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Changes in China's Mediation Strategies in International Conflict Resolution Since 2013

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the evolution of China's international mediation strategy since 2013, particularly in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The primary goal is to understand how China's mediation efforts have shifted toward greater proactivity, focusing on stability in strategically important regions such as South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. The paper is significant as it explores China's growing role as a global mediator, driven by both economic interests and geopolitical ambitions. Through case studies of conflicts in Sudan, Afghanistan, and Myanmar-Bangladesh, the analysis reveals China's focus on high-level, government-centric mediation and its tendency to align with strategic interests. It identifies key flaws, such as over-reliance on elites and lack of impartiality, which limit the effectiveness and sustainability of China's efforts. Suggestions for improvement include adopting more inclusive mediation practices, and ensuring greater transparency and neutrality. These recommendations aim to enhance the credibility and impact of China's mediation strategy, aligning it with international peacebuilding standards.

Keywords: conflict resolution, mediation strategies, Belt and Road Initiatives.

1. Introduction

Mediation is one of the most crucial tools for peacefully resolving international conflicts, as well as offering a diplomatic means of de-escalating tensions to reach settlements. China's role in international mediation has grown significantly in recent years, with its approach summarized by the phrase "contributing to the political settlement of conflicts and promoting peaceful talks," a notion central to its diplomatic ethos [1, 2]. Since the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, China has increasingly prioritized mediation as a key pillar of its foreign policy. The BRI has expanded China's global reach, incentivizing its involvement in conflict resolution in regions vital to the initiative's success. Consequently, Chinese diplomats have become more visible in areas such as the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia, actively participating in the prevention, management, and resolution of various conflicts [3].

This increased engagement, however, has not been uniform across regions or conflicts. China's mediation strategies and the resources it allocates differ significantly depending on the geopolitical, economic, and strategic importance of the area in question. In some cases, China adopts what scholars describe as "quasi-mediation diplomacy," particularly in regions like the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) [4, 5]. In these regions, China's intervention is often seen as more cautious and limited, focusing on maintaining stability and protecting economic interests rather than on direct

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conflict resolution. China's reluctance to take on a more assertive mediation role in these areas can be attributed to its traditional policy of non-interference and its preference for neutrality in conflicts that do not directly threaten its core interests.

In contrast, China has taken a more proactive and hands-on approach in mediating conflicts in its immediate neighborhood, such as in Myanmar and Bangladesh. In these cases, China's geographic proximity and its strategic interests – especially in ensuring the stability of its borders and securing BRI-related investments – have driven a more resource-intensive and assertive mediation strategy. This shift illustrates that China's mediation efforts are far from monolithic; rather, they may have been shaped by a complex set of motivations.

This paper seeks to explore why China has significantly increased its participation in international conflict mediation since 2013, with a particular focus on the factors influencing its motivations and strategies in various global conflicts. Specifically, the research analyses how China's economic interests, regional stability concerns, and the strategic imperatives of the BRI have shaped its evolving role in international conflict resolution.

2. China's Role in the Three Conflict Cases

2.1. Sudan Domestic Conflict

China's involvement in Sudan had increased significantly following the imposition of US sanctions on Khartoum in 1997, which had created wide opportunities for China to invest in Sudan's oil industry. By the early 2000s, China had become Sudan's dominant economic partner, with Sudan's oil exports accounting for over 70% of the country's total exports and 90% of its government revenue [6]. However, Sudan's internal conflict and the international community's criticisms of the Sudanese government's human rights abuses had placed China in a difficult position. China's motives in Sudan were primarily economic, aiming to ensure the access to a reliable supply of oil for its rapidly growing economy. Its strategic interest was mainly to maintain stability in oil-producing regions and keep connecting its economic relationship with Sudan despite international pressures. Sudan presented China with a great opportunity, and its main concern was to protect those investments.

In terms of strategy, China employed a non-interference approach, which aligned with its foreign policy principle of avoiding involvement in other countries' domestic affairs. China maintained close relationship with the Sudanese government, as well as avoided direct intervention in the conflict and resisted international calls for sanctions or peacekeeping missions. While its economic interests had urged for a careful balance, especially with the People's Liberation Movement/Army, who controlled many oil fields in southern Sudan, China largely refrained from becoming an active mediator, but instead focused on preserving its major business interests.

