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An Analysis of China's Conflict Mediation Approach: The mediating dragon in the  
graveyard of empires

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## Abstract

This paper discusses China's Conflict Mediation approach in Afghanistan and explores the multifaceted role that China plays in mediating Afghanistan's conflict, encompassing both its motivations and strategies within a defined timeframe of 2021 to the present. After the Taliban takeover in 2021, what the "Afghan peace process" refers to still remains a mystery because, as per many and rightly so, there is no return to democratic rule and equal opportunities for all. However, the author examines China's role as a mediator in conflicts, particularly as China strives to become a global superpower.

The paper analyses and tries to Understand China's involvement in Afghan conflict mediation and tries to find answers to the questions: If China's Conflict mediation approach in Afghanistan was a success? Secondly, how does China claim to maintain its non-interference policy while it increasingly mediates conflicts abroad?

Furthermore, The Belt and Road Initiative was discussed as a tool in Afghanistan. So were China's main concerns regarding the region. Finally, A Document-analysis approach has been used in the paper and concludes that it is still not clear from the available proof if the Chinese mediation approach was successful or not in Afghanistan; secondly, The documents thus show that China's adoption of a softened approach involving host-government consultation and limited means and goals across its mediation efforts enables it to reconcile its dual commitments to non-interference and its economic and national security interests. By doing so, China continues to expand its global presence without contradicting its non-interference policy.

Keywords: China, Conflict, Mediation, Afghanistan, BRI, globalisation

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## Introduction

### Overview :

Different agencies, individuals and organisations carry out decisions in conflict mediation. Historically, mediating conflict within a nation was the state's obligation, but with the process of globalisation, state capacities transformed <sup>1</sup>. The state could design and execute policies, but now it is almost impossible without the globalised world's consent. In today's globalised world, the task of mediating conflict is no longer solely the responsibility of individual states. As the boundaries between nations become increasingly fluid, geopolitical conflicts can ripple across borders and affect international stability and security. Afghanistan, in particular, has garnered significant attention due to its complex web of historical, ethnic, and religious dynamics. Against this backdrop, China has emerged as a potential mediator in the Afghan conflict, as Mordechai Chaziza, points out "as Afghanistan has been emerging as a strategic focal point in the regional ambit <sup>2</sup>," sparking significant interest among scholars, policymakers, and analysts alike. Amidst this intricate landscape, China's emergence as a potential mediator in the Afghan conflict has sparked considerable interest among scholars, policymakers, and analysts alike. This thesis aims to delve into the rationale behind studying China's conflict mediation role in Afghanistan. Specifically, it will employ a document analysis and case study methodology to explore China's post-2021 involvement in the region.

### Research Problem :

According to Political scientists, a conflict-ridden country is a country or region "that is experiencing ongoing or frequent conflicts, often resulting in mass displacement and refugee flight <sup>3</sup>."

Similarly, Mukherjee suggests that Countries can resolve conflicts through negotiation, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, judicial settlement, and the coordination of measures to prevent aggression <sup>4</sup>.

Basically, his work tries to answer the question: How can countries resolve conflict? What role

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Potter et al., *Geographies of Development*, 0 ed. (Routledge, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315759319>.

<sup>2</sup> Mordechai Chaziza, 'China's Peace-Maker Role in Afghanistan: Mediation and Conflict Management', *Middle East Policy* 25, no. 3 (September 2018): 143–54, <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12368>.

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Van Hear, ed., 'Diasporas, Recovery and Development in Conflict-Ridden Societies', in *The Migration-Development Nexus: A Transnational Perspective*, Migration, Diasporas and Citizenship Series (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Sarabjeet Mukherjee, 'A Mechanism to Resolve Conflict in Afghanistan', 2022, <https://kardan.edu.af/data/public/files/A%20Mechanism%20to%20Resolve%20Conflict%20in%20Afghanistan04012023113743.pdf>.

a third nation can play in mediating conflict in a war-torn region?

The central concept of his paper is that “Multilateral organisations and third nations can play a crucial role in bringing about lasting conciliation in war-ravaged countries by helping to mediate the conflict <sup>5</sup>. And Here comes the term ‘Conflict Mediation.’

### What is a conflict ?

Conflict can be a state of relation that can affect a country’s stability and development, arising from both objective and subjective factors. As Scheffran and Hannon describes, “conflict is a dynamic and complex form of human interaction, often emerging from incompatible actions, values, and goals and consuming a considerable amount of resources. Conflicts are an expression of and a contribution to system instability and may lead to chaotic escalation between adversaries, causing a breakdown of social and natural systems <sup>6</sup>.”

### What is conflict mediation ?

According to the UN Guidance for Effective Mediation, Conflict mediation is a process in which a third party helps two or more parties with their consent to prevent, manage, or resolve a conflict by assisting them in developing mutually acceptable agreements <sup>7</sup>. Thus, The process of conflict mediation is crucial in resolving disputes and tensions that could potentially disrupt a nation's stability. It involves a neutral third party to facilitate agreements that are mutually beneficial to all involved parties. In our case, China’s conflict mediation strategy in Afghanistan aims to promote cooperation and resolution among conflicting parties by fostering a common ground and preventing potential chaos <sup>8</sup>.

### Research Question :

The author was rightly told in 2022, what “Afghan peace process” refers to after the Taliban takeover. Is there a peace process still? However, the author’s current research is focused on examining China’s role as a mediator in conflicts, particularly as China strives to become a

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<sup>5</sup> Mukherjee.

