CHAPTER 7

China and Conflict Mediation

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Introduction

China has not been a traditional actor when it comes to conflict mediation. By definition, Beijing's ability to involve itself in other countries' conflicts is limited by its own non-interference principle.[1] However, in recent years, China has been a rising player in the global conflict mediation landscape, with two distinct successes: the 2023 Saudi-Iran peace deal[2] and the 2024 Beijing Declaration among 14 Palestinian factions.[3] Yet, despite China's expanding role in conflict mediation, few studies have focused on the motivations, approaches, criteria and effectiveness of China's mediation.

This chapter analyses the underlying thought and practices of Chinese conflict mediation. The first section examines China's motivations for engaging in conflict mediation against a backdrop of its expanding overseas interests and its rapid rise to great-power status. Section two analyses how China reconciles its international mediation activities with its principle of non-interference. Beijing has traditionally avoided intruding in other countries' internal affairs, including their domestic conflicts, but geography and necessity are important considerations in China's evolving approach. The third section examines the criteria China uses to determine which conflicts it will mediate and when, and how these have been applied in recent cases where Beijing has engaged or declined to intervene. Section four explores the backgrounds, roles and functions of special envoys and representatives who are dedicated full-time to specific conflicts. Section five presents a detailed analysis of China's approach

[1] For example, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated in 2018 that "China has always adhered to the principle of non-interference in internal affairs [of other countries]". This is "China's diplomatic tradition" and had "won the international community's universal praise". See: People's Republic of China, State Council, "王毅：中国坚持不干涉内政——其他国家也不得干涉别国内政 [Wang Yi: China adheres to non-interference in internal affairs: other countries should not interfere in other countries' internal affairs]", 27 September 2018. Available at https://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2018-09/27/content_5325606.htm (accessed on 25 November 2025)

[2] People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Joint trilateral statement by the People's Republic of China, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the Islamic Republic of Iran", 10 March 2023. Available at https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531_11367487.html (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[3] See People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Palestinian factions sign Beijing Declaration on ending division and strengthening Palestinian national unity", 23 July 2024. Available at https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbzhd/202407/t20240723_11458790.html (accessed on 25 November 2025).

to conflict mediation, its preference for dialogue and diplomacy over force, its emphasis on local solutions rather than ideological formulas and its engagement with regional bodies and mechanisms. Section six examines China's evolving roles as a mediator, analysing its evolution from convenor and facilitator in deference to local solutions to its increasingly ambitious role in the Saudi-Iran agreement and more coercive approach in Myanmar. The concluding section considers China's experience to date as a relatively new and increasingly ambitious player in global mediation and asks what the outcomes of its most successful engagements tell us about future prospects.

Motivations

Why does China involve itself in conflict mediation? Since 2000, the world has witnessed a significant expansion of China's mediation activities. Although no single factor can explain this shift, there can be no doubt that the interests China aims to serve through its mediation have also expanded.

To begin with, it is clear that the more geographically proximate a conflict is to China's border, the more deeply involved in conflict mediation it is likely to be. The logic is simple: when an ongoing armed conflict poses a direct challenge to border stability, China – like any other country – sees an innate need to intervene to protect its security. This reasoning is evident in the various multilateral negotiations convened by China, such as the Six-Party Talks on the North Korean nuclear program, its increasingly hands-on approach to the civil war that erupted in response to the military coup in Myanmar and the conflict between the Taliban and the previous government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. China's top concerns in these cases have included inflows of refugees into China, spillover of Islamic fundamentalists and terrorists, bombing and shelling of Chinese territory from across the border and, in the case of North Korea, potential nuclear contamination. The closer the conflict is to China's border, such as in Myanmar and Afghanistan, the more intense have been Chinese efforts to mediate its resolution or de-escalation.

China is also compelled to involve itself in the domestic politics of conflict-affected countries when it needs to protect its own interests on the ground, whether commercial (e.g. its involvement in Venezuela's ongoing crisis to safeguard its investment in the country's oil industry[4]) or reputational (e.g. its mediation with the Sudanese government to accept the African Union-United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur for stabilization[5]). China has extensive investments in natural resource extraction and businesses in politically unstable countries, and its assets and personnel inevitably become entangled in domestic conflicts when they break out.

It is also interesting to consider why China mediates in some of these conflicts but not in others. For example, China was not involved in mediation efforts during the Libyan or Syrian civil war, and it has not directly engaged in mediating the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Given China's global economic interests and the growing number of regional and domestic

[4] US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, "Chinese engagement in Latin America in the context of strategic competition with the United States: R. Evan Ellis testimony before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission", 24 June 2020. Available at https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2020-06/Ellis_Testimony.pdf (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[5] For example, see Gioia Serena Wang, "What motivates Chinese foreign policy in Sudan? A discourse analysis of Chinese official statements on the Darfur conflict from 2004 to 2023", *Grimshaw Review of International Affairs*, vol. 1, No. 2 (2024).

conflicts worldwide, it is reasonable to assume that China's economic engagement in conflict countries is a universal variable. This raises interesting questions about the criteria China uses for deciding to engage in mediation.

