

# China's Conflict Mediation and the Durability of the Principle of Non-Interference: The Case of Post-2014 Afghanistan

Miwa Hirono<sup>\*</sup>

## Abstract

China's efforts in conflict mediation are an important test of the durability of the principle of non-interference. By analysing the approaches and means of China's post-2014 mediation efforts in Afghanistan, this article finds that China's behaviour shows it engages in medium-level interference in domestic affairs, but mostly with the host government's concurrence. This is because of the two forms China's mediation takes. In a bilateral context, China's mediation takes the form of "incentivizing mediation," in which its economic power, and its omnidirectional foreign policy, provide incentives or leverage for warring factions to come to the negotiation table, but which also lets the warring factions formulate their own roadmap to peace talks. In a multilateral context, China sometimes engages in "formulative mediation," in which the mediators, not the disputing parties, formulate a roadmap to peace talks.

**Keywords:** China; mediation; Afghanistan; Taliban; non-interference; Pakistan

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## A Shift in China's Approach to the Principle of Non-Interference?

Analysts of China's foreign policy have noted that the country has shifted its approach to diplomacy based on the principle of non-interference since the early 2000s. For example, China has agreed to all UN Security Council resolutions on peacekeeping authorized under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter. China has done so with the consent of relevant host governments, thus enabling it to claim that it abides by the non-interference principle. However, it has further begun to negotiate directly with rebel groups in conflict mediation in such places as Afghanistan, Israel-Palestine, Myanmar, and South Sudan.<sup>1</sup> Do China's mediation efforts demonstrate that China's diplomacy has added a new dimension to the non-interference principle?

\* College of International Relations, Ritsumeikan University. Email: [hirono-1@fc.ritsumei.ac.jp](mailto:hirono-1@fc.ritsumei.ac.jp).

1 Chen 2015.

By analysing the approaches and means of China's post-2014 mediation efforts in relation to the Afghan civil war, this article assesses whether or not China's engagement in conflict amounts to violation of the non-interference principle. The Afghan civil war is chosen as a single case study because, as a result of China's mediation, there seems to be a modest change in the Taliban's behaviour towards peace talks. In so doing, this article establishes an analytical framework that shows the linkage between the non-interference principle and the various types of mediation by focusing on two elements of mediation. The first is the mediator's approach in terms of who will take charge of determining the roadmap to peace. When the roadmap derives from the mediator's ideas, then the approach can be interpreted as a form of interference. The second element of mediation in this analytical framework is the use of leverage to persuade warring parties to come to the negotiation table or settle their disputes. Leverage amounts to "coercive" mediation, which goes against the non-interference principle.

This article finds that China's diplomatic behaviour shows that it engages in medium-level interference in domestic affairs, but mostly with the host government's concurrence. This is because of the two forms China's mediation takes. In a bilateral context, China's mediation takes the form of "incentivizing mediation," in which its economic power and its omnidirectional foreign policy provide incentives or leverage for warring factions to come to the negotiation table, but also allow the warring factions to formulate their own roadmap to peace talks. In a multilateral context, China sometimes engages in "formulative mediation," in which the mediators, not the disputing parties, formulate a roadmap to peace talks.

This article first reviews the literature of conflict mediation to establish an analytical framework that helps to assess the relationship between the types of approaches to mediation taken by China, and the level of interference each implies. It then examines China's mediation efforts in the case of post-2014 Afghanistan.

## Non-interference and Mediation

As discussed in the introduction article of this special section, the literature lacks any consensus on a definition of the non-interference principle.<sup>2</sup> Taking a broad perspective, interference can include recommendations, fact-finding missions and discussions, all of which are integral to mediation. Taking a narrow perspective, interference does not include recommendations etc., but does include such measures as military intervention and sanctions, for example. In an examination of how the various types of mediation relate to the non-interference principle, it is unhelpful to rely on one definition of interference and then judge whether or not China's mediation amounts to interference based on that definition, because

2 Hirono, Jiang and Lanteigne 2018.

one is inevitably drawn to conclude that whether or not China's mediation amounts to interference “depends on the definition of interference.” Rather, it is more helpful to conceptualize a particular type of mediation on the interference spectrum – from non-interference (not even discussions) at the one end, to complete interference (including military intervention and sanctions) at the other end. Between the two extremes are numerous varieties of mediation that amount to low, medium, or high levels of intervention. A UN description of one of the rights under the non-interference principle helps one conceptualize “complete interference” in this article. Non-interference is described in “the sovereign and inalienable right of a State freely to determine its own political, economic, cultural and social system ... without outside intervention, interference, subversion, coercion or threat in any form whatsoever.”<sup>3</sup> Anything other than this represents a level of interference.

Mediation is usually defined as “a generally facilitative, non-coercive and non-binding form of social behavior.”<sup>4</sup> Mediation is different from arbitration; the outcome of the latter is enforced by the power of law or of the state.<sup>5</sup> Mediation is not enforceable. It becomes effective only when warring parties agree to concessions or to sign a political agreement, either of which is suggested by a mediator. The majority of the conflicts we are witnessing today involve a sovereign state as one of the warring factions, so non-coercive mediation tends to be a more appropriate method of resolving the conflict than the more coercive one of arbitration. This means that mediation, by definition, is the lowest level of interference, taking the form of “recommendations, fact-finding missions, and discussions.” However, if mediators formulate particular solutions that they believe will resolve conflicts and possess significant power and social influence over the warring factions, then what was supposed to be non-coercive mediation may become coercive – in other words, mediation may amount to a very high level of interference.