<sup>6</sup> Jürgen Scheffran and Bruce Hannon, ‘From Complex Conflicts to Stable Cooperation: Cases in Environment and Security’, *Complexity* 13, no. 2 (November 2007): 78–91, <https://doi.org/10.1002/cplx.20201>.

<sup>7</sup> United Nations, ‘United Nations Guidance for Effective Mediation’ (United Nations, 2012), [https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/GuidanceEffectiveMediation\\_UNDPA2012%28english%29\\_0.pdf](https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/GuidanceEffectiveMediation_UNDPA2012%28english%29_0.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Miwa Hirono, ‘China’s Conflict Mediation and the Durability of the Principle of Non-Interference: The Case of Post-2014 Afghanistan’, *The China Quarterly* 239 (September 2019): 614–34, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741018001753>.

global superpower<sup>9</sup>. The author will delve deeper into why this topic is of utmost importance, why it demands further investigation, and how this study will add a new dimension to the existing body of literature. The author believes that a critical examination of China's role in conflict mediation is timely and necessary for a better understanding of international relations and global politics.

This brings us to the research questions of the thesis. Through this work, the author will try to find out

- If China's Conflict mediation approach in Afghanistan was a success?
- Secondly, how does China claim to maintain its non-interference policy while it increasingly mediates conflicts abroad?

### Rationale for Studying China's Conflict Mediation in Afghanistan

The Afghan conflict has persisted for many years, presenting a significant challenge for international diplomacy and intervention. Despite the United States-led intervention in 2001, which successfully ousted the Taliban regime, lasting peace has proven elusive<sup>10</sup>. The country has continued to face insurgency, terrorism, and ethnic tensions, underscoring the urgent need for effective conflict resolution methods. Against this complex backdrop, China's increasing economic, political, and strategic regional investments have prompted it to take a more proactive stance, positioning itself as a potential mediator in the Afghan conflict.

Understanding China's involvement in Afghan conflict mediation is of paramount significance for several reasons:

- The rise of China as a global superpower has brought about significant changes in the geopolitical landscape, particularly in conflict-prone regions like Afghanistan. Understanding the evolving global dynamics is crucial in comprehending China's motivations and strategies in conflict mediation<sup>11</sup>.
- The current global dynamics are driven by various factors, including economic power, technological advancements, shifting alliances, and geopolitical priorities. China's rapid economic growth and increasing influence have contributed to the shift towards

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<sup>9</sup> Aaron L. Friedberg and W.W. Norton & Company, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (New York; London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> Dr. Anwasha Ghosh, 'One Year since the Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan', *ICWA*, 2022, [https://www.icwa.in/show\\_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls\\_id=7769&lid=5175](https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=7769&lid=5175).

<sup>11</sup> Nerkez Opacin, *China's Role in Afghanistan: A Capitalist Peace Approach* (Hamburg [Germany]: Anchor Academic Publishing, 2015).

a more multipolar system, making its involvement in regional conflicts like Afghanistan a subject of interest and analysis <sup>12</sup>.

- The interconnectedness of economies due to globalisation has created a network of economic dependencies that transcend borders. China's economic prowess, exemplified by initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative, underscores its interest in fostering stability in regions with significant investments. The BRI's potential to contribute to economic development in Afghanistan is intertwined with conflict mediation efforts <sup>13</sup>.
- China's diplomatic outreach extends to various regions and countries, allowing it to play a role in conflicts that might not have directly impacted its interests in the past. In Afghanistan, China's engagement underscores its growing role as a regional and international stakeholder.
- As transnational threats like terrorism and cyberattacks highlight the interconnected nature of security challenges, China recognises the potential for these threats to spill over into neighbouring countries and even impact its own domestic security. In the context of Afghanistan, China's efforts to mediate conflicts are part of its broader strategic objective to project a responsible global image.
- Global demand for resources has intensified, leading to competition for access to energy, minerals, and other commodities. Afghanistan's strategic location and its potential for resource development make it a region of interest for multiple countries, including China <sup>14</sup>.
- Changes in global norms, such as the emphasis on sustainable development, human rights, and environmental protection, influence the priorities of nations. China's alignment with or deviation from these norms impacts its standing in international affairs. Its engagement in Afghanistan's conflict mediation can be analysed through the lens of these norms.

As the international system becomes more complex, nations are increasingly engaged in regional balancing acts to safeguard their interests. In Afghanistan, China's mediation efforts

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<sup>12</sup> Vijay Gokhale, 'China's Vision of Hegemony: The View from India', *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, no. 1 (1 February 2021), <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/chinas-vision-of-hegemony-the-view-from-india/>.

<sup>13</sup> Jason Li, 'China's Conflict Mediation in Afghanistan. Examining How China's Interests and Relationships Fit into the Conflict', 16 August 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Clarke, 'China's Strategy in "Greater Central Asia": Is Afghanistan the Missing Link?', *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 40, no. 1 (January 2013): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00927678.2013.759443>.

need to be understood in the context of its relations with neighbouring countries like Pakistan, India, Iran, and Russia <sup>15</sup>. In conclusion, the evolving global dynamics have transformed the way nations approach conflict mediation and diplomacy. China's rising international stature and its growing interest in Afghanistan are intrinsically tied to these shifts. As China seeks to shape and navigate these dynamics, its role in mediating the Afghan conflict emerges as a critical aspect of its broader foreign policy strategy. Analysing this role not only provides insights into China's motivations and actions but also contributes to a deeper understanding of how evolving global dynamics impact conflict resolution and international relations.