As China becomes a great power and faces higher expectations in its actions abroad, projecting a great power image and building its reputation as a responsible leader that plays a constructive role in resolving conflicts has become a top foreign policy priority. In his Global Security Initiative, President Xi Jinping pointedly singled out conflict mediation as a distinct category, noting that China will make an enhanced effort to pursue cooperation to:

> … promote political solutions to international and regional hotspot issues; encourage relevant parties to seek solutions to hotspot issues through honest dialogue and communication and resolution of their differences; support the international community to constructively participate in the political resolution of hotspot issues under the precondition of non-interference in internal affairs through the promotion of peace and dialogues as the primary approach, and with fairness and pragmatism as the primary attitude, and addressing both the root causes and symptoms; support the political resolution of hotspot issues, including the Ukraine crisis, through dialogues and negotiations.[6]

Chinese involvement in mediation has been increasingly motivated by the positive image it can gain from mediating conflicts for two reasons. First, Beijing is beginning to realize that, due to its relatively neutral position in many cases and its extensive interests with the parties to the conflicts, it occupies a unique position, one that gives it a distinct influence over those parties. Even if China cannot persuade the parties to adopt a peace plan, it can still encourage them to engage in dialogue. Beijing has also been quick to learn that while political solutions are the ultimate goal of most mediation efforts – though most fail to realize it – the process itself can be considered a major achievement. China thus has much to gain and little to lose by positioning itself as a mediator, even if a political solution is not ultimately achieved.

Second, Chinese engagement is increasingly motivated by great power competition. In the cases of Afghanistan and the Israel-Palestine conflict, China's involvement has clearly aimed to succeed where the United States has failed. The narrative is that while the US foments war, conflict and instability,[7] China brings peace, development and security.[8] The sharp contrast China tries to highlight between its convening of dialogues and US military intervention is believed to be particularly beneficial for China's efforts to strengthen relationships with

[6] People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "全球安全倡议概念文件（全文）[Global Security Initiative concept paper (full text)]", 21 February 2023. Available at https://www.mfa.gov.cn/wjbxw_new/202302/t20230221_11028322.shtml (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[7] For example, see comments on the US approach to Afghanistan in People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "The hypocrisy and facts of the United States foreign aid", 19 April 2024. Available at https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xw/wjbxw/202405/t20240530_11344003.html (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[8] For modern remarks on the Five Principles, see People's Republic of China, State Council, "习近平在和平共处五项原则发表70周年纪念大会上的讲话 [Xi Jinping's speech at the commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence]", 28 June 2024. Available at https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202406/content_6959889.htm (accessed on 25 November 2025).

countries in the Global South.

Countries' actions are rarely altruistic, and China's efforts at mediation are no exception. Whether to mitigate the direct impact of conflict on its national security or its overseas commercial interests, or to enhance its reputation and build its image as a great power, China's motives for mediating conflicts are strong and diverse.

Reconciling International Mediation with the Non-Interference Principle

Non-interference in other countries' internal affairs is one of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, the guiding norms of Chinese foreign policy.[9] The principle stipulates that China should refrain from interfering in another sovereign state's domestic situation and decision-making, in line with the maxim of do unto others. As the Chinese Communist Party has always been sensitive to criticism and efforts by other countries to influence its domestic politics, especially its one-party system, Beijing has historically avoided taking a more forward approach to other countries' internal affairs, including their domestic conflicts.

There is also a cultural tendency in Chinese political culture to avoid "meddling" in other countries' affairs. The Chinese believe that all internal conflicts originate from the history and reality of the countries themselves and that outsiders are unlikely to make better judgments about the merits of each party's positions than the parties themselves. Outsiders' judgments, from the Chinese perspective, also reflect their values and convictions, as, for example, in the case of Western mediators' views on the responsibility to protect (R2P), democratic elections and federalism. Since China does not identify with such Western values, there is no inclination to adopt the traditional views and methods of conflict mediation that follow the Western approach.

The balance between China's non-interference principle and its conflict mediation strategy is determined by its initial motivation to engage in conflict mediation. China has the longest land borders in the world, spanning over 22,000 km and shared with 14 countries with which China maintains important trade, diplomatic and security relations. As China's border stability and economic interests become increasingly affected by conflicts in other countries, its interpretation of "interference" has started to shift. When the internal affairs of other countries begin to threaten its interests on the ground, they indirectly become China's affairs, and thus its involvement in resolving the conflict becomes justifiable.

A second Chinese logic that justifies its mediation efforts focuses on the result of the mediation. In the Chinese view, as long as the mediation results in the mitigation of tensions and tangible improvement of the situation on the ground, the ends justify the means. Even if China involves itself in conflict resolution in another sovereign country, the reduction of tension justifies China's interference.

Last but not least, the Chinese have in the past made the distinction between interference, intervention and influence. While interference implies a unilateral imposition undesired by the parties to the conflict, intervention, especially UN intervention, with a UN Security

[9] For modern remarks on the Five Principles, see People's Republic of China, State Council, "习近平在和平共处五项原则发表70周年纪念大会上的讲话 [Xi Jinping's speech at the commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence]", 28 June 2024. Available at https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202406/content_6959889.htm (accessed on 25 November 2025).

