China's Evolving Non-Interference Policy and Expanding Role in Conflict Mediation Abroad

Nicholas Hood Hearing
CHINA’S EVOLVING NON-INTERFERENCE POLICY AND EXPANDING ROLE IN
CONFLICT MEDIATION ABROAD

By

NICHOLAS HEARING

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Dr. Amanda Driscoll  
Thesis Director

Dr. Whitney Bendeck  
Outside Committee Member

Dr. Mark Souva  
Committee Member

Signatures are on file with the Honors Program office.
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Introduction

Following the “Century of Humiliation” inflicted on China by foreign powers from 1842 to 1949, the newly established People’s Republic of China articulated a policy of non-interference (Crossley). The Chinese Communist Party in 1954 announced this policy in the form of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence: “mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful co-existence” (“China's Initiation of the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence”). At the time, this policy stood in stark contrast to that of the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., and it served as a useful tool for reassuring smaller neighbors and partners that the PRC did not intend to impose its will on their internal affairs (“Principles of China's Foreign Policy”). Of arguably more importance to the CCP, this policy signaled the expectation of reciprocal treatment and respect of Chinese sovereignty by the West. For most of its history, the PRC operated firmly within this framework and, aside from minor changes in diction, Chinese officials continue to publicly reaffirm their commitment to these principles today.

However, when examining the world today, one finds an increasingly active and assertive China often at odds with its own policy of non-interference. Throughout the 2000s, China tested out engagement in domestic conflicts beyond its borders, especially in 2008 during its international charm offensive in the leadup to the Beijing Olympics. The figure below portrays examples of these conflicts. However, China scaled back mediation efforts after 2008 and would not resume them in earnest until 2013 under the new leadership of Xi Jinping. The uptick coincides with the 2013 launch of China’s signature investment project, the purportedly multi-trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative. As more Chinese companies set up offices abroad and
increase their investment in developing countries, the Chinese government has more incentive and feels more pressure to protect both those investments and Chinese nationals residing abroad. Many of these infrastructure projects are taking place in developing countries with internal conflicts and whose governments have little ability to ensure protection of Chinese-directed business ventures.

Figure 1

Given China’s official non-interference policy, why is Chinese interference so pronounced in recent years and what is the nature of its interference? Interference can occur militarily or diplomatically, though China has not interfered militarily, likely because it thinks that would be a strategic mistake, is still too weak, or some combination of the two. Therefore, I
will focus on diplomatic interference such as mediation, coercion, and enticement, and I will use “interference” and “intervention” interchangeably to refer to these methods. To answer this question, I first look at governmental documents and statements to discern the official party line on non-interference and how, if at all, it has evolved in recent years to accommodate its actions. I also explore the domestic debate within China’s scholarly community over the direction of China’s policy on interference. I then explore two case studies in-depth to determine what motivates China to intervene and where and how it will likely intervene in the future. I have selected Afghanistan and South Sudan because one of them is far removed from China and removed the BRI route, and the other borders China and is key to the economic stability of the BRI and internal stability in Western China. The cases allow me to examine China’s motivations in two different contexts and determine whether it uses different tactics given how much the cases differ. Furthermore, China engaged with these conflicts over a period of at least five years, meaning there is more reporting and information available on China’s involvement in these countries than others.

This paper expands upon existing research by examining the main theories and strategies set forth to explain China’s behavior on the issue of non-interference. I find that none of the broader theories have accurately described or predicted China’s policies in the last few years. China has pushed beyond the framework of these relatively restrained policy options and pursued a strategy that incorporates coercion and uses its leverage to obtain guarantees for the security of its people and assets in conflict zones. From the two case studies, it becomes clear that China often pursues a more aggressive, direct mediation role privately or secretly, though it is unwilling to publicly pressure foreign governments. While the threat of a military intervention remains low, China will likely continue to step up its role in mediations and pressure parties in
conflict to resolve the issue to China’s liking. However, China will prioritize its own investments and international reputation. This means that it will not likely contribute seriously to local development and will quickly seek to distance itself from any efforts that go awry. To that end, China has no incentive to take a high profile role publicly and instead will continue to hold to the non-interference policy rhetorically even if it is more involved behind closed doors.
Background

While China began opening to the world and reforming its economic system in the late 1970s, investment abroad really picked up until the early 2000s. In 1999, the CCP announced the Going Global strategy, which encouraged Chinese companies to invest abroad (“China Policy, 2017”). While this strategy had economic motivations, the CCP also aimed to boost China’s international image and shore up domestic support by rebranding China as a global leader. To meet China’s growing need for natural resources, much of this investment flowed into the developing world, in many cases to restive regions with untapped resources that risk-averse Western investors avoided (Gurría). However, these investments also have drawbacks. In dozens of incidents across Africa and South and Central Asia, the early and mid-2000s saw Chinese workers threatened, abducted, or killed abroad (Smith). The Chinese public reacted to each of these incidents with varying degrees of outrage, and the pressure on the Chinese government to use its influence and soft power to protect citizens and assets abroad steadily grew.

One prominent string of attacks in 2004 resulting in the collective killings of 14 Chinese workers in Afghanistan and Pakistan particularly captured the attention of citizens and the government. The popular anger resulted in a new strategy: ‘overseas citizen protection’ (Duchatel). Under this framework, the Chinese government worked in concert with various organizations to achieve the evacuation of thousands of Chinese nationals from countries experiencing rapidly deteriorating security situations and outbreaks of violence in the following years. Many of these were relatively small operations and were not viewed as a change in China’s policy of non-interference. In early 2011, though, as uprisings gripped the Arab world, China conducted a series of evacuations across the region. Among these was the evacuation from Libya of over 36,000 Chinese nationals in just 12 days as the country was descending into civil
war (Zerba). Prior to the civil war, Chinese investment in Libya was estimated at $20 billion U.S. dollars, with over 75 companies operating in the country. The ensuing war saw much of that investment squandered; a stinging reminder of the risks associated with so many of their projects. However, this operation signaled the Chinese government’s changing priorities and the pressure from Chinese businesses for more proactive protection. While it was not their first evacuation of Chinese nationals, it was by far the largest and most visible to the Chinese public, which reacted enthusiastically to the news of the success. It also set a precedent for Chinese nationals abroad who now expect to be rescued in case of crisis. For the government, the evacuation functioned as a test of its diplomatic and strategic abilities and showcased the dramatic increase in its capability to swiftly project power to protect its interests abroad.

The evacuation from Libya has been followed up by a much more proactive stance in conflicts across the world, notably first in South Sudan in 2013. After South Sudan gained independence in 2011, China was quick to build relations. For years it had invested in oil fields that now lie in the new country’s territory. When fighting broke out a few years later, Chinese proponents of greater engagement saw a relatively low-profile opportunity to again stretch the boundaries of the official line of non-interference and improve their mediation and diplomatic capabilities (“China's Foreign Policy Experiment in South Sudan”). The China National Petroleum Corporation, the main investor in South Sudanese oil, is state-owned, which gave the Chinese government direct incentive to stabilize the conflict zone and secure the oil fields in that area. China took a multilateral approach, sending in peacekeepers and working within the framework of the regional body that was taking the lead on the conflict. While eschewing any public unilateral actions or pressure tactics such as sanctions, China capitalized on its neutral position and leverage to pressure the two sides into talks. While they avoided more serious forms
of interference that included force, their actions went beyond any former engagements and forced a redefining of non-interference.

Since 2013, China has only ramped up its efforts to mediate internal conflicts abroad. With engagement in Afghanistan, Myanmar, and Syria, among others, they no longer necessarily shy away from high profile conflicts. However, they still maintain fewer diplomatic staff in many of these countries than Western countries do, and many of their diplomats are not experienced in mediation. Their efforts, accordingly, are more limited and behind the scenes. The benefit of this strategy is that they can claim to be a part of any successful outcome but quietly distance themselves from any failure. In this way, they can limit any domestic blowback to their efforts. Internationally, they can placate calls for China to be a more responsible global actor while still claiming to uphold neutrality and non-interference by working primarily through locally and multilaterally led institutions and not advocating regime change or publicly criticizing domestic policies. While most of the countries China is involved in lie along its Belt and Road, the contexts of interference, or non-interference, vary greatly from case to case.
China’s Policy of Non-Interference

In the post-WWII world, the principle of non-intervention became enshrined in the U.N. Charter, in which the U.N. declared it would not intervene in affairs that fell under the “domestic jurisdiction of any state” (United Nations). However, any involvement that is approved by the host state is not considered intervention, as it does not take matters out of the control of the government. Non-interference, however, is distinguishable from non-intervention in that a state commits to not interfere at all in the domestic affairs of another state (Wood). After defeating the nationalist forces, Mao Zedong and the CCP turned their attention toward entrenching their control nationwide and expelling any remnants of foreign influence. This made the second principle, non-interference, a particularly attractive principle for them to embrace.

