

# Conflict Mediation with Chinese Characteristics

## How China Justifies Its Non-Interference Policy as an Arbitrator

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**IN 1955, CHINESE PREMIER ZHOU ENLAI** advocated for and supported the adoption of a ten-point “declaration on promotion of world peace and cooperation” at the Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung, Indonesia. One principle from the final communiqué, the “abstention from intervention or interference in the internal affairs of another country,” has since been enshrined as one of China’s cornerstone foreign policy principles. This “policy of non-interference” denies China the ability to meddle in the internal affairs of other states under a tacit assumption of reciprocity. In its public statements and strategic messaging, Beijing has since clung tightly to this tenet of Chinese policy, even as its newfound global economic presence motivates it to play an increasingly active role mediating internal conflicts in other countries where China has expanding interests.

At the foundation of China’s non-interference policy is a self-interest in promoting norms of non-interference within global governance systems. It is in China’s best interest to universalize its normative understanding of the infallibility of sovereignty and territorial integrity and the non-interference in internal affairs. The policy has been particularly welcomed by authoritarian governments with colonial pasts, like many of those who attended the 1955 Bandung Conference. With growing international concerns about its treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang and the developments in Hong Kong, China has a strong motivation to promote policy alternatives to the “responsibility to protect” (R2P), which, in its calculation, may be used as justification to infringe on China’s sovereignty or promote regime change. Able to cite its condemnations of what it views as

R2P-enabled “regime change” in Libya and Syria, Beijing aims to build a defense against R2P being applied to China.

As China’s global presence expands, however, retaining such a lofty position and defense of non-interference has become increasingly difficult. In recent years, major overseas investments such as those under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have created exceptional difficulties for Chinese policymakers to maintain this policy. According to the Mercator Institute for China Studies, China was engaged in nine mediation projects in 2018, up from three in 2012, the year before Xi Jinping launched the BRI. China’s current mediation projects span Asia and Africa, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar, Iran, South Sudan, Syria, and Yemen, all of which are sometimes termed as BRI countries.

China has recently been compelled to involve itself in conflict areas outside its borders in ways that some—even some Chinese—see as counter to its policy of non-interference. While the motivation to interfere in conflict-ridden areas to secure economic and national security interests is not unique to China, China’s particular dilemma stems from its dual commitment to these interests and its non-interference policy and from its emerging and dominant role in development and infrastructure finance regimes. The question, therefore, becomes: how does China claim to maintain its non-interference policy while it increasingly mediates conflicts abroad?

China squares this circle—achieving the impossible of maintaining a non-interference policy while securing its important interests in unstable countries—by framing its engagement in a way that

softens the perceived breadth and depth of its interference. This softened approach manifests itself with two tactics: host-government consultation and limited means and goals across its mediation.

China has justified its interference via conflict mediation by conditioning its mediatory role on host-government consultation, which some Chinese scholars have branded as “consultative intervention” (协商介入 *xieshang jieru*). Because the spirit of the non-interference policy largely rests on the importance of state sovereignty and territorial integrity, China can claim to still adhere to non-interference by gaining the consent of or consulting with the rightful sovereign body whose internal affairs it is interfering in. In the cases where China is mediating internal conflicts, such as Myanmar, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh, Beijing first begins its intervention through bilateral consultation with the sovereign governments, then gradually expands the dialogue to include the opposition groups or the opposition parties. The logic is that if the host government is receptive and welcoming of a Chinese role in the mediation, it no longer constitutes interference, which by default is an unwanted unilateral imposition.

Paired with its host-government consent and consultation, Chinese mediators and the Foreign Ministry also often reiterate a country’s sovereignty and territorial integrity when engaging in any mediation roles. During debates about the Syrian civil war, for example, China’s Special Envoy to Syria and its representation at the UN Security Council have repeatedly referenced Syrian “sovereign independence” (主权独立 *zhuquan duli*) and “territorial integrity” (领土完整 *lingtu wanzheng*) to promote restraint before interfering or to veto resolutions seen as overly interfering in Syrian internal affairs. While these justifications also align conveniently with China’s general support for the Assad regime, China can point to its concern for the host government’s rights to these principles as evidence of its continued adherence to non-interference.

The second way by which China claims non-interference while mediating is by limiting the scope of its mediation means and goals. In an effort to be minimally invasive, Beijing often prefers conflict management (making peace) to conflict resolution (making peace *and* dismantling the risk factors for future conflict), since the former requires less alteration of

the fabric of the conflict’s origins. In Afghanistan, for example, China’s goals have revolved around cultivating political agreement for fighting to cease, and therefore the depth of its involvement has been limited. This limited role has often taken a form closer to “good offices,” whereby China mostly provides the space for discussion between combatants, rather than the sometimes interchangeable “mediation.” In 2015, Beijing convened meetings between representatives of the Taliban and the Afghan government in Urumqi but stopped short of pressuring further negotiations or offering solutions; in its opinion, China is simply the provider of the venue in which the two sides can talk. In its mediation between the ethnic armed organizations and Myanmar since 2013, China also played a “quiet and behind-the-scenes role” of coordinating under the guidelines of “persuading for peace and promoting dialogue” (劝和促谈 *quanhe cu tan*).

China’s preferred mediation tools also illustrate this narrow scope: it deploys special envoys and targets the top levels of parties involved for high-profile negotiations. In the case of mediating between Afghanistan and Pakistan, in 2017 China initiated a crisis prevention and management mechanism between the two countries’ central leadership, as well as the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers Dialogue, to increase discussion and consultation at the top levels of decision-making.

Thus far in its conflict mediation abroad, Beijing has relied on normative distinctions of host-government consultation and limited means and goals in its mediation to differentiate its involvement from R2P intervention. Nevertheless, as its engagement across the globe continues to evolve, so might its cornerstone policy of non-interference. A major conflict that threatens China’s economic or security interests too severely for it to mediate in its traditional way could emerge. How—or if—China tries to uphold its non-interference policy in such an event will be interesting to observe as a bellwether of China’s self-perceived norm-making role on the world stage.

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