### Relevance of the Study

It is imperative that we conduct further scientific research on China's role in conflict mediation, especially in the context of Afghanistan. The current state of affairs is that there is a paucity of analyses that comprehensively examine the entire mediation and implementation process. While various studies have been conducted, they need to be revised to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject. Therefore, this research will make a significant contribution to the field, serving as a crucial resource for future studies. By closely analysing the conflict mediation process, it will help to anticipate potential issues and inform policy decisions. Moreover, it will help us identify areas for improvement and further research. This will ultimately lead to a better understanding of this complex issue and enable us to develop more effective conflict-resolution strategies.

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<sup>15</sup> Li, 'China's Conflict Mediation in Afghanistan. Examining How China's Interests and Relationships Fit into the Conflict'.



### China's Mediation Role in Afghanistan's Conflict

The intricate tapestry of Afghanistan's conflict entered a pivotal phase with the withdrawal of the United States and the resurgence of the Taliban. China has emerged as a crucial mediator in this transformative landscape, offering diplomatic finesse, political acumen, and economic engagement to facilitate Afghanistan's journey towards stability and lasting peace<sup>16</sup>. The contours of China's role in mediating Afghanistan's conflict warrant a comprehensive examination, encompassing its diplomatic approach, regional engagement, and potential impact on the crisis at hand. The intricate dynamics of conflict in Afghanistan have entered a transformative phase, marked by the United States' withdrawal and the resurgence of the Taliban. In the midst of these consequential shifts, China has emerged as a pivotal mediator, wielding its diplomatic finesse, geopolitical considerations, and economic overtures to influence Afghanistan's trajectory towards stability and lasting peace. This paper delves into the multifaceted role that China plays in mediating Afghanistan's conflict, encompassing both its motivations and strategies within a defined timeframe of 2021 to the present. Through an analysis of scholarly works, research articles, and expert opinions, we aim to unveil the nuanced contours of China's mediation efforts, exploring its underlying interests, its evolving stand, and the implications for the conflict-torn nation and the broader regional dynamics<sup>17</sup>.

### Economic Leverage: Belt and Road Initiative

China's economic strength is a pivotal factor in its efforts to mediate conflicts, particularly through the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This initiative serves as a powerful tool that underscores China's commitment to fostering economic cooperation and promoting shared prosperity. Specifically, with respect to Afghanistan, the BRI plays a crucial role in advancing infrastructural development, enhancing trade connectivity, and facilitating regional integration<sup>18</sup>. By promoting economic stability and growth, the BRI is well-aligned with the overarching goal of resolving conflicts, making it a valuable opportunity for Afghanistan to advance its economic interests and promote stability in the region. Overall, the BRI represents a significant opportunity for China to build strong economic ties with other countries and promote peace and stability in the region.

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<sup>16</sup> Clarke, 'China's Strategy in "Greater Central Asia" '.

<sup>17</sup> Opacin, *China's Role in Afghanistan*.

<sup>18</sup> Sanjeev Kumar, ed., *China's BRI in Different Regions of the World: Cooperation, Contradictions and Concerns* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2023).

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a sweeping and ambitious development strategy introduced by China's President Xi Jinping in 2013, aimed at bolstering connectivity and cooperation across continents through a multifaceted approach encompassing infrastructure development, trade facilitation, and investment promotion<sup>19</sup>. The BRI comprises two primary components: firstly, the Silk Road Economic Belt, which concentrates on land-based infrastructure linkages, connecting China to Europe via Central Asia and the Middle East; secondly, the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, which seeks to enhance maritime connectivity by establishing robust connections between China's southern coast, Africa, Southeast Asia, and Europe<sup>20</sup>. Thus, Analysing China's mediation role in Afghanistan assumes critical importance as it offers insights into how the BRI can be strategically harnessed to contribute to conflict resolution and foster regional stability.

In the context of China's role in conflict mediation in Afghanistan, the Belt and Road Initiative introduces several essential dimensions:

1. With its strategic geographical location, Afghanistan has the potential to become a vital connector in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As a land bridge between Central Asia and South Asia, the country presents significant economic opportunities for regional trade and connectivity. China's investment in infrastructure projects, including the development of roads, railways, and energy pipelines, further highlights the importance of Afghanistan's stability in ensuring the success of these initiatives<sup>21</sup>. Thus, the economic stakes are high, and the country's role in the BRI cannot be overstated.
2. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is founded on the principle of promoting development through connectivity, which has the potential to impact conflict mediation. BRI's focus on improved infrastructure and economic growth has the capacity to address some of the underlying issues of conflict, such as poverty and limited opportunities<sup>22</sup>. This indicates that China's ongoing mediation efforts in Afghanistan could be in line with its economic interests in establishing stability for BRI projects.
3. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a strategic plan that has been implemented by the Chinese government to establish stronger economic ties with more than 100 countries

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<sup>19</sup> Vera Schulhof, Detlef Van Vuuren, and Julian Kirchherr, 'The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): What Will It Look Like in the Future?', *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* 175 (February 2022): 121306, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2021.121306>.