Prior to India’s independence, Britain had sought to expand its reach northward into Tibet. In 1950, when India and China established formal diplomatic relations, India hoped to inherit Britain’s privileged status in Tibet, whereas China rejected India’s involvement and wanted to assert exclusive control over the vast region (“China's Initiation of the Five Principles”). In 1954, Indian and Chinese officials met, and Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai laid out what would become the foundation of Chinese foreign policy to this day. Known as the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence, it entails mutual respect for each other’s territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in each other’s internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful co-existence ("Agreement between India and China"). Zhou reiterated this commitment in the final communique of the Bandung Conference in 1955, which specified ten principles of cooperation. Among these points were the “abstention from intervention or interference in the internal affairs of another country” and “abstention by any country from exerting pressures on another country” (“Asian-African Conference” 10).
Following horrific genocides in the 1990s, Western countries collectively adopted “responsibility to protect,” or R2P, as the new norm for interventions. This policy stands in direct contrast to the Chinese model of non-interference in that it calls for proactive intervention against foreign governments believed to be perpetrating atrocities against their own people (“Responsibility to Protect”). These interventions would directly target the foreign government and likely include regime change, as in the case of Libya. China, meanwhile, insists that any interference should have government approval and not infringe upon the government’s sovereignty. Given recent events in China, particularly international outrage over its actions in Hong Kong and its persecution of Uighurs and other minority groups, R2P poses an existential threat to the CCP’s dominance in China. Though an intervention is unlikely given China’s military strength, these are events that, at least hypothetically, would allow international interference in China on the basis of R2P (J. Li).

Nonetheless, as China has emerged as an important stakeholder in regions it previously shirked, its ambitious economic and political goals have dictated that it adopt a more active role in fostering peace and stability. While high-level Chinese officials have at times acknowledged China’s intention to play a positive role in resolving conflict, they have been careful to distinguish their involvement from that of other great powers and maintain a veneer of non-interference. China’s official line on conflict mediation became clear in early 2015, when Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi addressed the question of China’s drift away from non-interference directly while on a tour of five countries in Africa. After discussing China’s commitment to peace, he promised that they will “actively explore ways to resolve hot issues with Chinese characteristics” (“Wang Yi: Hotspot Issues”). A common refrain from Chinese politicians, the phrase “with Chinese characteristics” (有中国特色的 you zhongguo tese de) is
often employed to avoid claims that they are adopting the same policy as Western countries. In this case, its meaning is not entirely clear, though Wang goes on to emphasize African countries’ trust of China and frames it as China answering their calls for greater participation in conflict resolution. This characterization fits with China’s traditional opposition to Western countries’ uninvited interreference in other countries’ affairs, implying that China will restrain the scope of its involvement to what the host country requests of them. Wang notes China’s day-long consultation with the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) over the South Sudan conflict as one manifestation of this policy. In this process, China worked within the established IGAD-led structure and simply acted as a host to oversee the convening parties, rather than trying to lead peace talks themselves (“Special Consultation in Support of IGAD”).

On the question of whether this represents a shift in China’s diplomatic strategy, Wang demurred, saying that China has always acted on its responsibility to promote peace but unequivocally denounces power politics and foreign imposition in internal issues of other countries (“Wang Yi: Hotspot Issues”). As proof of continuity in Chinese foreign policy, Wang referenced China’s involvement in Indochina in the 1950s, Cambodia in the 1980s, and the Korean nuclear issue in the 1990s. Ironically, in 1979, China engaged in Vietnam and Cambodia in order to combat Soviet power and prevent their regional hegemony, and China even mobilized troops against Vietnam in one of the most traditional, full-fledged interventions in the PRC’s history (Tretiak 749).

Chinese scholars, too, have realized that China’s “going out” strategy and BRI present unprecedented challenges for its adherence to non-interference. Many of the target countries are “plagued by conflicts, corruption and political instability,” and Chinese infrastructure and workers face backlash from disillusioned locals who bear the environmental and other costs of
Chinese projects (H. Wang). In response, Chinese scholars have advocated several different strategies that accommodate China’s new reality but retain most of the traits and spirit of the non-interference policy.
Theories and Strategies Regarding the Future of Chinese Non-Interference Policy

Harmonious Intervention

Chiung-chiu Huang and Chih-yu Shih propose “harmonious intervention” as a model for explaining China’s past engagement in conflicts and guiding its future involvement. This strategy proposes that China should continue to place a greater value on having a stable, long-term positive relationship with other countries rather than pursuing short-term gains. Their analysis portrays China as a benevolent power immune to the draw of realist policies that would allow it to use its relative strength to make gains at the expense of its weaker neighbors. However, though the authors are undoubtedly biased toward the Chinese government, the strategy they pose is a legitimate strategic option for the CCP and dovetails with the stated objectives of China’s foreign policy. The authors use Myanmar and North Korea as examples to demonstrate what this policy looks like in practice.

As the first tenet of this policy, they argue that China has resisted using its power to strong-arm neighbors into accepting its demands on border disputes. Specifically, they point to China’s early border disputes with North Korea and Myanmar, in which China quickly ceded small areas of territory to Myanmar in 1960 and to North Korea in 1962. They claim that China could have taken these lands by force but gave them away as a token of goodwill to strengthen their long-term relationships with the two regimes. However, China’s military may not have been powerful enough to effectively invade and control those countries anyway. In the case of North Korea, they claim that this was intended to protect the business interests of the Korean minority living on the Chinese side of the border, who in return have maintained access to North Korea and use of a North Korean port on the Sea of Japan. In the case of Myanmar, they discuss the Burmese government’s war with minority groups of Chinese heritage in the north of
Myanmar. Though China faced calls to intervene against the Burmese, especially since it was occurring just across the border, the Chinese refused to challenge the Burmese government on internal issues within Myanmar’s sovereign territory. The authors argue that China’s reasoning for not intervening was to avoid the narrative of a threatening China, since they think China’s aims are entirely peaceful in its rise. However, they provide only a brief and unsubstantiated claim as to how this policy would work in China’s more serious border disputes, particularly with India, Japan, and the littoral states of the South China Sea. They claim that, under “harmonious intervention,” China would unilaterally withdraw “after a brief but fierce engagement,” in which it demonstrates its capability to take the territory by force but does not occupy it (Huang and Shih 3). After that, their bilateral relationship with the country in question would be strained until they see “a complete change of attitude” from the opposing government. Under this policy, we should expect China’s imminent unilateral withdrawal from the South China Sea, an unlikely prospect given the construction of islands and bases.

Second, the authors argue that China lacks what they see as the neo-colonial, resource-driven ambitions that drive modern-day interventions by other great powers. They argue that China could have manufactured a valid reason for intervening in nearby countries rich in mineral deposits and installed a friendly government that would supply China with cheap, or free, energy. For example, China could have used the persecution of the Chinese minority in Myanmar as a pretext to invade and co-opt the oil and gas industry there. The authors again claim that China’s restraint in these matters demonstrates its magnanimity and focus on the long-term stability of its relationships with other governments. However, those who view China’s Belt and Road Initiative as a convenient façade for debt-trap diplomacy would argue that China is now positioning itself to control other countries’ strategic territory and resources, though that
itself is an oversimplification. Furthermore, they will argue that China is in fact intervening in developing countries but is doing so on behalf of corrupt, autocratic governments in order to protect its control over mines and other resource-oriented industries.

As their third point, the authors argue that China will not cave to international pressure to intervene in its neighbors’ affairs. Only when China’s core economic or national security interests are threatened do they think it will intervene. They do, however, note that that does not preclude a rising China from being a responsible major power. Pointing to China’s efforts to lead six-party talks with North Korea, they emphasize that China recognizes its responsibility to engage on key international issues like non-proliferation but will refrain from engaging on issues that do not threaten global security. On this point, they return to the explanation of China’s desire to avoid the label of the “China threat,” which would be leveled at it if it were to infringe on its neighbors’ sovereignty. However, its reluctance to back down in the South China Sea seems to indicate that it has no qualms about taking on an expansionist position that threatens the sovereignty of other Southeast Asian nations.