Council mandate and host country consent, is seen as legitimate. Influencing another country's decision, especially through diplomatic persuasion rather than the threat of military intervention or economic sanctions, is also considered a normal and legitimate diplomatic manoeuvre, at least in the context of conflict mediation. Another term that Chinese scholars have deliberated over is "creative involvement". In his book Creative Involvement, Wang Yizhou from Peking University defined China's approach as a "realistic and updated" reading of the non-interference principle. In his view, because circumstances have changed, China must "enrich" and "innovate" its non-interference principle to promote the positive role of "emerging powers" in building a "more rational international order".[10]

Chinese Criteria for Mediation

China's shifting approach to noninterference raises the question of how it chooses which conflict to mediate. Presumably, China has a global economic presence, and its need for diplomatic prestige is also broad. So why would it involve itself in some cases but not others? A close examination of Chinese involvement in mediation reveals some patterns.

The first is that China's mediation is predicated on the consent of the parties to the conflict. If one or more parties reject external mediation, Beijing does not impose itself. The most striking case in this regard is Russia's rejection of China's public offer to mediate in the Ukraine crisis as a unique and constructive player.[11] Chinese interlocutors have repeatedly emphasized that, without Russian consent, China will not impose mediation on Russia, nor would it be successful if it did.[12] Even more preferable on the Chinese side is an explicit invitation by parties to the conflict for China to play a role. Indeed, China first became involved in brokering the peace deal between Iran and Saudi Arabia after a direct request from Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman during President Xi Jinping's state visit to Saudi Arabia in December 2022.[13]

The second pattern is that China is obviously more inclined to mediate in conflicts where it has a high stake in the outcome. In cases impacting its border stability, China has been actively involved in mediation in Afghanistan, Myanmar and North Korea. China has also played a role in resolving Sudan's Darfur conflict and Venezuela's ongoing crisis, partly due to its investments in oil assets. Similarly, China's mediation efforts in the Middle East –

10 See Wang's lecture on his book, "Creative involvement: a new direction in China's diplomacy", PowerPoint presentation, October 2019. Available at https://aseanregionalforum.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Lecture-11-Creative-Intervention-PD-Theory-in-China.pdf (accessed on 25 November 2025).

11 China has consistently maintained that it would play a positive role in promoting peace and dialogue in the Ukraine crisis. A Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson, speaking in 2023 ahead of Xi's meeting with Putin in Russia, said that it would be a "journey of peace". Similarly, on a call with Zelensky the following month, Xi noted that China would make its own efforts to end the fighting and restore peace as soon as possible, highlighting China's dispatch of its special representative for Eurasian affairs to Ukraine and elsewhere to discuss a political solution to the crisis. People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs "2023年3月17日外交部发言人汪文斌主持例行记者会 [Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's 17 March 2023 regular press conference]", 17 March 2023. Available at https://www.mfa.gov.cn/fyrbt_673021/202303/t20230317_11043865.shtml (accessed on 25 November 2025); People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "习近平同乌克兰总统泽连斯基通电话 [Xi Jinping speaks with Ukrainian President Zelenskyy on the phone]", 26 April 2023. Available at https://www.mfa.gov.cn/zyxw/202304/t20230426_11066754.shtml (accessed on 25 November 2025).

12 Private conversation with Chinese analysts, Beijing, October 2024.

13 Yun Sun, "孙韵：中国——新的"中东和平缔造者？[Yun Sun: China—New 'Middle East peacemaker'?]", Voice of America, 15 March 2023. Available at https://www.voachinese.com/a/sun-yun-on-chinese-policy-on-middle-east-20230315/7006180.html (accessed on 25 November 2025).

focused on the Israel-Palestine issue and Saudi-Iran relations – appear primarily motivated by diplomatic considerations: strengthening China's ties with the Muslim world and the broader Global South and building a strong Chinese role in the Middle Eastern region. China's special envoy diplomacy in Africa also largely follows this pattern, the aim being to showcase China's status as a great power and responsible stakeholder. By comparison, China is noticeably absent from other conflicts in Latin America, South Asia and other countries in the Middle East and Africa, where its interests are less significant.

Where China is not directly involved or related to the parties of conflict, the recommendation within the Chinese policy community appears to favour later involvement after other mediators have already tried and failed, as is the case of the Red Sea crisis and the Houthis. The logic is that China will reserve its mediation efforts until others have failed, so that the expectations placed on China as a new mediator will be more realistic.