### *Who decides the ends of mediation? – facilitative and evaluative approaches*

The literature points out two approaches to mediation based on who decides the ends to which it is directed. In essence, if the decision about the ends to be achieved is warring faction-driven, the mediation is facilitative; on the contrary, if the decision is mediator-driven, the mediation is evaluative. Facilitative mediators are expected to do no more than facilitate discussion between warring factions about how the factions would like to resolve their conflict. The mediators are “in charge of the process, while the parties are in charge of the outcome.”<sup>6</sup> This style of mediation amounts to the lowest level of interference because the

3 United Nations 1981.

4 Bercovitch 2011, 5.

5 Hörner, Morelli and Squintani 2015, 1484.

6 Ahtisaari 2013, 341.

mediators do not make a substantial contribution to the peace process, focusing instead on acting as a channel for communication. In contrast, evaluative mediators assess the strengths, weaknesses, risks, benefits and detriments of a particular solution, or predict the likely outcome of any peace talks. Thereby, they “direct some or all of the outcomes of the mediation.”<sup>7</sup> Evaluative mediators “take an interest in both the content and the process of the dispute, and they use case assessment to exert a considerable degree of influence over both in pursuit of settlement.”<sup>8</sup> Such influence can lead to the imposition of the mediators’ perspectives, which amounts to the very high end of the interference spectrum.<sup>9</sup>

In the case of evaluative mediation, the nature of the ends to which it is directed is a critical issue. Can the ends be neutral in relation to the warring parties? The answer to this question also affects the extent and nature of the relationship between mediation and the non-interference principle. Martti Ahtisaari, who served as a mediator in Kosovo and Aceh, claims that it is not possible, or indeed ideal, for any mediator to be neutral. He states:

I have not myself been neutral or impartial with regard to the issues or content of a peace process. When speaking of neutrality and impartiality it is important to distinguish between the issues on the one hand, and the parties involved on the other. It is very possible to take a clear stand on certain issues, but at the same time not to side with the parties.<sup>10</sup>

The question of whether or not it is possible to “take a clear stand on certain issues” and not impinge on the views of the warring parties goes beyond mere moral judgement. In one sense, taking a stand on an issue at the heart of a conflict is likely to locate a mediator in one or other of the warring camps, which carries significant implication with regard to the non-interference principle. Whether it is possible or not also relates to where the clear stand on certain issues derives from, and how the stand affects the warring parties and the people in the conflict area. In particular, where great powers “stand on certain issues” is likely to be a derivative of their national interests. For example, US mediation efforts in the Middle East peace process “are driven mostly by a strategic interest in the region.”<sup>11</sup> Most countries in which China mediates are those in which China’s national interests are at stake: neighbouring countries such as Afghanistan, Myanmar and Cambodia, resource-rich countries such as South Sudan, and countries in which China needs to demonstrate to the international community that it is doing something useful by way of contributing to the achievement of peace, such as Syria, Sudan and, once again, South Sudan. This brings into relief the question of the extent to which China’s mediation is driven by its strategic or national interests, and how such interests affect China’s neutrality. In short, in the empirical study of China’s mediation we will need to examine the following questions: First, is China a facilitative mediator that lets the warring factions decide

7 Riskin 1996, 23–24.

8 Della Noce 2009.

9 Schoenfeld 2000.

10 Ahtisaari 2013, 342.

11 Heemsbergen and Siniver 2010, 1175.

the ends to which mediation is directed, or an evaluative mediator that determines the ends mediation is to achieve? Second, if China is the latter, how do the ends of mediation relate to China's position with respect to each of the issues at stake?

*What are the means of mediation? – communication facilitation or directive strategy*

As mentioned earlier, mediation is defined as a facilitative form of behaviour. Therefore, the default means of mediation is “communication facilitation.” However, mediators are sometimes coercive, depending on how effectively or efficiently they wish to change the behaviour of warring parties. This more coercive form of mediation is called “directive strategy,” in which mediators use “sticks and carrots” as the means to persuade warring factions to adopt certain recommendations or solutions. The use of such means can be understood as indicative of a high degree of interference because it deters warring factions from making decisions freely about their own political, economic, cultural and social futures.

Great and middle powers tend to use different means of mediation. Middle powers, for example New Zealand and Finland, tend to adopt “low-profile strategies of dialogue and communication,” which are non-threatening to adversaries.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, the literature suggests that great powers, such as the United States, tend to “use their material capabilities to apply sticks and carrots” in mediation.<sup>13</sup>

“Sticks and carrots” – in other words, reward and coercive resources – are highly relevant to the non-interference principle because exerting these types of power in another sovereign state can take away the right “freely to determine its own political, economic, cultural and social system.”<sup>14</sup> If China's mediation effort uses reward or coercive resources, this would suggest China's mediation constitutes a variously high level of interference.

*Four typologies of mediation and the degree of interference*

Table 1 summarizes how the combination of the different approaches to mediation and the existence of leverage in mediation lead to different types of mediation. The four types of mediation are facilitative, incentivizing, formulative and manipulative. These types of mediation, in this order, can be understood to lie along the intervention spectrum, from the lowly interventionist facilitative, to the highly interventionist manipulative type (see Figure 1).

The facilitative mediator does not suggest an outcome to the warring parties, but rather remains merely a channel of communication between them.