Fourth, the authors argue that non-intervention and respect for other nations is inherent in Chinese culture. Specifically, they refer to the concept of guanxi, or a “harmonious community” based on “reciprocal relationships” in which disputes are resolved without resorting to force or upsetting the harmony. They claim that the government applies this same sense of community in its diplomacy, particularly countries with which China has a long history of relations and views as baobo, or brothers. Essentially, it strives for a reciprocal, balanced, harmonious relationship with every country. However, it maintains the right, and indeed the responsibility, to protect other countries from the ill-intentioned interference of other great powers. The authors use this concept to argue that China will stand with other developing countries and will be the champion
of smaller, poorer countries that cannot stand up to great powers themselves. Furthermore, they argue that China, unlike other great powers, is not interested in competing for influence – singling out the United States’ pivot to Asia as a prime example – in other countries. They claim China only cares about maintaining a stable diplomatic relationship with other countries and take the position that other countries should do the same.

As their fifth point, and a key one, the authors argue that regime ability is a crucial criterion in China’s decision to get involved. They argue that China will only interfere when the government of the target country gives its consent and seeks Chinese involvement. Usually, this will occur only when the government no longer has the capacity to control the situation and needs outside support to quell a crisis. This point again emphasizes the importance of respecting sovereignty and conforms to the government’s current official stance on interference. With consent, they imply, China would not be interfering in the traditional sense, but rather benevolently supporting the sovereign government at its own request. Calling again on the examples of North Korea and Myanmar, the authors note the strong governments in both countries as the principal reason China never intervened in either of these countries even under international pressure. The authors also argue that China has a visceral aversion to interference due to the memory of the century of humiliation at the hands of intervening colonial powers in China’s collective conscience. As an example, they argue that since China did not intervene in Myanmar even when it had a legitimate justification and means to do so, why would it intervene in other countries in the future? Those who fear China’s rise will not be peaceful might argue that a divided China in the midst of the disastrous Cultural Revolution cannot be compared with a resurgent, stable China that appears eager to reclaim its position as the center of the world.
Finally, the authors say that China will avoid intervention and heavy sanctions, which supposedly always fail, in favor of a middle ground approach of “soft” tactics like negotiation and mediation. They argue, again, that China does not seek to become a hegemon and that it will eschew coercive tactics, instead only engaging when it is for the good of the community. Mostly, they argue, China will not go beyond playing the role of host for parties to come together and resolve issues themselves, as it has done in the past for talks on North Korea. Even with regard to humanitarian and peacekeeping missions, the authors note China’s reluctance to engage in certain instances. They reference an important International Crisis Group report that found China to have a “case-by-case” approach to peacekeeping missions based on consent of the host government, strict U.N. neutrality, and the use of force exclusively in self-defense (International Crisis Group Asia Report №166 2). Furthermore, it will not provide combat troops, only support personnel such as engineers and military observers.

While the authors heap praise and flattery on the Chinese government and almost exclusively refer to examples that support their argument and their characterization of the Chinese government, the idea of harmonious intervention provides insight into one popular strategy put forth by the Chinese intellectual community. The overarching themes of this strategy also gel perfectly with the government’s characterization of its own intentions and may provide a useful and peaceful-sounding framework in which China packages its media statements on future involvement abroad. Those main themes are the respect of sovereignty to avoid the perception of a “China threat” and the emphasis on the long-term stability of bilateral relationships. The authors, here, have laid out a more detailed, concrete set of points that the government may adopt as it seeks to justify its involvement and differentiate it from Western intervention. This strategy
most closely resembles China’s traditional non-intervention stance, while the next three strategies promote a more assertive role.

Constructive Intervention

While harmonious intervention promotes a restrained policy that would largely represent continuity with China’s historic non-interference, some Chinese scholars have advocated a more proactive strategy: constructive intervention. This strategy would represent a sharper break from China’s traditional role and acceptance of a form of intervention more in line with that of the other great powers. Though still a middle ground between outright intervention and complete non-interference, constructive intervention would allow the Chinese government much more flexibility in its justification for getting involved in “grey-area” conflicts where explicit host government consent is not necessarily clear. Originally proposed by Western scholars as a more restrained, responsible policy option for great powers, Chinese scholars have since adapted the pre-existing idea of constructive engagement to be a policy option for the Chinese government.

Zhao Huasheng introduced this strategy and the benefits it would bring to Chinese foreign policy in the wake of what he saw as a failure of China’s response to a political crisis in Kyrgyzstan in 2010. In this instance, like most others prior to China’s recent shift to a more assertive posture, China quickly evacuated its people and resources from Kyrgyzstan. China then patiently waited for the crisis to be resolved, not declaring any political stance and only releasing standard statements of its desire for the conflict’s peaceful resolution. Only when stability was restored did China dispatch representatives to re-engage in the bilateral relationship. By not supporting either side, China ensured that it would have a chance to establish good relationships with whoever emerged at the helm in Kyrgyzstan. Proponents of constructive intervention argue
that Chinese interests are now too great to continue with this line of passive, reactive policy and
the consequences of mass evacuations.

The author argues that China should not abandon non-interference as the cornerstone of
its policy but rather add constructive intervention as another policy option to be used under the
right circumstances. He argues that China can use globalization, the interconnectivity of issues,
and regional consequences of localized conflict as a justification to engage, meaning that it
would not be interfering in strictly internal matters. He further argues that constructive
intervention would allow China to remain well within the boundaries of international law and
accepted norms. In fact, he implies that, like other great powers, China has a responsibility to
mediate, prevent crises, and ensure the respect of sovereignty, all in pursuit of global stability.

Zhao does not, however, recommend constructive intervention for every region, only
those where China has well-established interests and the presence and capabilities to affect the
outcome of the conflict. Otherwise, China should maintain its non-interference policy since it
would not have the means to back up its statements of support for any actor. He singles out the
possibility of the rise of extremists as the most urgent case in which China must get involved if it
has interests and influence in the region. However, he goes further in stating that China could not
ignore the matter if, say, its “oil and gas pipelines are threatened” (Zhao, “Non-Interference and
Constructive Intervention”). This is where the greatest shift in policy would come, as China
would be intervening not on behalf of the host government’s interests but to protect its own
economic interests in the country. Given China’s investment in natural resources in dozens of
countries, this criterion would essentially give China the option to intervene almost anywhere in
the developing world. He argues that, if China continues to withdraw, it will not be taken
seriously and will be unable to establish prestige and respect as a reliable partner in other
regions. While that sounds almost indistinguishable from the self-interested intervention policies implemented by other great powers, Zhao does place importance on host government consent, though he does not rule out intervention in cases without consent.

He identifies three possible “attitudes” of host countries toward Chinese intervention: “welcome, no objection, and opposition.” These correspond to three types of intervention: “invited intervention, automatic intervention, and forced intervention.” Like proponents of even the most restrained policy option of harmonious intervention, he thinks it is logical to intervene if the host government invites China to do so. However, he goes further in saying that China may also proceed without reservation if the host government is indifferent to Chinese involvement. He acknowledges that it would be difficult to intervene if China is unwelcome, but he leaves open the possibility of intervention even in this case, especially if there are internal divisions and one or more factions within the country call on China to intervene. Unlike harmonious intervention, which argues that China should go to any length to avoid the “China threat” moniker, Zhao and constructive intervention do not preclude intervention as an option even when local public opinion is against China. They recognize, though, that a negative view of China and the fear of the “China threat” may reduce the effectiveness of Chinese intervention and therefore those countries may require a less direct approach. Zhao also mentions that the interests of other great powers, particularly Russia, should be considered before taking an action that might result in unacceptable damage to bilateral relations. Finally, he advocates a gradual introduction of this policy, with a shift in how China casts its role in different regions.