2.2. Afghanistan Domestic Conflict

Afghanistan, to certain degrees, represents a different set of challenges and opportunities for China, particularly due to its proximity to China's Xinjiang region and its significance to the Belt and Road Initiative. Afghanistan's long-standing internal conflict, mainly between the US-backed government and the Taliban, has made the region rather volatile and posed tremendous security concerns for China. Should Afghanistan become destabilized, it could encourage terrorism and extremism, even with the possibilities of spreading into China's Xinjiang region. Emphasizing on economic connectivity through the BRI, China's motives in Afghanistan are both strategic and security-driven. Afghanistan's geographical location makes it essential to China's broader BRI infrastructure projects that aimed at linking Central and South Asia. China would in this way view Afghanistan as a crucial transit hub for BRI corridors connecting Pakistan, Iran, and beyond, making Afghanistan's stability key to the success of its regional infrastructure ambitions.

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It is argued that China is beginning to propose alternative solutions and emphasizes the importance of developing internal conflict resolution capabilities [7]. China's strategy in Afghanistan, unlike Sudan, has been more proactive. Recognizing Afghanistan's importance to the BRI, China has chosen to engage with multiple factions, including the Taliban, to promote dialogue and reconciliation. It offered economic incentives such as infrastructure development as a means to encourage stability. While China did not involve itself militarily, it worked diplomatically to stabilize the region, whilst promoting its vision of peace through economic development, which was crucial to the BRI.

2.3. Myanmar and Bangladesh Conflict

The conflict between Myanmar and Bangladesh centers around the humanitarian crisis involving the Rohingya people, who have faced persecution in Myanmar's Rakhine state. Since 2017, over a million Rohingya's exodus to Bangladesh had created a massive refugee crisis. China, with its strategic interests in both Myanmar and Bangladesh, has taken an active role in mediating this conflict. Both countries are critical partners for China under the Belt and Road. China's motives in the Myanmar-Bangladesh conflict are largely driven by its economic and strategic interests. Myanmar's significance to China stems from its strategic location as a gateway to the Indian Ocean, which offers China an alternative route to bypass the Strait of Malacca [8]. Similarly, Bangladesh is crucial to China's broader BRI plans, particularly in terms of infrastructure projects that can enhance regional connectivity.

China's strategy here has been diplomatically assertive, which aims to balance its relations with both Myanmar and Bangladesh. It organized trilateral talks while focusing on stability and economic development. China's mediation is not primarily humanitarian in this case, but rather to ensure that the regional instability does not threaten its BRI projects. By maintaining good relations with both sides, China safeguards its investments, especially in Myanmar's Rakhine state, where critical BRI infrastructure projects are located.

3. Comparison of Motives and Strategy

3.1. Motives

China's motives across these three cases reflect a combination of economic interests, security concerns, and geopolitical ambitions. In Sudan, the primary motivation was purely economic—securing access to oil resources. Sudan's oil sector was critical for China's energy needs, and ensuring stability in the country was directly tied to maintaining its supply. This motivation was less about geopolitics and more about resource security. In contrast, in Afghanistan, China's motivations were more strategically complex, with both security and economic dimensions. Afghanistan's instability posed a potential threat to China's Xinjiang region, where concerns about extremism and terrorism are high. Additionally, Afghanistan's location made it critical to the success of China's broader BRI ambitions. The need for stability was not only about preventing security risks but also about ensuring that Afghanistan could serve as a vital link in the BRI infrastructure network connecting Central and South Asia. Meanwhile, in the Myanmar-Bangladesh conflict, China's motivations similarly combined economic and strategic interests. Myanmar's strategic location as a gateway to the Indian Ocean, as well as Bangladesh's role in China's regional connectivity plans meant that stability in the region was essential for the success of BRI projects. Here, China's focus was not only on economic gains but also on ensuring regional stability, which is crucial for its long-term infrastructure projects in both countries.