12 Bercovitch 2011, 8.

13 Ibid.

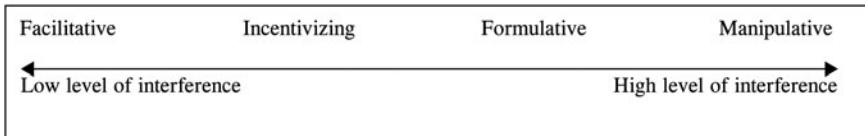
14 United Nations 1981.

Table 1: Four Types of Mediation

		Means of mediation	
		Communication facilitation (without leverage)	Directive Strategy (with leverage)
<b>Who decides the ends of mediation</b>	Facilitative (conflicting parties decide)	<b>Facilitative</b>	<b>Incentivizing</b>
	Evaluative (mediators decide)	<b>Formulative</b>	<b>Manipulative</b>

Source:  
Created by author.

Figure 1: Types of Mediation on the Interference Spectrum



Source:  
Created by author.

Facilitative mediators play a minimal role in predicting the likely outcome of negotiation.<sup>15</sup> Their role “is seen as enhanc[ing] and clarify[ing] communications between the parties in order to help them decide what to do”<sup>16</sup> as well as providing information that clarifies misconceptions the parties have about their opponent.<sup>17</sup> Mediators do not use any leverage in the process. Rather, the process is voluntary and consensual.<sup>18</sup> This approach amounts to the lowest level of interference.

Incentivizing mediation is mediation centring on providing incentives to the disputing parties to encourage them to come to the negotiation table, but the mediator does not bring a particular solution to the table. The mediator remains a facilitator of communication, but the power of the mediator is sufficiently apparent as to be an incentive to the parties in dispute to heed the call of the mediator. In other words, the mediator can encourage and improve communication, but uses the potential benefits of peace as an incentive to participate in conflict resolution. This works when warring factions seek opportunities for economic development, for example by stopping the war. The literature of conflict mediation assumes that mediators *deliberately* use leverage in the process of mediation. However, even though mediators may not mean to use leverage, the influence of the more powerful mediators is such that the form of mediation

15 Palmer and Roberts 1998.  
 16 Riskin 1994, cited in *ibid.*, 127.  
 17 Beardsley et al. 2006, 62–66.  
 18 MacFarlane 1997, 2.

can be *interpreted as leverage* by the disputing parties. When great powers possess the *prospect* of bringing significant investment and development opportunities to formerly warring parties, such opportunities act as an incentive to the warring parties, encouraging them to come to the negotiation table. Once they come to the negotiation table, they are the ones who formulate their own conflict resolution. This approach amounts to the second-lowest level of interference.

Formulative mediation allows the mediator to establish the blueprint of peace talks. Formulative mediators “structure the negotiations, create temporal constraints, redefine issues and create focal points and/or propose alternatives, especially when an impasse is reached at the negotiations’ table.”<sup>19</sup> However, formulative mediators do not apply leverage. They formulate solutions on behalf of the disputing parties, but they do not use leverage to enforce the solutions. Instead, they rely on legitimacy. The mediators do not have to provide a blueprint of all aspects of reconciliation. Norwegian mediation in Sri Lanka provides a good example of this. While the basic position of the Norwegian mediators was to stay neutral and to aim at a balanced process with respect to the parties, there were issues such as children’s rights, which they pressed for in negotiations.<sup>20</sup> This approach amounts to the second-highest level of interference because a roadmap to resolve conflict derives from the mediators themselves. Even though there is no material enforcement, the structure of a resolution is already determined by the mediators, which applies social pressure in order to encourage the warring parties to adhere to the roadmap.

Manipulative mediation is the most intrusive form of interference and is mediation in which the mediator formulates the goals of the mediation process and enforces them on the disputing parties, using leverage. The manipulative mediator also provides a substantive contribution to negotiations. In addition to formulating potential solutions, this mediator uses its position and its leverage, such as “resources of power, influence, and persuasion,” to “manipulate the parties into agreement.”<sup>21</sup> An example of the result of manipulative mediation is the Dayton Accords, which settled the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1995. NATO conducted air strikes against the Serbs, and the US applied international sanctions and political pressure to compel the warring parties to come to the peace talks in Dayton, Ohio. The manipulative mediator “aims at changing the parties’ behaviour and motivation by providing incentives or issuing ultimatums that alter the way in which they frame conflicting issues with the underlying objective of inciting the parties to cooperate.”<sup>22</sup> This type of mediation constitutes the highest form of intervention.

To examine China’s approach to the non-interference principle, the following section will examine the case of China’s conflict mediation in Afghanistan from

19 Beardsley et al. 2006, 62–66.

20 Ahtisaari 2013.

21 Touval and Zartman 1985; cited in Wilkenfeld et al. 2003, 284.

22 Amaral 2013, 74.

2014 to 2017 to assess which type of mediation China has conducted. It will begin with a brief description of the nature of the conflict and of China's mediation efforts. It will then analyse China's mediation efforts against the analytical framework discussed above. During the process of mediation, mediators rarely publicize the content of mediation, which makes it difficult to obtain primary materials related to Chinese mediation, other than the speeches of government officials, and official statements after bilateral and multilateral discussions about the Afghan reconciliation. The author approached Chinese diplomats for interviews, but was declined an interview. Empirical discussions in this article will therefore have to rely on a variety of media reports from a number of countries and on scholarly analyses.