At its most basic, Zhao’s version of constructive intervention argues for China to transform itself from a “bystander” to an active “participant” and from inaction to proactive policies in regions where it has interests. He emphasizes the need for China to cultivate a new
image of a reliable partner in regional affairs to gain the approval of other countries for its involvement. To achieve this transformation, he argues for a number of tactics mostly in line with how China has engaged with conflicts under Xi’s leadership. First, Zhao calls for high-level diplomatic visits and talks as the primary form of involvement in order to clearly signal its dedication to solving the crisis. He also, though, argues for China to propose more detailed plans and be clearer about its own interests in the country, rather than restraining itself to its typically general statements. As another strategy to reassure other countries of China’s impartiality and respect of sovereignty, Zhao says that China should seek to work in conjunction with regional multilateral organizations, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Central Asia. In fact, he argues that China should work with regional organizations to establish procedures to deal with crises that arise to ensure a more structured and consistent approach led by local countries. The goal of these procedures would be for China to avoid becoming a “regional manager” and carrying too much “political and economic baggage.” He again avoids suggesting this as a rule for Chinese involvement, though, and he says China may have to pursue a bilateral strategy when regional blocs or great powers cannot reach a consensus. Nonetheless, he maintains that China should carve out an independent position even when getting involved multilaterally. Finally, he emphasizes that China should remain neutral where its interests are not at great risk and should always revert first to “soft” tactics like mediation, reserving full intervention for only the most extreme and threatening cases. Though this strategy does not advocate for much more assertive tactics than China already claims to employ, it does call for a recasting of China’s role in the world. It also leaves extensive grey areas where China, as its influence deepens, can justify taking on a more traditional interventionist role if “soft” tactics do not produce the desired result.
Creative Involvement

Besides constructive intervention, some proponents of a more assertive China with more responsibilities globally advocate for a strategy known as creative involvement. Without specifying any particular tactics, the original author behind this strategy, Wang Yizhou, calls for a more pragmatic, case-by-case approach to Chinese intervention abroad consisting of original, innovative solutions and frameworks for solving problems. He argues that each case requires a unique response and that China should consider a wide range of options for each. Like the other strategists, though, Wang does not advocate for the use of force, rather suggesting that China “skillfully guide the evolution of the situation and make it serve the interests of all parties” (Y. Wang). However, he differs from the authors of the other strategies by more explicitly outlining two separate geographical spheres for Chinese involvement. Pointing to the importance of the Monroe Doctrine and the Warsaw Pact in establishing American and Soviet dominance over their respective regions, Wang argues that China too must carve out a “strategic frontier.” This would act as a boundary within which China would dominate, giving it the security at home to become more involved in other regions. Detractors would argue that this outlook is not feasible because it would turn its neighbors against China out of fear of the “China threat.” Though China may not be able to establish regional hegemony due to the big, powerful, and wealthy states surrounding it, in addition to the U.S.’ presence, Wang’s point is that China should first focus nearby to ensure a stable, friendly political environment on its borders. The more stable East and Southeast Asia are, the more China can afford to intervene in other regions.

Though this strategy can accommodate a significantly more assertive China, Wang still lays out standard and unsurprising pre-conditions for China’s involvement. First, he says it is important to ensure there is international consensus of some kind behind any of China’s actions,
which would reduce the chance of China being labelled a threat. He calls on China to open
dialogue in crisis areas but to first obtain international recognition of the process and decide on a
set of issues for discussion that both sides can benefit from, not contentious issues. Second, he
argues that China must respect existing international law and learn from the successes and
failures of other great powers in the past. He especially argues for an expansion of Chinese
political, economic, and cultural outreach as a means of underpinning its image as a reliable and
respected international partner, using the U.S.’ Peace Corps program as an example. Third, like
the other authors, he places a great importance on the respect of sovereignty. Even in the absence
of a functioning central government, he says China should gain the trust of the main political
factions and the public before interfering. Fourth, China should not tie itself to processes or
positions led by other countries, and it should still hedge its involvement so it can avoid backlash
and establish ties with whoever comes to power. Fifth, Wang says that China should never
support regime change as an objective. Finally, he says that China should open a national
dialogue about China’s interests abroad and determine in advance where it should invest the
most resources to protect those interests. In all, Wang vacillates between implying that,
realistically, China will try to become a regional hegemon and arguing that that does not mean
that China will resort to the same self-interested, wanton intervention that other great powers
have used in the past.

Consultative Intervention

More recently, Li Zhiyong put forth a more nuanced strategy of consultative intervention,
which acts as a sort of middle ground between the restraint of harmonious intervention and the
relative assertiveness of constructive intervention (Z. Li). Like constructive intervention,
consultative intervention entails a more active China but still explicitly rules out military intervention as an option. Li argues that China should expand its efforts to promote negotiation and dialogue as a peaceful means of resolving crises. As the name implies, this strategy would establish China’s role as that of a consultant to the host government and opposition factions within the country. China would urge both sides to find common ground, and China would often play host, though it would not impose its own plan or framework for the conflict’s resolution so as to retain its neutral reputation. He contrasts this with the U.S.’ form of intervention, which he argues is too imposing and focused on protecting American interests rather than the interests of the host country. This, along with the assertion that China only seeks to promote peace and human rights, casts China as a benevolent actor that will put the interests of others before its own, a far-fetched characterization not least because of its own human rights record. Like proponents of harmonious intervention, Li sees sanctions as ineffective and holds respect for sovereignty over internal affairs in the highest regard. Through a combination of a careful management of bilateral relationships, helping countries build stronger domestic institutions, and promoting dialogue, Li argues that China can effectively protect its interests abroad while avoiding the problems associated with R2P.

Using China’s voting record and speeches at the U.N., Li lays out a case for how this model of intervention encapsulates China’s new approach to foreign conflicts. He specifies six criteria that must be met before China will get involved in a crisis or consent to U.N. involvement, many of which are consistent with or identical to the criteria of the strategies of involvement discussed previously. First, and most importantly, the government in the country of interest must consent to outside involvement. Second, the U.N. or some other multilateral body must take the lead on intervening so no one country can protect its own interests at the expense
of stability. China made this clear in its dealings on Syria, with China’s U.N. representative saying, “China hopes to see a proper settlement of the Syrian crisis within the framework of the Arab League” because “Syria is a member of the Arab world” (“Security Council 6710th Meeting 25”). Third, China must focus on “soft” tactics like consultation and be committed to avoiding the use of force or sanctions. Fourth, along the lines of respect for sovereignty, outside powers must not pursue regime change as a goal. Fifth, China must prioritize humanitarian assistance while a political agreement is negotiated. Finally, intervention must build on local efforts to resolve the conflict, not replace them. While many of these guidelines are similar to what other scholars have argued for, these criteria most explicitly delimit China’s willingness to intervene in conflicts abroad and provide consistency and clarity on the preconditions for Chinese interference anywhere.
China’s Mediation in Afghanistan

Background

Sharing only a short 76-kilometer border where the Wakhan Corridor extends from northeast Afghanistan to China’s northwestern province of Xinjiang, the Chinese government has historically paid less attention to Afghanistan than its other neighbors. Nestled high in the Hindu-Kush mountains, the unpopulated border region does not offer much in terms of connectivity or economic transactions, most of which occur by air or ground routes through nearby countries. This disconnectedness has left China’s reputation untarnished in Afghan public perception, as they are not associated with invasion like other great powers involved in the region (Khan and Ayaz 5). Nonetheless, China does have a history of engagement in the country. Following the USSR’s invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, China began providing monetary and logistical assistance to the mujahadeen because they feared being surrounded by Soviet influence, which had already spread to Vietnam and Cambodia to China’s south (Khalil).

China became much more interested in Afghanistan in the mid-1990s when the Taliban seized power. At the time, the Taliban sheltered members of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which carried out terrorist attacks against China and had separatist objectives in Xinjiang. Initially, China supported U.N. sanctions against the Taliban, though in the late 1990s they began efforts to improve relations (Stone, “The Odd Couple”). China met with Taliban leaders in an attempt to improve trade relations and offer economic incentives in return for the Taliban dropping support for Uighurs using Afghan territory to plan operations against China. Though they did not ink an official deal because 9/11 halted talks, there was a tacit, unofficial agreement that the Taliban would not harbor Uighurs from China (Khalil). Though China cautiously supported the invasion of Afghanistan following 9/11, government
officials continued to hedge their relations with both sides. In fact, China regularly engaged with
the Taliban’s representative in Islamabad and was said to have had even better relations with him
than the Pakistanis, who had arrested some Taliban members, did (Stone, “The Odd Couple”).