Special Envoy Diplomacy

China's primary approach to conflict mediation has focused on the role of special envoys and representatives who are dedicated full-time to specific conflicts. Currently, China has special envoys for Asian affairs, the Middle East, the Horn of Africa, Syria and Afghanistan, and special representatives for African affairs (focused on Darfur), Korean Peninsula affairs (focused on North Korea) and Eurasian affairs (focused on the Ukraine crisis). According to Chinese official narratives, long-term special envoy offices designated to global crisis issues are a relatively new phenomenon, emerging after 9/11. It began with the appointment of the first special envoy on the Middle East in September 2002.[14] Below is a list of when each special envoy and representative office was first established:

- Special Envoy on the Middle East Issue: September 2002[15]
- Special Representative for African Affairs: May 2007[16]
- Special Representative on Korean Peninsular Affairs: February 2010[17]
- Special Envoy for Asian Affairs: February 2013[18]

[14] Public Diplomacy Network, "揭秘我国特使外交：他们既是"临时工"，也是"特种兵"，在国与国之间的外交上发挥着重大作用 [Revealing China's special envoy diplomacy: they are both 'temporary workers' and 'special forces' and play an important role in diplomacy between countries]", 3 August 2020. Available at http://pdnet.cn/home/index/view/article_id/13761.html. (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[15] Ibid.

[16] People's Republic of China, State Council, "经典中国·辉煌60年：中国政府外交特使走遍世界 [Classical China: 60 years of glory – the Chinese government's special envoys travel around the world]", 22 September 2009. Available at https://www.gov.cn/jrzg/2009-09/22/content_1423209.htm (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[17] Observer Network, "刘晓明大使再履要职 [Ambassador Liu Xiaoming is back in an important position]", 12 April 2021. Available at https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_12159930 (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[18] People's Republic of China, Consulate in New York, "2013年3月11日外交部发言人华春莹主持例行记者会 [Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's 11 March 2013 regular press conference]", 11 March 2013. Available at http://newyork.china-consulate.gov.cn/fyrth/201303/t20130311_4268734.htm (accessed on 25 November 2025).

- Special Envoy on Afghan Affairs: July 2014[19]
- Special Envoy on the Syrian Issue: March 2016[20]
- Special Representative for Eurasian Affairs: September 2019[21]
- Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa Affairs: February 2022[22]

In the Chinese policy lexicon, these special envoys are described as "political special envoys", in contrast to "ceremonial special envoys". Whereas the latter are dispatched to other countries for special ceremonial roles on behalf of the Chinese leader, political special envoys are senior career diplomats with extensive experience in regional affairs, diplomatic engagement and problem-solving.

An interesting characteristic shared by these special envoys is that most are over the age of 60, the official retirement age in the Chinese bureaucracy for officials below the rank of government minister.[23] Most of the Chinese special envoys enjoy the bureaucratic rank of director general or vice-minister, and many have served as ambassadors during their careers.[24] These backgrounds provide them with the seniority, experience and relationships needed to perform mediation roles.

Yet, appointing retired diplomats as special envoys generates potential problems. While all of these special envoys are highly experienced and well trained, they are also at the end of their diplomatic careers. The special envoy position is typically their last post before retirement; some have even been brought back from retirement to serve in the role. Compared to their younger counterparts, these senior diplomats may not be as enthusiastic to promote issues as vigorously. Their performance largely depends on their own personality: some are visibly more proactive than others.

Chinese special envoys are similar to "case officers" assigned to specific conflict issues. Their offices are typically embedded in the geographical departments of the Foreign Ministry, which facilitate their daily communications with country desk officers about current issues. Given their bureaucratic seniority, the country desk officers also provide support to the

[19] Xinhua, "解局·外交 | 阿领导人访华 中国与阿富汗如何共赢 [Solution diplomacy: Afghan leader visits China, how can China and Afghanistan win together?]", 16 May 2016. Available at http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2016-05/16/c_128986248.htm (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[20] Pan Yinru, "专访中国叙利亚问题特使解晓岩：中东局势当务之急是降温 [Exclusive interview with Xie Xiaoyan, China's wpecial envoy for Syria: the top priority in the Middle East is to cool down the situation]", Yicai, 15 May 2018. Available at https://www.yicai.com/news/5423209.html (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[21] Lianhe Zaobao, "'俄国通'中国欧亚事务特别代表李辉 将赴乌克兰等国 ['Russia expert' and Chinese special representative for Eurasian affairs Li Hui will visit Ukraine and other countries]", 27 April 2023. Available at https://www.zaobao.com.sg/news/china/story20230427-1388104 (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[22] Gu Yaping and Chen Along, "新时代中国的全球安全观及其在非洲安全治理的实践 [China's global security perspective and its security governance practice in Africa in the new era]", National Centre for Philosophy and Social Sciences Documentation, *Interpretation of Chinese Civilization and Mutual Learning Among Civilizations*, p. 54, http://iwaas.cssn.cn/kycg/xslw/202501/P020250110552488018920.pdf.

[23] For a discussion on age limits, see Shuli Ren, "Xi's cadre pension-age limit makes no sense", Bloomberg, 19 October 2022. Available at https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2022-10-19/china-s-retirement-age-for-officials-is-too-low (accessed on 25 November 2025); Yu Zeng and Stan Hok-wui Wong, "Time is power: rethinking meritocratic political selection in China", *The China Quarterly*, vol. 245 (2021), pp. 23–50.