## **China's Mediation Efforts in relation to Conflict in Afghanistan, 2014–2017**

### *The nature of the conflict and China's mediation*

Shortly after the September 11 attacks on the US, US-led bombing of Afghanistan dismantled the Taliban, which had ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001. Hamid Karzai became the head of an interim government, and the Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, and many of his top aides escaped to the Afghanistan–Pakistan border region, and fought against the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) – NATO-led security mission in Afghanistan, which, at its peak, was 130,000 strong. In 2014, the war was ongoing, but President Obama announced the withdrawal of the ISAF mission so that the Afghan forces could take full responsibility for securing the nation. At the end of 2014, the ISAF mission transformed to a new smaller non-combat mission with some 13,000 personnel from NATO member states and partner countries.

During the war from 2001 to 2014, China maintained a low profile in Afghanistan, but as ISAF withdrew, China became “an active and enthusiastic supporter of reconciliation between the Taliban and the Afghan government” and began diplomatic mediation between the warring parties.<sup>23</sup> China's mediation efforts in Afghanistan began as the Istanbul Process (also known as the Heart of Asia) in Beijing in October 2014, to reconcile the Afghan government and the Taliban. Since then, the Chinese government has continued its mediation efforts between the two warring parties through bilateral and multilateral channels. Directly mediating between the warring parties in Afghanistan “marks a departure for China, which had previously preferred to exert influence on Afghanistan indirectly through Pakistan.”<sup>24</sup>

Bilaterally (including bilateral meetings as side events to multilateral fora), the Chinese government discussed peace processes with Afghan government leaders

<sup>23</sup> Small 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Hodge, Totakhil and Chin 2015.



and the Taliban, separately, in various locations. After the Istanbul Process in October 2014, the Taliban visited Beijing in November 2014, with the purpose “to share the Islamic Emirate’s [Taliban’s] stance with China,”<sup>25</sup> according to some news reports (although the Chinese government did not confirm the visit).<sup>26</sup> Afterwards, China made frequent efforts to meet with Afghan government officials and the Taliban. As early as 15 December 2014, Li Keqiang 李克强 met with the Chief Executive Officer (akin to the Prime Minister) Abdullah Abdullah at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) meeting in Astana.<sup>27</sup> This was followed shortly after by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s 王毅 visit to Kabul in February 2015, and by the Taliban delegates’ second visit to Beijing in May 2015.<sup>28</sup> In December 2015, Li Keqiang again met Abdullah Abdullah, who attended the fourteenth Prime Ministers’ Meeting of the SCO Member States in Zhengzhou.<sup>29</sup> The two met on a further occasion in May 2016 in Kabul.<sup>30</sup> In July 2016, a Taliban delegation led by Abbas Stanakzai, who heads the Taliban’s political office in Qatar, visited Beijing.<sup>31</sup> A Taliban official commented, “we informed Chinese officials about the occupation by invading forces and their atrocities on Afghan people [...] We wanted the Chinese leadership to help us raise these issues on world forums and help us get freedom from occupying forces.”<sup>32</sup>

Multilaterally, too, since 2014 China has used various institutions to mediate between the Afghan government and the Taliban. The aforementioned Istanbul Process is one such institution. Other multilateral fora include the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG), SCO and Russia–China–Pakistan Trilateral Dialogue. In January 2016, China became a member of the QCG, consisting of China, Afghanistan, Pakistan and the US. All four countries shared the vision that the Afghan peace and reconciliation process must be “Afghan-led and Afghan-owned.” Further development can be seen in China’s new mediation efforts between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Pakistan is the key to addressing counter-terrorism in the Pakistan–Afghan border regions. China held the first trilateral meeting of the Foreign Ministers of China, Afghanistan and Pakistan in

25 “Afghan Taliban delegation visited China recently,” *The News*, 2 January 2015, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/10080-afghan-taliban-delegation-visited-china-recently>.

26 *Ibid.*; Hodge, Totakhil and Chin 2015; Tiezzi 2014.

27 “China willing to play constructive role in Afghan reconstruction: PM,” *China Daily*, 16 December 2014, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/201412/16/content\\_19095607.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/201412/16/content_19095607.htm).

28 Mullah Abdul Jalil, Mullah Mohammad Hassan Rahmani and Mullah Abdul Raqaq, all of who are based in Pakistan, were said to have participated in the talk, but the Taliban claims that the talk did not happen, and only those in its Qatar-based political commission are entitled to participate in peace-related talks. However, the Taliban often denies publicly the existence of peace efforts, while it confirms it privately. See Stancati 2015 for details.

29 Ministry of Foreign Affairs (China) 2015.

30 Ministry of Foreign Affairs (China) 2016.

31 “Afghan Taliban delegation visits China to discuss unrest: sources,” Reuters, 30 July 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-taliban-china/afghan-taliban-delegation-visits-china-to-discuss-unrest-sources-iduskcn10a09h>.

32 *Ibid.*

Beijing in December 2017, and a second one is to take place in Kabul in December 2018.<sup>33</sup>

### **Mediation Approach: Is China's Mediation Facilitative or Evaluative?**

This section attempts to examine China's mediation approach in relation to each of what the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs claims as the four Chinese objectives in mediation for the Afghan issue. The objectives are the "Afghan-led" and "Afghan-owned" reconciliation process; inclusive political reconciliation; enhancing counter-terrorism capability and combating extreme terrorist forces, while attaching the important role of Pakistan in the Afghanistan issue; and maintaining communication and coordination with the US on the Afghanistan issue.<sup>34</sup>

#### *The "Afghan-led" and "Afghan-owned" reconciliation process*

China has made a consistent claim since 2010 – even before the beginning of the mediation effort in 2014 – that the reconciliation process would have to be "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned," rather than being driven by the international community. China's mediation has been conducted mostly in this direction, showing that its basic mediation approach is facilitative, rather than evaluative, because it assumes the decision-making process of reconciliation is to be owned by Afghanistan. In particular, China's mediation efforts in a bilateral context – with the Afghan government and with the Taliban – take a facilitative approach. China's mediation efforts have been almost always in consultation with the Afghan government. The Chinese government also extends to the Taliban invitations to the discussion table.