Over the last two decades, China has had conflicting responses to the U.S. presence in
Afghanistan. On the one hand, they have benefitted from the improvement in the security
situation when large numbers of American troops are present. Not only has that security
protected Chinese nationals and business interests in Afghanistan, but it has also reduced the
capacity of would-be terrorists who might otherwise threaten northwest China. Furthermore,
China’s non-interference policy prohibits the option of sending Chinese forces into Afghanistan,
and China receives the security benefits without the costs. However, it does not like the U.S.
presence in its backyard, and Chinese officials have welcomed the decision to withdraw U.S.
troops (Sun). The U.S. military drawdown has seen an increase in terrorist attacks and forced the
closure of Chinese business ventures in Afghanistan, though, spurring Chinese efforts to mediate
between the warring factions (Stone, “China’s Afghanistan Threat”). Since 2014, China has
engaged in numerous conflict resolution efforts, both bilateral and multilateral, in Afghanistan.

Chinese Interests in Afghanistan

China’s core interests in Afghanistan can be separated into security and economic
concerns. First, as before, China worries that instability in Afghanistan could spill over the
border and encourage a resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism in the largely Muslim province of
Xinjiang. While China has effectively used its influence to reduce the Uighur presence in
Afghanistan, a civil war would offer the space for potential insurgents to again use Afghanistan
as a sanctuary from which to attack China (Sun). Second, China has expressed little to no
confidence in the U.S.’ ability to negotiate a lasting peace agreement and expects chaos following their complete military withdrawal (Sun). China expects the already higher level of terrorist attacks following the NATO drawdown to increase even further, and it cannot intervene militarily to protect its citizens. For that reason, they have engaged in multilateral talks in anticipation of a breakdown in relations between the Afghan government and the Taliban that may require a U.N. peacekeeping deployment or some other measure to prevent a civil war (Sun). China also fears that overplaying its hand in Afghanistan might spark backlash in Xinjiang, so it prefers a multilateral approach in which it can more easily distance itself from failures (Mustafa 425).

China also has significant business interests and prospective business interests in Afghanistan, though experts disagree on how prominently economic considerations factor in China’s strategic plan in Afghanistan. While China’s trade level with Afghanistan may not be very high, Chinese businesses hope to take advantage of the country’s untapped mineral resources. In 2008, a Chinese company won rights to a massive mining operation, the Aynak copper mine, for 30 years but has since had to shutter it and other locations because of attacks on workers (Safi and Alizada 32-33). Beyond restarting existing operations like Aynak, China would like to invest in other mineral extraction projects as well. China also sees potential in Afghanistan to develop a transportation hub that links its trade network in Pakistan to the China-Central Asia-Western Asia economic corridor (Safi and Alizada 23). As a first step in this direction, China in 2017 announced the addition of Afghanistan to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and has encouraged Pakistan to open border crossings to facilitate trade (Safi and Alizada 48-53). In conjunction with those projects, China intends to expand and improve Afghanistan’s railway network. China figures that if it can achieve these economic goals, it
would greatly increase the economic potential of the BRI in South and Central Asia and eventually pay economic dividends for China (Zhao, “Afghanistan and China’s New Neighborhood Diplomacy”). However, China’s stated position suggests a difficult road ahead, as it claims that economic development is the path toward a more stable Afghanistan, but expanded economic projects depend on more stability and security.

Others argue that economic realities will limit the extent to which China is willing to get involved in Afghanistan. Former Ambassador of China to Afghanistan Yao Jing notes that China’s trade volume with Afghanistan is only $400 million, which is inconsequential for an economy as large as China’s, especially when compared with the tens of billions of dollars in trade with Pakistan (Safi and Alizada 47). He argues that such a small trade volume, and such a small economy in Afghanistan, is not worth large Chinese investments on the scale that would be needed to improve the situation. Besides the Aynak copper mine and oil exploration at Amu Darya, not many Chinese companies expressed interest in investing in Afghanistan even at the height of the “Going Out” policy of investment abroad, signaling that economic projections may be overly optimistic (Sun). Whether economic investments are a major factor in Chinese Afghanistan policy, a full-blown civil war would threaten the stability of the whole region, including in western China, and would deal a major blow to BRI, so China has an economic and security interest in fostering peace in Afghanistan.

China’s Strategy and Stated Objectives in Afghanistan

Prior to the recent official peace talks, Afghan and Taliban leaders would typically deny discussing peace with each other or outside powers. China’s mediation efforts do not fit well within its non-interference policy so Chinese officials would deny talks as well. As a result,
China has been reluctant to openly express its goals in Afghanistan and confirm that it has regularly hosted meetings with representatives from both sides. When asked about a documented meeting with Taliban representatives in Urumqi in 2015, China’s Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman denied knowledge of the meeting and simply said that China “values developing China-Afghanistan relations and hopes that Afghanistan will achieve enduring peace, stability and development” as soon as possible (Wong and Mashal). This response has become typical for the topic and has been repeated throughout the years at each report of secret meetings hosted by China (Sediqi). China does, however, acknowledge that it offers visas for Taliban members to attend meetings in China and promotes itself as a neutral actor ready and willing to help facilitate intra-Afghan talks in any way it can (Sun). Though China casts itself as a central partner in reconstruction efforts and a valuable sideline mediator in peace talks, it does not see a role for itself in the security sphere.

According to one Chinese official, “local development,” especially the creation of more employment opportunities, is the key to improving the security atmosphere in Afghanistan (Kelemen). Given the failures of the U.S. and other countries, China is the only country left with the ability and motivation to invest substantial economic resources in Afghanistan that might spur that growth (Chaziza, “China's Peace-Maker Role”). Though former Chinese Ambassador Yao Jing does not encourage large investments in Afghanistan at this time, he does say that China remains undeterred and only needs security guarantees in order to start work on infrastructure and other projects (Safi and Alizada 14). Overall, China has made it clear that it sees a leading role for itself in post-conflict reconstruction and investment that it believes will lead to lasting peace.
However, China believes multilateral peace talks are still the first step toward peace and a settlement is necessary before large-scale investment and reconstruction can begin. While these talks could occur through the U.N. or some other multilateral body, China is also prepared to work within bodies in which it plays a leading role. One of the most prominent of these is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which includes China, Russia, India, Pakistan, and several Central Asian countries (Ullah 66). Given that one of the main functions of this group is to coordinate militarily to combat terrorism, China thinks this organization is well placed to oversee any agreement in Afghanistan and might eventually induct Afghanistan into its sphere of relative stability.

China’s Efforts in Practice

In reality, China’s mediation and conflict resolution efforts in Afghanistan are more expansive than they officially acknowledge. In addition to multilateral talks, they also host representatives in China for smaller meetings and led the push for intra-Afghan talks while the U.S. was focused on negotiating directly with the Taliban. Many of these unofficial meetings focus on reconciliation and trust building. Meanwhile, China maintains high-level contacts rather than relying on a larger diplomatic core of experts on the ground. They also provide a range of aid packages and economic incentives to the two sides. Despite this suite of efforts, China has largely failed to make any major breakthroughs in the peace process.

Multilateral Talks

As China promotes a multilateral forum as the ideal way to achieve sustainable peace in Afghanistan, it has accordingly participated in numerous different iterations of these talks. In the
2015 Murree talks led by Pakistan, China joined the U.S. as an observer and stepped up its involvement thereafter. In 2016, China launched the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM) with Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan, and it joined the U.S., Pakistan, and Afghanistan in the Quadrilateral Coordination Group. Both of these groups encouraged security cooperation laid the groundwork for future talks. Additionally, China attended the 2017 Kabul Process in 2017 and sent a delegation to Moscow for talks in 2018. In an effort to reconcile the Pakistani and Afghan government, China convened trilateral meetings between the three of them and also attended trilateral meetings with the U.S. and Russia to coordinate strategy (Stone, “The Odd Couple”). China also opened up a major multilateral channel through the SCO by re-engaging the Afghan Contact Group to discuss security issues with Afghanistan. China also moved to coordinate SCO actions with other mediators though the “six plus two” talks that include Afghanistan’s six bordering neighbors and the U.S. and Russia (Khan and Ayaz 5).

Despite the number of talks and forums, movement toward official peace talks and a negotiated settlement were hampered by differences between the goals of the great powers. Though the U.S. and China both seek a stable and prosperous Afghanistan, they disagree on how to achieve that and who should govern it. The U.S. insists that the Afghan government must maintain control, while China recognizes that the Taliban will not accept a secondary role and is more conciliatory toward their demands (Imran 61). Furthermore, animosity between the Pakistani and Afghan governments makes it difficult to pressure the Taliban into concessions, as Pakistan has no incentive to push them. Similarly, the Afghan government does not view China as a neutral mediator. This mistrust and these competing interests, along with a lack of
consistency in the members and format of talks, make discussions cumbersome and make it
difficult to move the needle forward toward a lasting settlement everyone can agree on.