[24] Based on in-depth analysis of publicly available background and resume information on each special envoy.

special envoys' missions. Special envoys operate on both bilateral and multilateral levels to facilitate dialogues and solutions to ongoing crises. They have proven to be the most engaged mediators in the Chinese foreign policy community.

Characteristics of China's Approach to Conflict Mediation

China's approach to conflict mediation is guided by several principles. First, China is focused on political dialogue and diplomatic resolution as the foundation of its mediation strategy, rather than military approaches. "Promotion of peace dialogue" is the central theme of Chinese involvement in international conflicts. In this sense, its conflict mediation mainly relies on deploying special envoys and applying diplomatic skills to bridge differences. China is no stranger to diplomatic manoeuvres, especially at multilateral forums such as the United Nations or regional organizations. The commitment to diplomatic negotiations and the outright rejection of military conflicts highlight the centrality of diplomacy to China's approach to conflict mediation.[25]

Second, China rejects foreign – especially Western – influence in conflict resolution. In most, if not all, cases, China emphasizes the will of the people in the conflict countries. "Afghan-led, Afghan-owned"[26] or "Palestinians governing Palestine"[27] and "Syrian-led, Syrian-owned" are key points in China's diplomatic stance on these conflicts. With this emphasis, China is tacitly rejecting proxy warfare and foreign influence in the conflicts, a stance that follows from its belief that foreign states back various political forces involved in conflicts to protect their own vested interests and, at times, their sphere of influence. Beijing has viewed conflicts in Afghanistan,[28] Syria,[29] Mali,[30] Yemen[31] and Sudan[32] as at least partially the result of foreign interference.

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[25] For one of many examples, see People's Republic of China, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's regular press conference on September 15, 2021", 15 September 2021. Available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng./xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347122.html (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[26] People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Wang Yi chairs the first 'neighboring countries of Afghanistan plus Afghanistan' foreign ministers' dialogue", 31 March 2022. Available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng./wjbzhd/202204/t20220401_10663013.html (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[27] People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Remarks on the Palestinian-Israeli issue by China's Permanent Representative to the UN Ambassador Fu Cong at the UN Security Council briefing", 18 March 2025. Available at https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/zwbd/202503/t20250324_11580638.html (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[28] People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's regular press conference on August 31, 2021", 31 August 2021. Available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng./xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347111.html (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[29] People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning's regular press conference on March 10, 2023", 10 March 2023. Available at https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347481.html (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[30] For an in-depth discussion of China's perceptions of and approach to mediation in Mali, see Lina Benabdallah, "China's conflict resolution and mediation approach in Mali", Stimson Center, 26 January 2024. Available at https://www.stimson.org/2024/china-conflict-resolution-and-mediation-in-mali/ (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[31] People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "US hegemony and its perils", February 2023. Available at https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531_11367483.html (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[32] Laura Barber, *China's Response to Sudan's Political Transition*, Special Report, No. 466 (Washington, D.C., US Institute of Peace, 2020), p. 3.

Relatedly, as noted above, China also does not subscribe to many of the traditional principles common to the Western approach to conflict resolution, such as democratic elections, federalism and civilian control of the military.[33] For China, each country has its own distinct historical and cultural background, and there is no single universal approach to conflict resolution that can be applied to all circumstances. On the contrary, China presents parties to the conflict with a series of its own experiences and lessons on dealing with legitimacy issues and the complex relationship between ethnic majority and minority groups. In contrast to legitimacy conferred by democratic elections, the Chinese argue that the performance of the ruling party, based on revolutionary credentials and economic growth, is equally important for establishing legitimacy. When it comes to managing the relationship between majority and minority groups, the Chinese also see their model of ethnic autonomous regions and the One Country, Two Systems principle,[34] as implemented in Hong Kong,[35] as alternatives to federalism. In recent years, in Bangladesh and Nepal, which are burdened by internal political turmoil, the Chinese have argued that Chinese-style modernization, which emphasizes the harmony between the state and its people, could very possibly be the key to resolving their internal conflicts. In short, approaches to mediating conflict vividly reflect a country's own political philosophy and ideals. For China, this means that conflict-affected countries should identify their own solutions or, at the very least, should not accept Western proposals based on liberal democracy and federalism as the default answer to conflict.

In the most acute conflicts, China tends to prioritize ceasefires over peace. The logic is that a ceasefire will suspend or de-escalate the conflict, creating space for political negotiations and confidence-building measures. But this approach also has weaknesses. A ceasefire is not a resolution to the conflict; it is a pause in the fighting that creates space for the eventual resolution, which usually takes the form of a peace agreement. However, a ceasefire also encourages inertia in a peace process due to the interest groups involved in these temporary arrangements, which can sow the seeds for the resumption of the conflict in the future. The 1953 truce on the Korean Peninsula is a good example. The armistice established a state of "no peace and no war" on the peninsula, but the transition to a peace mechanism has been exceedingly difficult. Understanding that reaching a peace agreement will be extremely difficult and could significantly change the situation on the ground, China seeks to prioritize ceasefires and let the parties to the conflict handle the peace process at their own pace.