<sup>20</sup> Schulhof, Van Vuuren, and Kirchherr.

<sup>21</sup> Sanjeev Kumar, *China's BRI in Different Regions of the World*.

<sup>22</sup> Sanjeev Kumar.

in Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. One of the BRI's key objectives is to promote people-to-people exchanges, cultural cooperation, and educational initiatives, which can contribute to China's soft power projection<sup>23</sup>. By engaging in conflict mediation in Afghanistan, China can demonstrate its commitment to regional stability and build trust among countries and communities along the BRI routes. However, the BRI has also been criticised for its potential to increase China's geopolitical influence in the regions in which it seeks to establish stronger economic ties<sup>24</sup>. In the Afghan context, China's engagement in conflict mediation can be seen as part of its broader efforts to play a responsible and constructive role in regional affairs. This aligns with China's aspiration to be perceived as a responsible global player. Therefore, the BRI's geopolitical influence on Afghanistan should be viewed within the broader context of China's diplomatic efforts to establish stronger economic ties and promote regional stability.

4. When considering the viability of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it is important to take into account the security challenges that may arise throughout the regions it passes through. One such area is Afghanistan, which is known for its instability and susceptibility to terrorism and insurgency<sup>25</sup>. These factors can undoubtedly pose a risk to the BRI projects in the region. However, China's vested interest in ensuring the security of its investments and trade routes may provide some degree of protection and conflict mediation efforts in the area. Furthermore, it is important to note that the BRI is a multi-stakeholder initiative with involvement from governments, international organisations, and private companies<sup>26</sup>. In the context of Afghanistan, China's engagement in conflict mediation efforts provides an opportunity for coordination and cooperation among these stakeholders. By working together, they may be better equipped to address the complex and multifaceted challenges facing the country and the BRI projects operating within it.
5. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is playing a crucial role in promoting regional cooperation and integration. China's active involvement in conflict mediation can help foster productive dialogue and collaboration among Afghanistan and its neighbouring

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<sup>23</sup> Małgorzata Jakimów, 'Desecuritisation as a Soft Power Strategy: The Belt and Road Initiative, European Fragmentation and China's Normative Influence in Central-Eastern Europe', *Asia Europe Journal* 17, no. 4 (December 2019): 369–85, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-019-00561-3>.

<sup>24</sup> Gokhale, 'China's Vision of Hegemony: The View from India'.

<sup>25</sup> Sanjeev Kumar, *China's BRI in Different Regions of the World*.

<sup>26</sup> Schulhof, Van Vuuren, and Kirchherr, 'The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)'.

countries. By facilitating stable relationships that support regional development, this approach can have a positive impact on the economic, social, and political dynamics of the region. Through regional diplomacy, the BRI is creating opportunities for sustainable growth and progress<sup>27</sup>.

Overall, Incorporating the BRI into the analysis of China's role in conflict mediation in Afghanistan adds depth to understanding China's motivations and strategies. While the BRI offers opportunities for economic development and connectivity, its success hinges on the resolution of conflicts and the establishment of stable environments along its routes. Consequently, China's mediation efforts in Afghanistan can be viewed through the lens of how they align with and impact the broader objectives of the BRI, underscoring the intricate interplay between regional stability, economic development, and China's global ambitions.

### Straddling National Interests and Regional Equilibrium

The conflict in Afghanistan is a complex issue that requires careful consideration of various factors, including regional dynamics and national interests. As a neighbouring state to Afghanistan, China's role in mediating this conflict is of utmost importance, given its potential impact on China's own territory. Thus, China must balance its national interests with the broader regional dynamics, which could shape the outcome of this conflict. The intricacies of China's mediation efforts in Afghanistan imply that it must navigate a complex equilibrium, which requires a multifaceted approach. Examining how China deals with this intricate balance reveals the complexity of its role as a mediator in the region, highlighting the need for a nuanced and strategic approach<sup>28</sup>. To comprehend China's involvement as a mediator in Afghanistan's conflict, it is crucial to delve into the driving forces behind its engagement. As suggested by Umarov, "China's stake in Afghanistan extends beyond the country's borders; it is driven by a combination of economic, security, and geopolitical considerations<sup>29</sup>." One significant aspect of China's interest in Afghanistan arises from its geographical proximity to the Xinjiang province. Here, China is particularly concerned about instability spilling over and potentially fueling separatist sentiments. This concern is magnified by the presence of a Muslim Uighur population in the region, which heightens China's apprehensions. Furthermore, Afghanistan's strategic location within Central and South Asia holds implications for China's

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<sup>27</sup> Schulhof, Van Vuuren, and Kirchherr.

<sup>28</sup> Chaziza, 'China's Peace-Maker Role in Afghanistan'.

<sup>29</sup> Akram Umarov, 'Assessing China's New Policy in Afghanistan', *Central Asian Affairs* 4, no. 4 (25 November 2017): 384–406, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22142290-00404004>.

ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its broader regional security interests <sup>30</sup>. To substantiate these claims, various sources, including Huasheng Zhao's work titled "Chinese Views of Post-2014 Afghanistan," underscore China's interest in mediating the conflict to safeguard the security of Xinjiang, promote Afghanistan's stability, and facilitate its development Zhao <sup>31</sup>. To gain a thorough understanding of China's mediation efforts, it is necessary to carefully analyse and deconstruct its overall strategy. By examining the intricate ways in which China interacts with various Afghan stakeholders, as well as the communication mechanisms and negotiation tactics it employs, we can gain valuable insights into its modus operandi. Through a detailed examination of China's diplomatic toolkit, we can further develop a nuanced comprehension of its objectives, challenges, and the potential ripple effects that its mediation efforts may have within Afghanistan's complex conflict landscape. This examination sheds light on the multifaceted nature of China's involvement, where it not only upholds its principle of non-interference but also actively engages with a volatile region driven by a confluence of strategic interests, security concerns, and geopolitical considerations. It is evident that China's mediation efforts in Afghanistan are driven by a complex web of incentives and interests <sup>32</sup>. Therefore, China must adopt a nuanced and strategic approach that balances its national interests with regional dynamics to achieve a sustainable resolution to the conflict.

### The Shift in China's Approach

China's involvement in mediating the conflict in Afghanistan must be examined in the context of its evolving stance, which represents a departure from its historical commitment to non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign nations. This shift in China's approach can be attributed to the evolving dynamics of the Afghan conflict and reflects China's recognition of its emerging role as a global actor with expanding strategic interests. While the principle of non-interference continues to guide China's external engagements, its active participation in mediating the Afghanistan conflict underscores the intricate nature of contemporary diplomacy. This transformation in China's stance, as documented in Miwa Hirono's work "China's Conflict Mediation and the Durability of the Principle of Non-Interference,"

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<sup>30</sup> Umarov.

<sup>31</sup> HUASHENG Zhao, 'What Is Behind China's Growing Attention to Afghanistan?', *Carnegie Endowment*, 8 March 2015, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2015/03/08/what-is-behind-china-s-growing-attention-to-afghanistan-pub-59286>.

<sup>32</sup> Opacin, *China's Role in Afghanistan*.

necessitates a comprehensive examination of its implications for both the Afghan conflict and China's broader foreign policy objectives<sup>33</sup>.

The diplomatic philosophy that underpins China's efforts to mediate the complex conflict landscape of Afghanistan is deeply rooted in the principles of non-interference and respect for national sovereignty. Unlike the more traditional Western approaches to intervention, China's stance is characterised by a pragmatic and respectful approach that avoids imposing its own value system on other nations. This approach is founded on China's long-standing commitment to non-intervention and its unwavering belief in the fundamental right of every sovereign state to determine its own internal affairs without coercion from external forces. Through this approach, China seeks to promote constructive participation and engagement that respects the autonomy of other nations while also advancing its own strategic interests<sup>34</sup>.

China's diplomatic relations with Afghanistan have been dynamic and all-encompassing, touching upon a wide range of fronts, including political dialogues, economic collaborations, and regional partnerships. A noteworthy example of China's foreign policy vision is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), As described above which serves as a quintessential model for promoting economic cooperation and addressing the underlying causes of conflict. The BRI's developmental projects and substantial infrastructural investments align with Afghanistan's aspirations for stability, prosperity, and self-reliance. By leveraging the BRI's potential, China is contributing to the Afghan government's efforts to build a robust and sustainable economy, which is critical for ensuring long-term peace and stability in the region (Embassy of People's Republic of China in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2022).

Furthermore, Navigating Crisis Management and Peacebuilding In the midst of the shifting political dynamics within Afghanistan, China's role in crisis management and peacebuilding holds profound implications. Its mediation efforts aim to strike a delicate balance between the interests of diverse Afghan stakeholders while also taking into account the broader regional ramifications. As China assumes this multifaceted role, it possesses the potential to bridge gaps, facilitate constructive dialogue, and contribute substantively to the establishment of a sustainable and inclusive peace in Afghanistan (Embassy of People's Republic of China in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2022). This involvement underscores the complexity and nuance of China's contemporary foreign policy, where traditional principles of non-interference are being re-evaluated and adapted to meet the demands of a changing global landscape.

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<sup>33</sup> Hirono, ' China's Conflict Mediation and the Durability of the Principle of Non-Interference '.

<sup>34</sup> Hirono.

### Geopolitical Implications and the Great Power Game

The ongoing involvement of China in mediating the Afghan conflict is a significant development in the current geopolitical landscape. As said by Srinath Raghavan, “Geopolitics, as far as it is going to operate in Asia, especially in the heartland areas of Central Asia, is not going to be purely geopolitics of the old style or great power rivalries alone but will be driven by a number of other considerations <sup>35</sup>.” This is particularly noticeable given the recent withdrawal of the United States from the region. The absence of the United States in the region has created a void that China is looking to fill by assuming a proactive role in the conflict. By doing so, China aims to protect its economic interests, counterbalance the influence of rival powers such as the United States, Western nations, and India, and assert its position as a responsible and influential global actor <sup>36</sup>. The shift in China's foreign policy towards a more proactive role in shaping the region's dynamics has not gone unnoticed. Some critics have pointed out that this deviation from China's traditional stance of non-interference is alarming. However, it also indicates China's ambition to take on a more assertive role in shaping the region's future. It is crucial to analyse various perspectives and scholarly analyses to understand the complexities of this power struggle fully. This analysis should also take into account both the immediate and long-term consequences of China's involvement in the Afghan conflict. By doing so, we can gain a comprehensive understanding of the situation at hand and its potential impact on the region and the world.