Secret and Bilateral Talks

Aside from multilateral talks, China has undertaken a campaign of smaller, unofficial
meetings hosted in China with the goal of reconciliation and laying the groundwork for more
productive talks in multilateral settings. China especially hopes that including Pakistan in these
meetings will provide a spark for negotiations by building trust between Pakistani and Afghan
officials (Dobbins and Malkasian). The first of these reported meetings occurred in 2014 and
brought together unofficial Taliban representatives and Afghan government officials in Urumqi
to discuss the possibility of the entering negotiations (Stancati). Though both sides deny that
these meetings are direct negotiations, they have continued to attend and in 2018 China even
confirmed that it had welcomed a Taliban delegation (Wong and Mashal). These talks are
important because the Taliban and Afghan government cannot meet in Afghanistan, so China
provides a somewhat secret channel that keeps communication between the sides open even if it
does not result in major gains. China has also brought Pakistani ISI officials to talks and
successfully convinced them to open border crossings and reduced tensions between them and
the Afghan government (Rehman). With these key actors all participating in meetings in China,
China may gain traction despite not being seen as neutral by the Afghan government.

Intra-Afghan Talks

In recent years, mediators have succeeded in bringing Afghan government officials and
Taliban representatives together for official talks. These have occurred in Russia and Qatar as
well, but secret talks in China are partly responsible for bringing them together. While the U.S. focused on direct negotiations with the Taliban, China worked to provide a venue where Afghans on both sides could talk openly without the pressure of international attention and official negotiations. Because Taliban officials cannot meet with Afghan government representatives, the Taliban would send people who were technically private citizens. At this point, the Taliban publicly acknowledges its participation in these talks, and they have moved to more formal settings.

Though China had success in bring the sides together privately, there is skepticism around whether China can succeed as a mediator in official negotiations. The Afghan government views China as too hesitant to invest enough resources and fears that China will favor Pakistan and the Taliban in any deal (Kousary). However, the Afghan people still view China favorably as a mediator, so China may be able to succeed by using the SCO to encourage further talks (Seerat 5-6).

Shuttle Diplomacy

In all of these efforts, China relies heavily on high-level contacts and shuttle diplomacy to imbue a sense of urgency and get buy-in from important, high level officials on both sides. For example, in the days leading up to the 2014 Afghan elections, Ambassador Sun Yuxi visited with President Hamid Karzai, Ashraf Ghani, and Abdullah Abdullah, as well as U.N. officials, and with the US and EU Ambassadors to Afghanistan (Sun and Zoubir 232). China also designated its first ever Special Envoy to a specific country to deal with foreign ministers, ambassadors, and high-level military officials on all sides (Chaziza, “China's Peace-Maker Role” 148). When holding secret talks, they also invite high-level representatives that can make decisions on behalf
of the side they represent. For example, a former Taliban official, Maulvi Qalamuddin said that the secret meetings in China were a “very high-level effort to discuss peace” and that “these people are more important than those in Qatar,” noting that the “talks are held secretly, and only a few people know about it” (Stancati). While it is difficult to establish the exact purpose of these meetings, these comments lend support to the idea that much of the groundwork for official talks is laid during high-level secret talks in China.

Development and Security Aid

As discussed previously, China contributes to development efforts in Afghanistan through direct funding and projects. However, their support still lags behind that of the U.S. and others. Nonetheless, their commitments are increasing, and they are providing around $80 million each year, along with professional training for thousands of Afghans (Chaziza, “China’s Mediation Efforts”). However, many of its economic projects have not met much success. For example, a China-Afghanistan air corridor established to boost Afghan exports has proven costly and ineffective (Kelemen). Other efforts to revamp the economy, such as mining projects and railway expansions, have run into security issues and have been suspended indefinitely. However, China has invested $1.5 billion in Afghanistan since 2001 and has had some success, such as with hundreds of scholarships and housing projects (Chaziza, “China’s Peacemaker Role” 149). The purpose of these projects ties back to China’s stated goal of social change through economic opportunities. China also hopes that commitments to infrastructure projects like roads will be enticing enough to encourage the Taliban to agree to a peace deal.

Not all of China’s aid is benevolent though, and its security aid to the Afghan government appears to be tied to Afghan cooperation on security issues important to China.
Specifically, China’s significant security aid contributions were paired with the extradition of 15 Uighurs to China in 2015 (Khalil). Like prior to 2001, China continues to use Memoranda of Understanding with the Talban as well. While their contents are unknown, they appear to have again attained the Taliban’s cooperation against Uighurs, and at times Chinese economic projects have been left untouched while insurgents destroyed and looted everything nearby, suggesting that they have an agreement to leave Chinese assets intact (Khalil).

Afghanistan and Non-Intervention Theory

China’s involvement in Afghanistan violates at least one of the boundaries of each of the four previously discussed theories: harmonious, constructive, creative, and consultative intervention. While those theories may have fit a few years ago, China has become more direct in its involvement. First, meeting directly with the Taliban, and with the Taliban and Pakistani government, both adversaries of the Afghan government, clearly violates the Afghan government’s sovereignty. Based on the non-interference policy, the Afghan government should also be present at any talks with the Taliban, otherwise China is circumventing them and legitimizing the rebels. Furthermore, the Afghan government likely would not consent to any Chinese efforts to incentivize the Taliban with economic support. At the same time, these secret meetings violate the idea that China should operate throughout multilateral forums and only take actions that have international support. In the public eye, China focuses its statements on its multilateral mediation efforts and development aid. In that sense, China is trying to project an image of a responsible power engaging in harmonious intervention, where China is only involved where and how the local government asks it to be involved. However, the only red line China has left intact is the use of force to achieve its objectives.
While these theories do not fit, one observer of the South Sudan conflict noticed a pattern that seems to apply well to the Afghanistan case as well. Obert Hodzi suggests a strategy of ‘parallels,’ in which China combines “principle with pragmatism; multilateralism with bilateralism; and power politics with mediation.” This balance reflects the disparity between China’s public and behind-the-scenes efforts. While China does have a presence in multilateral settings, it has made more immediate progress through secret talks that bring together people that cannot meet in public. China has also used these talks to offer economic incentives for the two sides making concessions. Though the discussions in most secret meetings are unknown, there are not many indications that China has used threats or aggressively pressured either side in any way. However, as its interests and resources increase and China strengthens internationally, it may head in this direction. The lack of threats could also be a result of the international attention Afghanistan receives relative to South Sudan, so China may wish to avoid criticism over being too forceful.
China’s Mediation in South Sudan

Background

Despite the geographical distance between the two, China has become Africa’s largest trading partner, often taking on risky business ventures in unstable regions (Jorgic). As a result, China has been forced to reconsider and think outside of its established foreign policy principles. In some cases, such as Libya, China paid a high price for its reluctance to engage and protect its citizens and investments, instead pulling out. In the wake of that incident and the chaos that spread from Libya to nearby countries where China had interests, Chinese representatives have begun to bend or entirely break the non-interference principle to take practical steps to protect its interests.

Since the early 2000s, China had been particularly interested in Sudan because of its immense oil wealth. China correspondingly invested heavily in the industry, but in the spirit of non-interference it favored relations with the central government in Khartoum. To increasingly separatist-minded politicians in the south of Sudan, where about 75% of the oil laid, that meant China was supporting those in the north at the expense of those in the south (Large 37). Leading up to South Sudan’s independence in 2011, China increased its outreach to South Sudan in an attempt to secure continued access to and control over oil resources. However, even after establishing formal relations with Juba, Chinese oil business representatives were expelled from the country and President Salva Kiir curtailed his visit to China (Bayoumy and Mao). In short order, though, China convinced the ruling party in South Sudan that partnering with China was in their economic interest. Soon after independence, China faced its next test when South Sudan refused to transport its oil through Sudan over export fee disagreements and arbitrary seizures.
(Walker). Given China’s economic stake, it swiftly stepped in to mediate and helped negotiate a deal.

Before long, in late 2013, civil war erupted in the newly founded nation and again threatened the flow of oil. The two main factions in the conflict were separated along ethnic lines. Sparked by a failed coup attempt by Vice President Riek Machar of the Nuer ethnic group, the conflict between Kiir’s Dinka and Machar’s Nuer did not conclude until 2018 (Tiezzi). Even now, tensions persist, and war could break out with little notice (“Despite Ceasefire Agreement in South Sudan, Intercommunal Conflicts Increase”). Throughout five years of conflict, almost 400,000 people died and over two million were forced to flee, many to neighboring countries (Global Conflict Tracker). China again quickly stepped in to mediate, playing a key role in peace talks in Addis Ababa (Jorgic). Given its economic interests, which were more substantial than those of the U.S. and other mediators, China was well placed to use its investments as leverage to nudge both sides toward a settlement. Since then, China has worked to promote peace and stability in South Sudan in a much more direct fashion than it has anywhere else.