However, there was one exception to China's facilitative approach based on the "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned" process. The third Russia–China–Pakistan Trilateral Dialogue took place in Moscow in December 2016, in which the three countries agreed on a "flexible approach to remove certain [Taliban] figures from [United Nations] sanctions lists as part of efforts to foster a peaceful dialogue between Kabul and the Taliban movement."<sup>35</sup> The Taliban responded to the agreement by publishing a statement saying:

It is joyous to see that the regional countries have also understood that the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan [Taliban] is a political and military force. The proposal forwarded in the Moscow tripartite of delisting members of the Islamic Emirate is a positive step forward in bringing peace and security to Afghanistan.<sup>36</sup>

Prior to the meeting, the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed its displeasure, claiming that "talking on Afghanistan without consulting the country

33 Ministry of Foreign Affairs (China) 2017a; Yousafzai 2018.

34 Ibid.

35 Hobson 2016.

36 Shaheen 2016.

raises serious questions for the Afghan people.”<sup>37</sup> Afghan Parliament Members also commented that “the holding of such a meeting on Afghanistan, without consulting government, is an *obvious interference in internal issues*” (author’s emphasis).<sup>38</sup> Such an approach is evaluative, in that great powers other than the Afghan government formulate the peace process without consulting the host state. However, as the three parties have said they would include the Afghan government in the next meeting, this might be a one-off event.

In short, apart from the one exception, the “Afghan-led and Afghan-owned” reconciliation demonstrates that China’s mediation is largely facilitative.

### *Inclusive political reconciliation*

China’s mediation efforts are based on the premise that the reconciliation process must be inclusive of both parties. The premise lays the foundation for facilitative mediation because China can then remain as a channel of communication between the parties. With the minor exception of the aforementioned Russia–China–Pakistan Trilateral Dialogue, the Chinese government has always sought to maintain relations with the Afghan government in Kabul as well as with the Taliban. One of the best successes of China’s mediation efforts is that it has managed to bring the two parties to peace talks twice – in the town of Murree near Islamabad in July 2015 and in January 2016. Even though both US and Chinese officials were present, without China’s mediation efforts it would not have been possible for representatives from the Afghan government and the Taliban to meet together, given that the Taliban did not trust the US.

Arguably, this inclusive approach derives from China’s national interests. Civil war and the Taliban’s expansion will lead to an increase in terrorist activities, which will then heighten the level of insurgency in Xinjiang. To avoid the use of Afghan territory for launching attacks into Chinese territory, and to protect Chinese assets and nationals in Afghanistan, the Chinese government needs to cooperate with both warring factions. China’s significant investment in Afghanistan is also at stake. Its existing investment, such as the US\$3 billion project in a copper mine in Mes Aynak, is already in jeopardy because of the conflict.<sup>39</sup> The Taliban has attacked China’s Mes Aynak copper mine 19 times,<sup>40</sup> and dozens of Chinese engineers and workers have been kidnapped.<sup>41</sup> China further plans to invest US\$62 billion in the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is a signature project of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>42</sup>

37 Faramarz 2016.

38 Ibid.

39 Hasrat-Nazimi 2013.

40 Brazier 2012; cited in Downs 2012, 78.

41 “Taliban bangjia zhongguo gongchengshi: Afugan weilai huocheng zhongguo mafan (Taliban kidnapped Chinese engineers: Afghanistan might become China’s trouble in the future),” *Huangqiu shibao*, 20 January 2010, <http://world.huanqiu.com/roll/2010-01/694207.html>. Parello-Plesner and Duchâtel (2014, 71) has a useful map that compiles a number of attacks against Chinese workers in Afghanistan.

42 Siddiqui 2017.

So the stability of the region is critically important not only to CPEC's success but also the entire BRI. China's cooperation with the Afghan government is essential in protecting Chinese investment, but large parts of Afghan territory have been under Taliban control so national reconciliation must be inclusive.<sup>43</sup>

Such an inclusive approach was possible because of historical relations that China has maintained both with the Afghan government and the Taliban, as well as China's political distance from ISAF between 2001 and 2014. The Chinese government did not establish diplomatic ties with the Taliban government that ruled there from 1996 to 2001, but maintained unofficial channels of communication, according to foreign diplomats.<sup>44</sup> Immediately after Hamid Karzai was sworn in as head of an interim power-sharing government in 2001, China and the new Afghan government established diplomatic relations, but never cooperated with ISAF in the "War on Terror" despite international expectation.<sup>45</sup> Such episodes show that China has deliberately shown strategic ambiguity towards the warring parties in Afghanistan, thus avoiding antagonizing both parties.