### Looking Ahead: Implications for Afghanistan's Future

The current situation in Afghanistan has left the country in a transitional period, with the United States withdrawing and the Taliban gaining power <sup>37</sup>. With this in mind, China's involvement in mediating the conflict carries significant implications for the nation's future trajectory. As China continues to push forward with ambitious Silk Road initiatives and aims to establish a more prominent role in regional security affairs following the U.S. withdrawal, the political, economic, and security landscape of the region is set to undergo significant changes. In his work, “Pak-China Joint Strategy against the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan,” Manzoor Khan

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<sup>35</sup> Special Correspondent, ‘Afghanistan Will Remain a Geopolitical Laboratory for U.S.-China Rivalry: Raghavan’, *The Hindu*, 2022, Chennai edition, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/afghanistan-will-remain-a-geopolitical-lab-for-us-china-rivalry/article65573751.ece>.

<sup>36</sup> Lt. General Prakash Katoch, ‘China the Regional Hegemon’, *Indian Defence Review*, Geopolitics, no. Net Edition (8 March 2021), <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/news/china-the-regional-hegemon/>.

<sup>37</sup> Ghosh, ‘One Year since the Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan’.

Afridi highlights China's keen interest in Afghanistan's stability and its potential contribution to regional security<sup>38</sup>. This underscores the enduring significance of China's mediation role in the region. As China seeks to deepen its involvement in Afghanistan's affairs, it is likely that the nation's strategic interests in the region will only intensify. Ultimately, the decisions made by China in the coming months and years will have far-reaching consequences for Afghanistan and the wider region. In light of China's increasing involvement as a mediator in the complex conflict in Afghanistan, it is crucial to conduct a comprehensive exploration of its role, diplomatic tactics, and the potential consequences. This analysis takes a deep dive into the core principles of China's diplomatic doctrine, its economic leverage, and its pursuit of regional stability. By gaining a holistic understanding of these facets, a nuanced perspective emerges, illuminating China's efforts to mediate and the multifaceted implications they may have on the ongoing conflict landscape in Afghanistan<sup>39</sup>. As the conflict in Afghanistan continues to evolve, uncertainties loom large on the horizon. China's ability to shape the trajectory of Afghanistan's future is inextricably linked to its ability to adapt to changing circumstances. The effectiveness of its diplomatic efforts, the outcomes of its engagements, and the extent to which it can facilitate the establishment of a sustainable peace all remain subjects of conjecture. A thorough analysis of these dynamics not only allows for the anticipation of potential scenarios but also sheds light on China's potential contributions to the long-term stability of Afghanistan.

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<sup>38</sup> Manzor Khan Afridi and Musab Yousufi, 'Pak-China Joint Strategy against the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan', *European Journal of Social Sciences* 3, no. 3 (2014).

<sup>39</sup> Umarov, 'Assessing China's New Policy in Afghanistan'.



## China and Afghanistan

China's relationships with key parties to the conflict China places great emphasis on the Afghans themselves leading and owning the peace process, with minimal influence from external parties. To this end, China has been actively involved in facilitating discussions and engaging in diplomacy between Kabul and the Afghan Taliban, while also cooperating with other nations, such as the United States and Russia, in bilateral and multilateral forums <sup>40</sup>. China's role in the ongoing Afghan conflict has been observed as that of a facilitator, implying that it is providing assistance and resources to the parties involved in the conflict rather than being a mediator who directly intervenes in the resolution process. Through its efforts, China has been able to establish itself as a key player in the region and is actively working towards promoting stability and peace in Afghanistan.

## China and Kabul

The relationship between Beijing and Kabul did exhibit remarkable stability and predominantly maintained a state-to-state character after the ousting of the Taliban government in 2001 <sup>41</sup>. As Afghanistan embarked on its path towards the pursuit of peace, China demonstrated its commitment by actively engaging in mediation endeavours, both bilaterally and within the framework of multilateral forums. An illustrative instance of China's diplomatic initiatives occurred in 2017 when it instigated shuttle diplomacy between the capitals of Kabul and Islamabad <sup>42</sup>.

At the bilateral level, the China-Kabul relationship encompassed a multifaceted spectrum, spanning military cooperation, international assistance, and diplomatic engagements. Commencing in 2002, China did extended invaluable material support and reconstruction aid to the government in Kabul <sup>43</sup>. Notably, this period witnessed ministerial-level visits between the two nations, marking a significant upturn in high-level interactions following the U.S. intervention. These interactions culminated in milestone meetings, such as those between Chinese President Xi Jinping and then Afghan President Ashraf Ghani in 2017 and 2019.

Moreover, the two nations have cooperated extensively in the sphere of military collaboration, extending their efforts towards training Afghan security forces and jointly establishing a

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<sup>40</sup> Li, 'China's Conflict Mediation in Afghanistan. Examining How China's Interests and Relationships Fit into the Conflict'; Jason Li, 'Conflict Mediation with Chinese Characteristics', 2019, [https://www.stimson.org/wp-content/files/file-attachments/Li-Conflict-Mediation-with-Chinese-Characteristics-R3\\_03.pdf](https://www.stimson.org/wp-content/files/file-attachments/Li-Conflict-Mediation-with-Chinese-Characteristics-R3_03.pdf).

<sup>41</sup> Li, 'China's Conflict Mediation in Afghanistan. Examining How China's Interests and Relationships Fit into the Conflict'.