**Chinese Interests in South Sudan**

Despite its position as a relatively small, landlocked country, South Sudan is strategically important to China’s economic interests, the security of Chinese citizens, and as a sort of experiment for Chinese diplomats to mediate and push the boundaries of China’s non-interference policy. Most analyses point to investments in the oil sector as a China’s principal reason for remaining involved. Prior to the civil war, South Sudan accounted for 6% of China’s oil imports, but that figure has been slashed by a third as many of the oil extraction sites have been shut down (Mugo 43; Tiezzi). On the production side, the China National Petroleum
Hearing 42

Corporation, a state-run entity, is a major stakeholder in extracting oil, holding a 40% stake in plans to develop the oil fields (Yan). With many of those projects offline, China lost access to a key source of affordable oil and cannot recoup the costs of its investments. With its near monopoly over South Sudanese oil compared to other foreign countries’ investments there, China stands to benefit immensely from a stable environment where it can cheaply tap those resources. Finally, China’s investments in the Horn of Africa are not limited to South Sudan. With millions of refugees fleeing across the border to Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, and elsewhere, China must contend with the prospect of a disruption to its investments all over the region. After failing to step in to protect its interests in Libya, armed conflict proliferated throughout the Sahel, and China fears a repeat of that in the Horn if South Sudan becomes a failed state (Hodzi 3).

With those investment projects, hundreds of Chinese workers went to work in South Sudan’s oil industry, creating a security problem for China. As early as 2008, Chinese workers were kidnapped and killed in the district of Abyei, today a territory disputed by Sudan and South Sudan (China Hostages). In 2014, the kidnapping of 29 construction workers in the same area prompted China to preemptively pull workers out of the area (Bradsher and Gettleman). Facing public pressure from its domestic audience, China eventually evacuated over 300 workers from the oilfields (Barber 1). That figure accounted for 97% of the China National Petroleum Corporation’s employees in the country and stalled operations (Hodzi 4). Because China could not resume operations without the requisite security situation, security guarantees figured prominently in China’s talks with the warring parties.

Finally, some have argued that China used the relatively low-profile South Sudanese conflict to test out its mediation skills while other major powers were distracted by conflict
elsewhere (Cahyadi). Whereas it might face blowback for getting too involved in Syria or Yemen, where the U.S. is more interested, Western leaders have welcomed China’s mediation efforts in South Sudan, where China has more resources and can devote more attention. In the absence of international scrutiny, China is free to experiment and improve its diplomatic skills without worrying about being accused of breaking with its non-interference principles.

China’s Strategy and Stated Objectives in South Sudan

When South Sudan achieved independence in 2011, Chinese President Hu Jintao congratulated them and relayed his desire to establish a cooperative relationship “based on the five principles of peaceful coexistence,” one of which being non-interference (“China Recognizes Independence of South Sudan”). Two years later, as civil war erupted, China’s Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying said that China would start “promoting negotiation with its own way” and would “work with all relevant parties to promote the conflicting sides in solving their disputes through dialogue and negotiation” (Tiezzi). In 2014, Hua’s successor as spokesperson, Hong Lei, would go on to acknowledge that China has actively worked to mitigate the crisis but insisted that “it does not mean that China has changed its diplomatic principles” (“Hong Lei’s Regular Press Conference”). Hong would also claim that China is only interested in “maintaining regional peace and enabling conditions for local development,” refusing to admit that China has any self-interest in the conflict’s resolution (“Hong Lei’s Regular Press Conference”). However, in that case China should be just as involved in conflicts elsewhere in Africa, not just those where it has a stake. China has also found excuses to justify its involvement in South Sudan’s internal conflict. Notably, Hong focused on tensions between Sudan and South Sudan, rather than the civil conflict in South
Sudan (“Hong Lei’s Regular Press Conference”). Mediation between two sovereign states fits more cleanly into the principle of non-interference than stepping into a civil conflict does, so China has at times ignored the more prominent civil aspect in public statements. Chinese officials also claim that it is China’s duty as a responsible state to actively work toward peace, arguing that China is present out of obligation rather than self-interest (“Wang Yi: China’s Mediation”).

However, lower-level officials on the ground in South Sudan have offered more blunt and practical assessments of China’s role in the conflict. In 2014, Chinese Ambassador to South Sudan Ma Qiang acknowledged that China has “huge interests in South Sudan” and would make a “greater effort” to persuade the two sides to accept a ceasefire (Tiezzi). When a ceasefire was reached in 2014, Chinese Ambassador to Ethiopia Xie Xiaoyan was just as forceful as representatives from Western countries in making it clear that the warring factions needed to abide by the deal (Jorgic). Unlike in prior conflicts, speeches like Xie’s reflected China’s new, more direct approach and willingness to make demands and use its leverage to enforce peace. Later, China’s Special Envoy for Africa, who took the lead on its efforts in South Sudan, said that South Sudan posed a unique challenge to China given China’s historical non-interference, adding that China is “not only a participant, but also learning” (Vertin 21). Overall, the most visible high-level officials in Beijing continued to stick to traditional talking points on respecting sovereignty while those in Juba and Addis Ababa outlined a more direct, flexible role for China.

China’s Efforts in Practice

Compared to China’s involvement in Afghanistan, its actions in South Sudan have been more direct and China plays a more central role. However, its actions still fall into similar
categories. China principally has relied on multilateral forums to mediate in South Sudan, but it has played more of a leading role in those talks than it has in Afghanistan. China has also simultaneously engaged both parties in bilateral talks, where it can more freely apply some of its economic leverage to bring the sides closer to a deal. Like elsewhere, China has engaged mostly in relatively high-level shuttle diplomacy and has provided some development aid.

Multilateral Talks

From the early days of the conflict, China established a permanent presence at the multilateral talks being led in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, where it participated alongside the U.S., U.K., Norway, and East African countries (Brosig 876). Those outside powers often met to discuss the internal affairs of South Sudan, which clearly violates the non-interference principle as those meetings often did not involve South Sudanese officials. China has also provided millions of dollars to the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), an organization made up of East African states. IGAD led mediation efforts and policed the ceasefire agreements it helped to broker (Verjee). IGAD has allowed China to maintain its principle of supporting regionally led peace processes, playing the role of a quasi-mediator within that framework (Cahyadi). Some, though, have accused China of using this process only to advocate for its own interests and get assurances for the protection of its oil interests (Hodzi 5).

China has also engaged in U.N.-led efforts to support ceasefires and peace agreements. Though China had been reluctant to commit troops in the past, it committed 700 peacekeeping troops to the South Sudanese conflict (Sultan and Sun 20). The chief of the U.N. mission in South Sudan at the time, Hilde Johnson, praised China’s monetary and other commitments as “extremely helpful,” a sentiment shared by East African leaders (Jorgic). Kenyan President
Uhuru Kenyatta said that China’s “political, diplomatic and financial assets… would be a game-changer” (Jorgic). One reason for this embrace of China may be that it provides a counterbalance to the typical mediators in the region and takes away some of their leverage over weaker East African states. China’s peacekeepers have also worked to protect refugees and rebuild infrastructure (“South Sudan Welcomes China’s Peace Mediator”). These efforts, sincere or not, play well into how China wants the world to view its efforts: that of a responsible power acting out of concern for regional stability and not just pursuing its own interests.

Bilateral Talks

In addition to playing the role of a facilitator in multilateral talks, China has also used its economic leverage in bilateral talks to pressure the sides to accept a deal. Although China depends on South Sudan’s oil, South Sudan is in an even worse position. 98% of the government’s budget comes from oil production, and it sends 80% of its production to China (Tiezzi). This reliance not only makes the government susceptible to rebel attacks on their main source of funding, but it puts China largely in control of their economic fate. Bilateral talks provide an opportunity for China to apply pressure using those economic realities, and it also allows China to determine which side it should support based on intelligence gathered from meeting with both sides (Hodzi 6). Also, at the start of negotiations, China’s Special Envoy for Africa openly offered to work with rebel groups in mediation (Barber 1). A clear departure from non-interference, these mediations violated South Sudan’s sovereignty by bypassing the government and recognizing the influence and importance of other armed groups in the country. They would attempt to justify this by repeating that China does not take sides and wants to take a
positive approach to peace, avoiding sanctions or other aggressive measures ("South Sudan Welcomes China’s Peace Mediator").