No matter how much China has wanted to maintain neutrality, the relationship between China and the Taliban has nevertheless been shaky. A couple of examples show that some factions of the Taliban seem to perceive China as being hostile to the Taliban because of China's policy towards China's Muslim populations and its close relations with Pakistan and the current Afghan government. As mentioned earlier, the Taliban has attacked China's Mes Aynak copper mine. Some analysts also claim that "militants blamed China for the Pakistani government's 2007 decision to launch an assault on the Red Mosque, a pro-Taliban stronghold in Islamabad, and duly retaliated with a series of attacks on Chinese workers in Pakistan."<sup>46</sup> Added to this, China's relations with the Taliban are now experiencing significant challenges, mainly deriving from the death of its leader Mullah Mohammad Omar – so-called "China's Man" – in 2013. With his death, the Taliban became more fragmented than before, so even though China has attempted to maintain contact with the Taliban to bring it to the peace talks, there are numerous factions within the group that are separate from the actors who have participated in those peace talks.<sup>47</sup> This has led to confusion in Beijing about "who is the real Taliban, who has the final say, [and] who is a legitimate negotiation partner."<sup>48</sup>

In short, China's inclusive mediation policy reflects a facilitative approach to mediation, but without having a clear picture of who the Taliban is, the basic assumption of the facilitative approach – that a warring "party" exists – is problematic. This shows that its facilitative approach is murky at best. Even though

43 Nooruzzaman 2016.

44 Hodge, Totakhil and Chin 2015.

45 Hirono 2016, 42.

46 Small 2013; see also French 2007; Pantucci 2010, 23; Parello-Plesner and Duchâtel 2014, 80.

47 Small 2015.

48 Hodge, Totakhil and Chin 2015.

China's basic stance is to take a facilitative approach to mediation, from the perspective of some segments of the Taliban, China's mediation is nothing more than interference in domestic affairs.

### *Counter-terrorism and Pakistan*

In order to make progress in putting into place relevant counter-terrorism measures, China initiated mediation between Afghanistan and Pakistan in June 2017.<sup>49</sup> This is because Afghanistan points to Pakistan as sheltering militants and continually causing instability and insecurity in Afghanistan. As mentioned earlier, peace with Pakistan was Afghanistan's demand. Foreign Minister Wang Yi acted on that demand and discussed counter-terrorism measures with Pakistani Foreign Minister Sartaj Aziz in Islamabad in June 2017. It is not known whether Wang Yi brought back with him any proposals from the Afghan side at the time.<sup>50</sup> However, the three countries' foreign ministers met in Beijing at the first Afghanistan–Pakistan–China trilateral meeting in December 2017. At this meeting, the three sides confirmed their wish to continue such dialogue in the future (the next meeting is to be convened in Kabul in December 2018),<sup>51</sup> and to “communicate and consult on developing the Memorandum of Understanding on Counter-Terrorism Cooperation.”<sup>52</sup>

However, as Wolf points out, China's and Pakistan's positions “might face critics of ambiguity, especially through the lens of the Afghan government.”<sup>53</sup> This is because of the ambivalent way in which China has dealt with terrorist groups. Obviously, when matters relate to any of the groups that the Chinese government officially identifies as terrorist groups, such as the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), China's policy for combatting them is straightforward. However, China has an ambivalent attitude towards other insurgencies in Pakistan and Afghanistan, such as the Lashkar-e-Taiba/Jamaat ud-Dawah, the al-Akhtar Trust, the al-Rashid Trust, and the Jaish-e-Mohammad military groups. On one hand, the Chinese government has attempted to support Pakistan and “still continues to block UN sanctions (based on Resolution 1267) against Pakistan based on terrorists and Jihadist organizations.”<sup>54</sup> On the other, China, together with Russia and India, “express[ed] concern [at] the security situation [in Afghanistan] and [the] violence caused by the Taliban, ISIL/DAISH, Al-Qaida and its affiliates including [the] Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement, [the] Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Haqqani network, Kashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammad, TTP and Hizb ut-Tahrir” at the

49 Gul 2017.

50 Ibid.

51 Yousafzai 2018.

52 Ministry of Foreign Affairs (China) 2017b.

53 Wolf 2016.

54 Ibid.

BRICS Declaration in 2017,<sup>55</sup> gently nudging Pakistan to take counter-terrorism more seriously.<sup>56</sup> Afrasiab Khattak, a Pakistani senator, responded to the Declaration by saying that “China is not content with looking at Afghanistan or India from Pakistan’s point of view anymore.”<sup>57</sup>

In short, China’s approach to counter-terrorism in the context of Afghanistan–Pakistan relations has been so ambiguous thus far that it is difficult to assess whether its approach is going to be facilitative or evaluative. But China’s recent prod to Pakistan – and the need for stability in the CPEC for China’s future investment – suggest that China cannot afford to let Afghanistan and Pakistan decide the agenda. To take an evaluative approach to mediation, China may need to suggest to Pakistan some specific solutions to counter terrorism in the CPEC.

### *Communication and coordination with the United States*

Even after ISAF’s withdrawal, the US remains heavily involved in the war in Afghanistan. As of January 2018, 14,000 American troops are still deployed there.<sup>58</sup> The US designated Afghanistan a “Major Non-NATO Ally” under the Strategic Partnership Agreement signed by then President Obama and then President Karzai in May 2012, which assures an American presence in Afghanistan after the ISAF withdrawal. The US also tried to broker peace between the Taliban and the Afghan government, although its efforts have borne little fruit.