<sup>42</sup> Hirano, 'China's Conflict Mediation and the Durability of the Principle of Non-Interference'.

<sup>43</sup> Chaziza, 'China's Peace-Maker Role in Afghanistan'.

strategic base in the region of Badakhshan <sup>44</sup>. Within the context of China's military cooperation and its endeavours to stabilise Afghanistan, a pivotal concern has been its unequivocal commitment to supporting Kabul's anti-terrorism campaign, particularly with regard to the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) <sup>45</sup>.

China has also ventured into mediating between various political factions within the Afghan government, notably prior to the Taliban's ascendancy to power. China, adhering to its doctrine of non-interference in the domestic affairs of sovereign states, refrained from openly expressing strong opinions during the contentious 2019 presidential election, which witnessed a contest between the incumbent President-elect Ghani and Afghanistan's Chief Executive Officer, Abdullah Abdullah <sup>46</sup>. However, in March 2020, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman Geng Shuang subtly extended support to President Ghani's administration over Abdullah's challenge. This stance reflected Beijing's apprehension that internal political divisions within the Afghan government might engender instability or spawn elements opposed to the ongoing peace process. It is noteworthy that China's longstanding association with the Ghani administration predisposed Beijing toward favouring the continuity of that government.

Nonetheless, the recent takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban has catapulted China into a state of heightened vigilance. Consequently, Beijing is now poised to potentially activate crisis management mechanisms to effectively grapple with the escalating instability within Afghanistan and the potential ramifications it may portend in the broader regional context.

### China and Taliban

In spite of China's historical animosity towards the Afghan Taliban, the country has been cautious not to alienate the group due to several thorny issues that exist in their relationship <sup>47</sup>. One salient concern that has garnered China's attention pertains to the potential of the Taliban-led government in Afghanistan to serve as a sanctuary for Uyghur separatist elements, particularly within the context of historical events dating back to the 1990s. Moreover, the Taliban's track record includes incidents of orchestrating violent attacks against Chinese workers and citizens, notably in 2007 and 2011 <sup>48</sup>. Despite the complex challenges posed by these historical occurrences, it is notable that China has navigated a pragmatic working relationship with the Taliban both prior to and subsequent to the pivotal events of 2001. An

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<sup>44</sup> Li, 'China's Conflict Mediation in Afghanistan. Examining How China's Interests and Relationships Fit into the Conflict'.

<sup>45</sup> Chaziza, 'China's Peace-Maker Role in Afghanistan'.

<sup>46</sup> Hirono, 'China's Conflict Mediation and the Durability of the Principle of Non-Interference'.

<sup>47</sup> Zhao, 'What Is Behind China's Growing Attention to Afghanistan?'

<sup>48</sup> Li, 'China's Conflict Mediation in Afghanistan. Examining How China's Interests and Relationships Fit into the Conflict'.

illustrative instance of China's diplomatic engagement with the Taliban transpired in 2000 when China's ambassador to Pakistan undertook the significant step of engaging in discussions with Mullah Omar, the then-leader of the Taliban, to address pressing concerns pertaining to Uyghur militants operating within the Xinjiang region of China. This interaction underscored China's proactive approach to safeguarding its interests and security concerns in the broader context of its engagement with Afghanistan. It is imperative to recognize that China's relationship with Pakistan has exerted a considerable influence on its interactions with the Taliban. Nevertheless, a notable shift has been discerned in China's approach since 2014, as the nation has earnestly endeavoured to establish direct lines of engagement with the Taliban without the intermediation of Pakistan. This shift underscores China's recognition of the pivotal role played by the Taliban in preserving stability within Afghanistan and in countering separatist groups that maintain a presence within China.

Prior to the current year, Chinese officials had hosted Taliban representatives for bilateral negotiations pertaining to the Afghan peace process on no fewer than five separate occasions. These diplomatic exchanges reflect China's proactive commitment to contributing to the peace and stability of Afghanistan through direct dialogue with the Taliban. This engagement culminated in a high-profile meeting in July 2021, wherein China's Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, conducted official discussions with a prominent delegation comprising nine Afghan Taliban representatives. This event garnered significant attention and underscored China's evolving role as a key player in shaping the trajectory of Afghanistan's political landscape and its role in regional security dynamics. This meeting was unprecedentedly publicised by Chinese state media and attracted widespread attention as the world speculated about the future of China's engagement in Afghanistan following the departure of foreign troops.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Embassy of China, 'Wang Yi Speaks with National Security Advisor to Afghan President Hamdullah Mohib on the Phone', 2021, [http://hr.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/gnxw/202105/t20210518\\_8963033.htm](http://hr.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/gnxw/202105/t20210518_8963033.htm) ; FMPRC, 'Wang Yi attends the 9th Istanbul Process conference', *FMPRC*, 2021, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjzbzd/t1865442.shtml>; Embassy of China, 'Wang Yi Speaks with National Security Advisor to Afghan President Hamdullah Mohib on the Phone'; Embassy of China.

## Literature Review

The rise of China as a significant global player has prompted a notable increase in academic research on its approach to foreign policy, with a particular focus on its role in resolving conflicts. One significant manifestation of China's burgeoning role in the international arena can be observed in its increased involvement in the Afghan conflict. This can be observed since the aftermath of the withdrawal of United States troops from Afghanistan, temporarily concluding nearly two decades of protracted conflict<sup>50</sup>. In the wake of this significant power shift, China exhibited a mounting interest in fostering peace negotiations within the Afghan region. This newfound and increasingly conspicuous Chinese commitment to mediating conflicts in Afghanistan has prompted a gush of academic investigation. Scholars have turned their gaze toward Beijing's expanding influence in regional geopolitics, specifically, its approach to conflict mediation in the Afghan context.