In certain cases, China has demonstrated an ability and willingness to apply the necessary pressure to coerce either side to do as China wishes. Even though China does not send regular troops, it has the financial weight to buy the support of forces on the ground. In April 2014, for example, Chinese officials instructed government forces to “take forceful measures to protect the safety of lives and properties of Chinese people and enterprises” if necessary and to protect Chinese production and transportation operations (Minister Gao Hucheng). In a separate case, the central government wanted to simply dismantle a refugee camp in Juba that held around 15,000 Nuer. The U.N. argued unsuccessfully for the government to relocate the camp, but the government only conceded when China stepped in and convinced them, promising to contribute $2 million toward the new camp (Jorgic). Though China certainly puts its own interests first, other countries have welcomed these backdoor channels, as China is often the only state with the resources and connections to get things done.

Shuttle Diplomacy

Though South Sudan has not received as much attention as Afghanistan from key players in Beijing, China still conducts shuttle diplomacy and prefers to communicate at a high level there. When conflict broke out between Sudan and South Sudan, and again the next year when internal conflict broke out in South Sudan, China sent its Special Envoy for Africa to participate in the mediation (Chun and Kemple-Hardy 3). China then appointed Ambassador Zhong Jianhua as the Special Representative of the Chinese Government on African Affairs, and he shuttled between parties to the point that a Chinese government spokesperson joked that his “hair has
turned white” (“Wang Yi: China’s Mediation”). Rather than having him direct the effort from afar, China ensured that he and other top officials were constantly consulting directly with the parties to keep negotiations moving along and build trust. Zhong and other powerful officials also had more leeway and authority to pressure Kiir and Machar, both publicly and privately, to agree to and abide by ceasefires (Hodzi 6).

Development and Security Aid

South Sudan’s relative isolation and distance from the core route of China’s BRI make it a less attractive prospect for a wide range of investments compared to China’s neighbor Afghanistan. However, China has committed significant resources to South Sudan’s development, even if it falls short of the commitments made by the U.S., U.K., and Norway, the major Western powers involved in the conflict (Jorgic). Most of this aid goes toward the support of peace agreements or toward supporting displaced people. For example, following a 2016 agreement, China provided food to rebel forces in Juba during a short-lived effort to form a transitional government (Verjee). China also appears to want to get credit and recognition for its aid, pledging more aid and signing investment contracts when the Chinese Premier or other leaders visit from Beijing (Jorgic). China’s lack of aid relative to its interests in South Sudan, though, lend support to the argument that China gives some aid and makes statements in support of sovereignty only to maintain a façade of responsibility and non-interference. Meanwhile, this argument holds that, behind-the-scenes, Chinese diplomats mostly pressure the warring factions on the issue of oil and Chinese investments and do not care much for the well-being of the South Sudanese people.
South Sudan and Non-Intervention Theory

China has taken an even more aggressive approach in South Sudan than it has taken in Afghanistan. While its approach is still less direct than that of Western countries often is, China has violated most of the boundaries put forth by the theories but again stopped short of the use of force. However, China did pressure Kiir into using government forces to protect Chinese interests. China also sent peacekeepers through the U.N., a move many countries welcomed but which again pushes the boundaries of China’s own principles. Just as it talked directly to the Taliban, China has openly acknowledged its outreach to Machar and his forces, which recognizes their influence and authority and undermines the absolute sovereignty of the government in Juba. Finally, China used its economic leverage, which is much stronger in South Sudan than in Afghanistan, to pressure both sides.

The idea of a strategy of ‘parallels’ fits better in this case as well, even better than in the Afghanistan case because it was proposed specifically to explain China’s involvement in South Sudan. Though China did not regularly host secret bilateral meetings as it did in Afghanistan, China did use more direct pressure in its bilateral meetings with the factions in South Sudan. Meanwhile, visiting officials from Beijing would offer a slate of development aid and highlight China’s support of regionally led mediation efforts, like IGAD. Though China may not yet feel comfortable publicly engaging in power politics, Chinese diplomats clearly understand that pragmatically they must use these tactics behind-the-scenes or else suffer the consequences like in Libya. China has been more direct in South Sudan than in mediation efforts anywhere else, but it may offer insight into how China will operate once it is stronger and has more leverage. In the case of South Sudan, it has already become the dominant outside power, whereas elsewhere its position is still developing.
Conclusion

Since 2013, China has demonstrated more and more willingness to engage in mediation efforts in conflict areas where Chinese interests are threatened. Furthermore, in these cases, China has also become even more active and direct in its approach and methods throughout the years. Whether because China feels emboldened by its strengthening international position or its newfound experience with mediation, Chinese officials have broken boundaries typically associated with its non-interference principle. While publicly China has not swayed from its insistence on non-interference, a disparity has developed between its public statements and its actions on the ground. Bilateral meetings with rebel groups, the application of its economic influence as leverage to pressure factions to take certain actions, and the prioritization of Chinese security and economic interests over local humanitarian interests all violate the sovereignty of the host governments that China deals with.

When analyzing case studies, it becomes apparent that China’s efforts go beyond the methods and boundaries put forth in the major theories. Instead, the strategy of ‘parallels’ proposed to explain China’s interference in South Sudan appears to characterize China’s actions more accurately and realistically. Nothing would indicate that China will rhetorically depart from its principle of non-interference anytime soon, as it still has not reached the height of its power and the principle is a useful tool for China to separate itself from and criticize Western powers. China would like to maintain its image as a neutral, responsible global partner and cast itself as an alternative to Western backers, whose support often comes with demands that are difficult for host governments to accept. At the same time, China recognizes that it cannot continue to expand its investments and send Chinese workers into unstable parts of the world without taking more active steps to protect them. Most importantly, China wants to avoid backlash from its domestic
audience that reacts poorly to news of recurring kidnappings and killings of Chinese workers and citizens abroad. Secondly, instability will hamper China’s grand BRI and set it back in key areas if left unaddressed. By engaging with both the government and rebels in internal conflicts abroad, China can use inducements and veiled threats to obtain security guarantees for its economic projects and transportation routes. While my argument closely follows the classical realist line that China will intervene more as its capabilities increase, there are limits. Having seen other superpowers get bogged down in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere, China has had time to observe what works and what does not work in foreign intervention. Even if its military capabilities develop to a level that makes military intervention a feasible policy option, it is unlikely to consider it seriously because of the monetary and human cost, as well as the reputation cost of completely breaking out of the non-interference policy. Moving forward, China will continue to advocate for non-interference while its adherence to the principle in practice will continue to slowly erode.

 Practically, these conclusions suggest a couple strategies for dealing with Chinese involvement in conflict zones. Optimistically, bringing China into negotiations adds a party with leverage and resources that in some countries the U.S. and other mediators simply do not have. China’s grasp of South Sudan’s oil sector and contacts within the Taliban, for example, would expand the tools available to mediators and, where necessary, give mediators more leverage in negotiations and credibility in enforcing agreements. Furthermore, countries like South Sudan that are not of strategic geographical importance to many international powers provide an opportunity for the U.S. and others to find common ground and work constructively with China. In an environment where U.S.-China tensions are heating up on many issues, this cooperation would provide a base for further cooperation in Africa and other areas where their interests align.
Additionally, host countries and local communities would stand to benefit from the positive results of any negotiations and Western mediators could pressure China to provide more humanitarian and development assistance. However, it is important to keep in mind that China often engages in mediation out of self interest and in certain cases that may hamper existing mediation efforts. For example, if China were to host talks parallel to an international coalition’s talks, it may further complicate the process and reduce the legitimacy of all talks. In this case, the U.S. or other involved mediators should increase the costs of China’s involvement by publicizing China’s efforts so that China knows it will be held to account, along with other mediators, for the outcome. Because China is reluctant to publicly acknowledge its interference and the failures that could come along with it, it may be induced to scale back its efforts or work more cooperatively with other international mediators. Overall, the U.S. and other mediators should cautiously welcome China’s mediation efforts and evaluate on a case-by-case basis whether to embrace or call out China’s actions. However, neither Western nor Chinese efforts have been particularly successful in many conflict zones, so they should at least try to work together.
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