In these types of conflicts, China also tends to prioritize regional organizations as the primary platform for conflict mediation, with China playing a supportive or collaborative role. This is evident in China's emphasis on the role of the African Union in conflicts in Sudan,[36] South

[33] For some discussions on these themes, see Soeren Keil, "Federalism as a tool of conflict-resolution: the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina", *L'Europe en Formation*, vol. 363, No. 1 (2012), pp. 205–218; and especially Peter Harris and Ben Reilly, eds., *Democracy and Deep-Rooted Conflict: Options for Negotiators* (Stockholm, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 1998

[34] People's Republic of China, State Council, "中国的民族区域自治 [Regional ethnic autonomy in China]", February 2005. Available at https://www.gov.cn/zwgk/2005-05/27/content_1585.htm (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[35] People's Republic of China, State Council, "《"一国两制"在香港特别行政区的实践》白皮书 [White paper on the practice of 'one country, two systems' in Hong Kong SAR]", 10 June 2014. Available at https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2014-06/10/content_2697833.htm (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[36] People's Republic of China, Permanent Mission to the UN, "On the issue of Darfur, Sudan", 13 March 2008. Available at http://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/hyyfy/200803/t20080313_8399192.htm (accessed on 25 November 2025).

Sudan,[37] DRC,[38] the Horn of Africa[39] and in the Sahel region,[40] as well as its prioritization of ASEAN's central role in the Myanmar crisis,[41] and the conflict between Thailand and Cambodia over their territorial disputes.[42] In Afghanistan, China has worked to ensure that any development plan has the support and participation of regional neighbours and partners, including but not limited to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Meetings of the Foreign Ministers of Afghanistan's Neighbouring Countries organized by China. Beijing's goal in these situations is to shift expectations and responsibility away from China as the mediator and hold regional countries more accountable for resolving the conflict, given that they are more affected by its impacts. In cases where neighbours of the conflict country play a de facto role in the conflict due to their own permeable borders, transnational ethnic ties and interest groups, their support and consent are essential for resolving the conflict. In this sense, China believes that regional organizations will help foster understanding and build consensus among relevant countries with vested interests in the conflict, making these organizations necessary and desirable partners in the mediation process.

China's Evolving Roles

If China places more emphasis on regional organizations for conflict mediation, this raises the question of what conflict-resolution proposal and model it brings to the table. Until 2023, China appeared to be content with organizing peace talks, facilitating communications and meetings, and focusing quite literally on the "promotion of dialogues" among parties to the conflict. What China had refrained from, however, was agenda-setting and developing substantive proposals to bridge differences and break negotiation impasses. Historically, China has convened meetings between the Afghan Taliban and the Ashraf Ghani government,[43] as well as dialogues between ethnic armed groups in Myanmar and the Burmese central government.[44] More recently, in 2024, Beijing also convened meetings

[37] People's Republic of China, Permanent Mission to the UN, "Remarks by Ambassador Dai Bing at the UN Security Council briefing on UNMISS", 6 March 2023. Available at http://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/hyyfy/202303/t20230307_11036642.htm (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[38] People's Republic of China, Permanent Mission to the UN, "Remarks by Ambassador Fu Cong at the UN Security Council briefing on cooperation between the United Nations and the African Union", 29 March 2023. Available at http://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/chinaandun/securitycouncil/202303/t20230330_11051653.htm (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid.

[41] People's Republic of China, Permanent Mission to the UN, "Remarks by Ambassador Geng Shuang at the UN Security Council briefing on the situation of Rakhine State of Myanmar", 4 April 2024. Available at http://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/chinaandun/202404/t20240405_11276712.htm (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[42] People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Guo Jiakun's regular press conference on July 30, 2025", 30 July 2025. Available at https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202507/t20250730_11679797.html (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[43] For example, see BBC, "Viewpoint: Ashraf Ghani needs Pakistan help with Taliban talks", 13 January 2015. Available at https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-30785086 (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[44] International Crisis Group, "Rebooting Myanmar's stalled peace process", Asia Report, No. 308 (Yangon/Brussels, 2020). Available at https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia-pacific/myanmar/308-rebooting-myanmars-stalled-peace-process (accessed on 25 November 2025).

among 14 Palestinian factions, which culminated in the Beijing Declaration.[45] But even in these cases where China assumed a leading role in convening stakeholders, it has refrained from playing a more substantive role – such as setting the agenda – or offering detailed proposals on how to break the political deadlock. As China believes in local solutions and the will of the people, it would have been contradictory for it to bring its own plan for resolving the conflict and impose it on the parties.

Until 2023, China's role in conflict mediation therefore remained peripheral to the essential resolution of the conflicts in question. China acted as a convener, dialogue host, facilitator of communications and messages, and sometimes even an endorser or guarantor of the agreements, as in the cases of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in Myanmar in 2015 and the Saudi-Iran deal in 2023. But in all of these cases, China refrained from substantive contributions on how the conflicts should be resolved.