While having the US in the mediation process is a necessity, the way in which China should involve the US in its mediation process is a delicate issue for two reasons. The first is the Taliban’s distrust of the US. According to a senior Pakistani official, despite US attempts to mediate the Afghan conflict, “the Taliban [have] not [been] amenable to American mediation.”<sup>59</sup> Since January 2016, the US and China have cooperated on the Afghan reconciliation process through the framework of the QCG. The QCG, including the Afghan government, having met with the Taliban representative, created a roadmap to direct peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban by stipulating “the stages and steps in the process.”<sup>60</sup> Much of the content of the roadmap is unknown, but the Taliban has stated that this was a “one sided affair” which would “not produce any results.”<sup>61</sup> Further, after the fifth QCG meeting began on 18 May 2016, the Group’s work had to be suspended for a year and a half because the US killed Afghan Taliban chief Mullah Akhtar Mansour as a result

55 “(BRICS summit) full text of BRICS leaders Xiamen declaration (5),” Xinhua, 4 September 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-09/04/c\\_136583401.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-09/04/c_136583401.htm).

56 Khattak, Daud 2017.

57 Khattak, Afrasiab 2017.

58 Jaffe and Ryan 2018.

59 Khan, Miraj and Yousaf 2015.

60 US Embassy in Afghanistan 2016.

61 Tanzeem 2016.

of a drone attack on 21 May. This “signaled the end of the Obama administration’s interest in dialogue with the Afghan Taliban.”<sup>62</sup> The US is also not content with the Russia–China–Pakistan Trilateral Dialogue, and its discussion about removing sanctions against the Taliban. H.R. McMaster, US National Security Adviser to the Trump Administration, met with Afghan leaders in April 2017, and warned Russia, China and Pakistan against “perpetuating this very long conflict” by supporting the Taliban.<sup>63</sup>

Despite such disagreement between the US and China, both countries have worked with the Afghan government and, as a result of China’s presence, managed to have the Taliban delegation attend the first QCG meeting in January 2016. Even though it did not lead to agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban, the first QCG meeting showed that China and the US made an effort to lay the foundation of a facilitative approach to mediation by inviting both warring parties to the negotiation table. However, the “roadmap” to peace talks was created at the second QCG meeting, in consultation with the Afghan government, not with the Taliban. China’s and the US’s attempt at facilitative mediation are limited by the Taliban’s inability to agree with the terms of peace talks. From the Taliban’s perspective, the QCG set the goals of the peace talks, which the Taliban does not agree to, so the “roadmap” amounts to the evaluative approach to mediation.

### **The Means of Mediation: Does China Use Communication Strategy or Directive Strategy?**

Do the means of China’s mediation simply amount to communication facilitation (without leverage) or to directive strategy (with leverage)? There is no evidence that China has used its economic might to provide rewards for reconciliation at the negotiating table per se, but this section claims that China’s economic potential forms part of an indirect “reward power,” which can be understood as the “carrot” in the “carrot and stick” metaphor used earlier.

China has had some economic presence in Afghanistan, but it has so far been only symbolic. In terms of development aid, China provided the Afghan government with approximately \$240 million in grants between 2001 and 2014,<sup>64</sup> and pledged to provide \$327 million between 2015 and 2017.<sup>65</sup> Considering the Afghan GDP of \$19.469 billion, those grants are financially unimportant. Therefore, these projects do not necessarily attract the attention of the Taliban. Further, this is not even comparable to the US contribution, which has amounted

62 “Pakistan daily hails revival of four-party Afghan peace talks,” *BBC Monitoring South Asia*, 18 October 2017, retrieved from Proquest.

63 Tikhonova 2017.

64 Deng 2015.

65 Kumar 2017. More detailed description of China’s support for Afghanistan can be found in Deng (2015).



to more than \$100 billion for the relief and reconstruction of Afghanistan between 2001 and 2014.<sup>66</sup>

What matters a great deal to the Afghan government, and perhaps to the Taliban, are China's investment prospects. In 2007, the Metallurgical Corporation of China (MCC) and the Jiangxi Copper Corporation (JCCL) agreed to invest \$3 billion in the development of copper mines at Mes Aynak. In 2011, the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) invested \$400 million, initially to develop three oil blocks in the Amu Darya in northwestern Afghanistan. These projects, however, have stalled and been delayed by security concerns. In contrast, surrounding regions including Pakistan and Central Asia have already secured significant investment pledges from the Chinese government. Pakistan is moving forward with the CPEC projects which are worth \$62 billion;<sup>67</sup> and Central Asian countries have a \$31 billion commitment. Clearly, once a resource-rich Afghanistan achieves stability, China's investment is likely to increase dramatically. Nooruzzaman, an Indian journalist, writes that "China must have come to realise that this is the ideal time for its increased involvement in Afghanistan when both the government in Kabul and the Taliban are looking towards Beijing for all kinds of assistance for their nation rebuilding efforts."<sup>68</sup>

Indeed, joining the CPEC project has been the wish of the Afghan government and business community, as expressed, for example, by Omar Zakhelwal, the Afghan ambassador to Pakistan, in 2016.<sup>69</sup> A number of Pakistani officials also expressed the view that the success of CPEC depends on political stability in Afghanistan.<sup>70</sup> Against this background, it is insightful that the first trilateral Foreign Ministers' dialogue in December 2017 concluded that the parties would not only cooperate with each other to "reinforce coordination and cooperation in counter-terrorism," but also "discuss ways to extend the CPEC to Afghanistan" – a possibility being to bring the \$62 billion project to Afghanistan and make it successful in Pakistan *should the Afghan–Pakistani tension ease*.<sup>71</sup> Arguably, China brought to this first-ever trilateral meeting reward power, used persuasively to bring the two parties together to the negotiating table in the future. No available sources suggest how the Taliban has responded to China's "reward," but it is possible that the extent to which CPEC affects Afghan-controlled areas will also affect China's future mediation efforts.