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3.2. Strategy

Mediation strategy refers to the overall method of conflict resolution provided by the mediator, including how to manage the conflict and coordinate the conflicting parties [9]. China's strategies in these three cases reveal a shift from non-interference to a more proactive and economically-driven approach, especially under the Belt and Road Initiative. In Sudan, China adhered to a non-interventionist policy, focusing on maintaining its economic relationship with the Sudanese government without directly involving itself in the conflict. This strategy reflected China's earlier approach to global conflict resolution, where protecting economic interests through diplomatic neutrality was prioritized over political or military involvement. In Afghanistan, however, China's strategy was rather different. Recognizing Afghanistan's importance to the BRI, China took on a more proactive role. It used its economic influence to promote regional stability. China engaged diplomatically with all key players, including the Taliban, to support reconciliation efforts. This proactive stance reflects China's shift towards using economic diplomacy – infrastructure development and economic incentives – to achieve conflict resolution, which aligned with its broader BRI goals. Stability in Afghanistan was crucial not just for regional security but also for the successful implementation of China's infrastructure projects, making the BRI central to its strategy. Similarly, in the Myanmar-Bangladesh conflict, China adopted a more assertive diplomatic role, actively mediating between the two nations. While China maintained its non-military discipline, it was more engaged diplomatically, organizing talks and emphasizing regional stability. The BRI's importance in this conflict was evident, as China's investments in both countries were endangered. China's mediation was aimed at ensuring that the refugee crisis would not disrupt its infrastructure projects, particularly in Myanmar's Rakhine state, where key BRI projects are located. This strategy of economic diplomacy was consistent with China's broader approach under the BRI, where economic development is seen as a tool for promoting stability.

4. Recommendations for China's Mediation Strategy

Since the launch of the Belt and Road in 2013, China's mediation strategy has evolved into a more proactive and visible role in international conflict resolution. Its approach now focuses more on achieving stability in strategic regions crucial to the BRI, such as South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. China's efforts would typically involve top-level diplomacy as well as leveraging economic incentives to promote peace. However, this approach may be characterized by two minor flaws: over-reliance on government elites and a perceived lack of impartiality.

4.1. Over-Reliance on Government Elites

China's mediation strategy tends to concentrate on high-profile, top-level engagement, primarily targeting government officials and elites in conflict regions. While this approach grants access to decision-makers and some immediate influence, it can exclude other critical stakeholders, such as local communities, civil society groups, and marginalized populations. This top-down focus limits the inclusivity of peace processes, whilst making agreements less likely to be sustainable or widely accepted.

To better address this issue, China may try to adopt a more inclusive mediation approach that involves a broader range of participators. This means engaging grassroots organizations, women's groups and minority representatives who have unique perspectives and needs within conflict dynamics. Greater inclusivity would, to certain degrees, contribute to more comprehensive peace agreements that reflect the interests of all parties involved. By broadening its engagement, China would strengthen the legitimacy of its mediation efforts and improve the chances of achieving longer-lasting peace.

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4.2. Lack of Impartiality

Where another improvement lies in China's mediation strategy may be its impartiality. China's interventions often align with its strategic interests, such as maintaining stability in BRI countries or supporting allied regimes. This may actually create a sort of bias, diminishing trust among conflicting parties and other mediators. In cases like Syria, for instance, China's support for the Assad regime has sparked criticism, as it contrasts with calls for a more balanced approach that includes accountability for war crimes and political transition [3].

To improve its impartiality, China should demonstrate a more balanced approach in its mediation efforts. Engaging with all conflict parties, including those who may be opposed to China's strategic interests, could be imperative. Publicly articulating a set of impartial mediation principles – focusing on neutrality and peace as the primary objectives – would further bolster China's credibility. Additionally, adopting a more transparent mediation process by openly sharing goals and outcomes would enhance trust among conflict parties as well as the international community.

5. Conclusion

This paper has explored the evolution of China's mediation strategy since 2013, and examined the factors driving such evolution as well as its impact on conflict resolution in particular regions. The analysis demonstrates that China's approach has become more proactive, it showing broader geopolitical ambitions tied to the Belt and Road Initiative. Key suggestions for improvement include adopting a more inclusive approach that engages grassroots actors and civil society, as well as enhancing impartiality to build greater trust among conflicting parties. Implementing these strategies could enhance the sustainability and legitimacy of China's mediation efforts and strengthen China's role as a responsible global actor.

Despite its contributions, this paper has limitations. It primarily focuses on China's mediation in selected conflicts, which may not fully capture the diversity of its global mediation efforts. Additionally, the analysis is largely qualitative, relying on case studies and theoretical frameworks, and could better benefit from empirical data to support the conclusions more robustly. Besides, the scope of the paper is also limited to analyzing state-level mediation, which overlooks potential informal diplomacy that may shape China's broader peacebuilding role.

Nevertheless, this paper provides a foundation for further studies by shedding light on the complexities and motivations behind China's evolving mediation strategy. Future research could expand the analysis to other conflicts where China has been involved or use quantitative methods to assess the effectiveness of China's mediation efforts over time. This would contribute to a deeper understanding of China's role in global conflict resolution and its potential trajectory as a major international mediator.

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