This tendency, however, has been changing more recently as China shows greater ambition in peacemaking and considers the great power glory such successes could bring. Two examples stand out. First, in the Saudi-Iran deal in 2023, China allegedly pressured Iran to accept the deal that Saudi Arabia first approached Beijing about.[46] While it remains unclear what positive reward China promised Iran or what negative consequences would follow if Iran failed to comply, the understanding is that China used its influence to shape Iran's decision-making. Experts in Beijing also confirmed that China signed the agreement as a guarantor, which is quite unprecedented.[47]

China's most coercive approach to mediation has been in Myanmar. After the 2021 coup triggered chaos and anarchy in the country, illicit activities, especially online scam centres, proliferated along the Chinese border and caused significant financial losses and security threats to Chinese nationals. To eliminate such operations and punish the military government for supporting them, China backed ethnic armed groups in Shan state as they launched Operation 1027 in October 2023.[48] The operation was highly successful, and the armed groups were able to significantly expand the territory under their control. China's approach also forced the Burmese military to pursue engagement with the US.[49] As the military-engineered election drew closer, China scaled back its support for these same ethnic groups[50] and pressured them to give up the territory they had gained since 2023,[51]

[45] People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Palestinian Factions Sign Beijing Declaration".

[46] Yasmine Farouk, "Riyadh's motivations behind the Saudi-Iran deal", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 30 March 2023. Available at https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2023/03/riyadhs-motivations-behind-the-saudi-iran-deal?lang=en (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[47] Track-two dialogue with Chinese expert, Muscat, Oman, April 2024.

[48] For an in-depth analysis on this situation, see International Crisis Group, "Scam centres and ceasefires: China-Myanmar ties since the coup", Asia Briefing, No. 179 (Bangkok/Brussels, 2024). Available at https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/north-east-asia/china-myanmar/b179-scam-centres-and-ceasefires-china-myanmar-ties-coup (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[49] Private conversations, Washington D.C., June 2024.

[50] People's Republic of China, "王毅会见缅甸前国家和平与发展委员会主席丹瑞 [Wang Yi meets with Than Shwe, former chairman of Myanmar's State Peace and Development Council]", 14 August 2024. Available at http://mm.china-embassy.gov.cn/chn/sgxw/202408/t20240816_11474392.htm. (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[51] The Irrawaddy, "TNLA defies Myanmar junta push to cede Shan towns in China talks", 7 July 2025. Available at https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/tnla-defies-myanmar-junta-push-to-cede-shan-towns-in-china-talks.html (accessed on 25 November 2025).

cease military operations against the military government[52] and participate in the elections in certain localities. All these steps were taken to ensure a smooth election that would confer more legitimacy on the new government that will succeed the military junta.

This may be the most proactive posture China has ever adopted in any mediation. Not only did China choose a side, encouraging the military to hold the election, but it also actively took measures to help the military suppress the ethnic armed groups in the name of stabilization and broader peace. Throughout 2025, China's priority has been to convince all the opposition groups to participate in the election. This strongly suggests that China decided to use its influence to steer the country's future in a specific direction through a general election and central government rule. China's rationale could be that, without an election, Myanmar will not be able to move beyond the current political and military impasse, but the approach it has adopted in pursuit of this goal is more coercive than we have seen in all other cases of China's involvement.

These examples demonstrate that China's role in conflict mediation has become more proactive, bold and ambitious. As it shifts from a facilitator to a mediator, China recognizes the increasing benefits of using mediation in conflicts or "global hotspot issues" to showcase its great power status, its perceived moral superiority and its leadership credentials. It is noteworthy that China also realizes that longstanding conflicts, like that in Israel-Palestine, have limited prospects for a quick resolution. Joining the mediators' club is therefore, ultimately, worthwhile. China can reap the benefits of involvement in the process while not incurring any cost from a lack of success in the short term. The low risk of involvement is a key factor that has shaped the expansion of China's role in conflict mediation over time.

Conclusion: Evaluating the Results

Overall, China has had experience mediating in two types of conflicts: intra-state and inter-state conflicts. The most visible examples from the first group include Afghanistan, Myanmar, Sudan and Palestine (though the last did not necessarily involve a protracted armed conflict between Palestinian groups). Examples from the second category include the Saudi-Iran peace deal, the border conflicts between Pakistan and Afghanistan since 2022, and the Rohingya issue between Myanmar and Bangladesh. China also offered to play a mediating role in the Russia-Ukraine war since 2022,[53] and, in 2025, in the Thailand-Cambodia border crisis,[54] but its offers were not accepted in either case.