66 Lutz and Desai 2015, 2.

67 This figure may decrease, as Pakistan withdrew its request to include the \$14 billion Diamer-Bhasha Dam in the CPEC in November 2017. See Rana 2017.

68 Nooruzzaman 2016.

69 "Kabul pre-condition for reopening of Waga Port," *The Kabul Times*, 31 October 2017, <http://thekabultimes.gov.af/index.php/opinions/economic/15296-kabul-pre-condition-for-reopening-of-waga-port.html>.

70 For example, see a comment by Pakistan's Foreign Minister Khawaja Asif cited in "Taliban are a political force: Khawaja Asif," *The News.com.pk*, 02 March 2018, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/287299-taliban-are-a-political-force-khawaja-asif>.

71 "China, Pakistan, Afghanistan agree to discuss extending economic corridor," *Xinhua*, 26 December 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-12/26/c\\_136853623.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-12/26/c_136853623.htm).



In short, even though China does not deliberately use “carrot and stick” in mediation, the economic potential China brings to the war-torn society means that the sheer existence of China is leverage in and of itself. In the author’s conversation with a Chinese diplomat who is familiar with China–Afghan relations, the diplomat said that he also thought that China’s economic power attracted the attention of the warring parties, such as the Afghan government, the Taliban and the Pakistani government, and compels them to listen to Chinese mediation. Therefore, it can be argued that, in the specific context of mediation *at the negotiation table*, China adopts a communication strategy, but in the broader context of mediation – which would matter more to the long-term perspectives of the region – China can be regarded as adopting a directive strategy in mediation.

## Conclusion

The analysis of China’s mediation approaches and means suggests that in a bilateral context the country is taking a facilitative approach, and indirectly using economic leverage in its mediation between the Afghan government and the Taliban in the long-term context. According to the analytical framework established in this article, China’s mediation type can be understood as “incentivizing mediation.” The country’s economic power can be regarded as a great opportunity by both warring factions. Chinese investment and business opportunities can bring to a war-torn society the hopes of a prosperous future. Even though China does not deliberately use its economic power at the negotiation table in the mediation process, if a warring party is looking for economic opportunities, China’s economic power can have unintentional reward power in the eyes of the warring factions. Incentivizing mediation amounts to a medium level of interference.

However, in a multilateral context, China’s mediation has taken a mixture of facilitative and evaluative approaches. While multilateral fora attempted to take a facilitative approach by aiming at “Afghan-led and Afghan-owned” mediation and inclusive peace talks, discussion of the removal of sanctions against the Taliban at the Russia–China–Pakistan Trilateral Dialogue, the counter-terrorism measures in relation to China’s mediation between Pakistan and Afghanistan, and the creation of a roadmap to peace talks in the QCG framework without the presence of the Taliban, amount to evaluative approaches. This mixture means that China’s mediation in the multilateral context amounts to “formulative mediation,” which shows a medium level of interference in domestic affairs.

This article has shown that China’s approach to the non-interference principle is indeed shifting. Unlike the assumptions evident in the relevant literature, the action of mediation itself does not demonstrate the shift. The shift mainly derives from three factors: China’s economic potential, which can be regarded as leverage; China’s omnidirectional foreign policy vis-à-vis Afghanistan, the Taliban,

Pakistan and the US; and its belief in the uselessness of sanctions against the Taliban.

Finally, China's conflict mediation has brought with it a new challenge concerning what it means to abide by the non-interference principle, because the extent to which China is able to maintain the principle *in practice* is affected by how it is able to manage its relationship with the Taliban. If the Afghan government and the Taliban both agree to be mediated, China can take a facilitative approach. If not, from the perspective of the rebel group, China's behaviour is nothing more than interference. Furthermore, when even the identification of factions in the rebel groups is difficult, managing a relationship with them is virtually "mission impossible." Even though China actively supports reconciliation talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government, how successfully China can maintain relations with the Taliban depends on the Taliban's own situation, and on how China manages the perception gap between its intentions and what the Taliban considers China to be doing to the group, as well as to Islam as a whole.

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### Biographical note

Miwa HIRONO is an associate professor at the College of International Relations at Ritsumeikan University, in Japan. Her research focuses on China's engagement in conflict-/disaster-affected regions, with particular attention paid to peacekeeping, peacebuilding, humanitarian assistance, overseas development aid and investment, and conflict mediation. Her recent publications include "Linkages between China's Foreign Policy and Humanitarian Action" (Overseas Development Institute, 2018), and *China's Evolving Approach to Peacekeeping* (Routledge, 2012).

**摘要:** 中国在冲突调解方面的努力是对不干涉原则持久性的重要考验。通过分析 2014 年后中国在阿富汗进行调解努力的途径和方法, 本文发现中国的行为表明, 虽然中国进行中等程度内政干涉, 但主要还是在与东道国政府达成共识的基础上进行干涉。这是由中国调解采取的两种形式导致的。在双边背景下, 中国的调解采取“激励式调解”的形式, 其中它的经济实力和全方位的外交政策为交战各方提供了动机或杠杆来到谈判桌上, 但也让交战各方制定他们自己的和平谈判路线图。在多边背景下, 中国有时参与“主导式调解”, 和平谈判的路线图是由调解者而不是争议各方来制定的。

**关键词:** 中国; 调解; 阿富汗; 塔利班; 不干涉; 巴基斯坦

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