The two most successful examples of China's mediation are the Saudi-Iran deal in 2023 and the Beijing Declaration among the 14 Palestinian factions in 2024. Despite the appearance of success, both deals come with significant caveats on the actual outcomes. It is widely acknowledged that China did not create the Saudi-Iran deal; the foundations were laid

[52] The Irrawaddy, "China ramps up pressure on TNLA to stop fighting junta", 5 May 2025. Available at https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/myanmar-china-watch/china-ramps-up-pressure-on-tnla-to-stop-fighting-junta.html (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[53] incent Ni, "China signals willingness to mediate in Ukraine-Russia war", *The Guardian*, 1 March 2022. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/01/china-mediate-ukraine-russia-war (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[54] Zhao Ziwen, "Thai-Cambodian conflict: China blames Western colonial legacy for dispute" *South China Morning Post*, 25 July 2025. Available at https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3319558/china-takes-mediation-role-thai-cambodian-conflict-calls-restraint (accessed on 25 November 2025).

during negotiations facilitated by Iraq and Oman over several years.[55] Some analysts interpret Riyadh's decision to award China the prestigious role of formalizing the agreement as a snub to the Biden Administration, a direct consequence of President Biden's promise to make Saudi Arabia a "pariah" state following the killing of Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi columnist for *The Washington Post*.[56] Others contend that Riyadh was acting out of pragmatism, having learned in recent years that only China has the leverage to ensure that Iran would respect its commitments under the agreement to de-escalate, thereby avoiding a repeat of the massive cruise missile and drone attack in 2019 that took 5.7 million barrels of daily oil production – about half of the Kingdom's capacity – offline.[57]

The Beijing Declaration among the 14 Palestinian factions is equally problematic. While Beijing demonstrated its influence by convening the meeting and helped to craft the document, observers have criticized the declaration for its broad, vague terms and its failure to address the practical or specific challenges faced by the Palestinian movement.[58] Specifically, Beijing believes that the path to a two-state solution will depend on a strong and unified government of Palestine, which is an essential reason why China invested political capital in the Beijing meeting. However, whether the meeting and the declaration have actually contributed to building the capacity and capability of the Palestinian movement remains in question.

Beyond these two cases, Chinese mediation in Afghanistan did not produce concrete results before the Taliban took over Kabul. In Myanmar, China has been able to dial tensions in the country up and down to suit its own needs, but there is not yet a concrete peace process. Chinese mediation between Afghanistan and Pakistan seems to have brought some tranquillity to their broader disputes for now,[59] but experts question whether the effect is limited to a ceasefire, as the challenge posed by the Durand Line shows no tangible solution in the near future. Finally, while China's mediation between Myanmar and Bangladesh on the Rohingya refugee issue supported the conclusion of a bilateral agreement on a limited repatriation of Rohingyas from Bangladesh back to Myanmar's Rakhine state,[60] at the time of writing, few Rohingya refugees have returned.[61]

The point is not that China has not been an effective mediator. It clearly has a distinct ability

[55] Saeed Azimi, "The story behind China's role in the Saudi-Iran deal", Stimson Center, 13 March 2023. Available at https://www.stimson.org/2023/the-story-behind-chinas-role-in-the-iran-saudi-deal/ (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[56] For analysis on the tensions in US-Saudi ties around the time of the deal, see Peter Baker, "Chinese-brokered deal upends Mideast diplomacy and challenges U.S.", *The New York Times*, 11 March 2023. Available at https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/11/us/politics/saudi-arabia-iran-china-biden.html (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[57] Farouk, "Riyadh's motivations".

[58] For an in-depth analysis, see Raphael Angieri, "Palestinian responses to the Beijing Declaration", China-Global South Project, 8 September 2024. Available at https://chinaglobalsouth.com/analysis/palestinian-responses-to-the-beijing-declaration/ (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[59] Rick Noack and others, "As Afghanistan and Pakistan mend ties, China could be the real winner", *The Washington Post*, 5 June 2025. Available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/06/05/afghanistan-pakistan-relations-china-taliban/ (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[60] Imtiaz Ahmed, "The Rohingya crisis: eight potential pathways to repatriation", New Lines Institute, 7 August 2024. Available at https://newlinesinstitute.org/state-resilience-fragility/the-rohingya-crisis-eight-potential-pathways-to-repatriation/ (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[61] Meetings with ethnic group representatives, Chiang Mai, October 2024.

to influence the calculus of many governments and other conflict parties. But translating such influence into effective measures towards peace is a different question. China does not subscribe to the Western prescription for sustainable conflict resolution, which includes institutional guarantees such as democratic elections and federalism. At the same time, it has not articulated an effective alternative to this approach. Moreover, in the cases we have seen, China's motivation is not always solely peace. As a great power, its involvement is usually motivated by many other factors, including protecting its own political and economic interests. This creates a dilemma for its approach: in conflicts that do not involve Chinese interests, China is more likely to be a disinterested actor, but in those that do, it is less likely to remain purely neutral and objective.

As a relatively new player in global mediation, China is becoming increasingly ambitious and is eager to assume a larger role as a peacemaker. China's Global Security Initiative dictates its commitment to peacemaking and conflict mediation, with Chinese diplomats actively involved in identifying solutions to the world's deadliest conflicts. China's approach to conflict mediation is heavily imbued with its own political philosophy and experience. As a non-Western country and a leader of the Global South, China's mediation is often welcomed by conflict parties. At the same time, its motives for pursuing conflict mediation may not only include seeking peace but could also lead it to pursue goals that favour its own interests over a lasting resolution. As a result, China has some way to go to become an effective mediator with a distinguished record of success.