The literature addressing China's mediation tactics in Afghanistan has grown at a slender pace in recent years, reflecting the salience of this issue within the global discourse on peace and stability. This literature review plans to undertake a comprehensive synthesis of China's existing mediation initiatives, together with an in-depth exploration of the intricate political landscape of Afghanistan. Within the purview of this comprehensive review, the paper shall dive into the multifaceted dimensions of China's conflict mediation approach in Afghanistan. Drawing upon an array of scholarly analyses, the author aims to examine China's mediation principles, its overarching objectives in the Afghan theatre, the strategic methodologies it employs to advance its mediation efforts, as well as the daunting challenges it confronts in the process. Moreover, we will scrutinise the efficacy and impact of China's mediation endeavours, assessing their effectiveness in realising tangible peace outcomes.

Beyond this, the paper's examination extends to encompass a nuanced exploration of various scholarly perspectives on China's geostrategic interests vis-à-vis Afghanistan and the broader regional policy calculus. The author will scrutinise the contours of China's mediation model, with particular emphasis on its distinctive non-interventionist style, which has garnered both praise and critique in equal measure. Furthermore, the analysis will probe the complex web of China's interactions with the Taliban and other militia groups in Afghanistan, understanding

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<sup>50</sup> Behnam Sahranavard and Ali Asghar Kazemi, 'The Constant Changes in US Strategy in Afghanistan: Achievement or Failure', *Journal of Politics and Law* 10, no. 2 (28 February 2017): 41, <https://doi.org/10.5539/jpl.v10n2p41>.

the motivations and implications of such engagements. In this review, the paper will also cast a discerning eye on the prevailing critiques and potential opportunities associated with China's mediation efforts. By going through this complicated landscape, we aim to provide a holistic understanding of China's role in mediating conflicts in Afghanistan and its broader implications for regional stability and global diplomacy. Through summarising scholarly insights and the careful dissection of multifarious dimensions, this review attempts to contribute to a more refined understanding of China's changing role in the intricate world of international conflict mediation.

### Principles and Objectives of China's Mediation Approach

China's approach to mediation, particularly in the complex context of Afghanistan, is underpinned by a set of precise principles and objectives which have gained significant scholarly attention. These principles, as mentioned by Li and Zhao, represent 'China's commitment' to peaceful coexistence, non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states, the pursuit of mutual benefit, and a loyal dedication to address the root cause of conflicts<sup>51</sup>. These foundational beliefs underscore China's aspiration to be a constructive and responsible global actor in the field of conflict resolution.

Expanding on the multifaceted nature of China's mediation strategy, Zhang has pressed on the idea of "light mediation," a distinctive approach that emphasises the facilitation of communication and the provision of incentives rather than imposing predefined solutions<sup>52</sup>. This approach aligns with China's overarching objective of building an environment helpful to dialogue and negotiation, where parties in conflict can arrive at mutually agreeable settlements. Furthermore, As Li and Clarke observes that China prioritises mediated outcomes that not only resolve immediate conflicts but also contribute to long-term stability and economic development adds to our understanding of China's mediation objectives<sup>53</sup>. This perspective highlights China's commitment to sustainable peace, recognising that lasting stability is essentially linked to socio-economic prosperity.

A critical dimension of China's mediation endeavours in Afghanistan, as highlighted by multiple scholars, lies in its strategic motivations. As Cheng underscores the paramount

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<sup>51</sup> Li, 'Conflict Mediation with Chinese Characteristics'; Zhao, 'What Is Behind China's Growing Attention to Afghanistan?'

<sup>52</sup> Feng Zhang, 'China's Long March at Sea: Explaining Beijing's South China Sea Strategy, 2009 – 2016', *The Pacific Review* 33, no. 5 (2 September 2020): 757–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2019.1587497>.

<sup>53</sup> Li, 'China's Conflict Mediation in Afghanistan. Examining How China's Interests and Relationships Fit into the Conflict'; Clarke, 'China's Strategy in "Greater Central Asia"'.

importance of preventing unrest from spilling over its borders as a primary objective for China<sup>54</sup>. This strategic objective aligns with China's broader goals of safeguarding its national security interests. Building on this strategic dimension, Zhao argues that China's mediation efforts also serve as a means to expand its geopolitical influence in the Asian region<sup>55</sup>. This perspective highlights the fact that the broader regional implications of China's involvement in Afghanistan and its aspiration to shape the geopolitical dynamics of Asia is through its mediation initiatives. Schulhof brings an additional layer to China's objectives, suggesting that these mediation objectives are closely connected to securing its Belt and Road Initiative investments in the Asian sub-continent<sup>56</sup>. These arguments bring forward the economic and infrastructural dimensions of China's engagement in Afghanistan and the exchange between economic interests and conflict mediation strategies.

To summarise, scholars offer a detailed view of China's mediation agenda in Afghanistan, showcasing it as a delicate balance between moral principles such as peaceful coexistence and non-interference and practical strategic interests, including preventing spillover unrest, expanding geopolitical influence, and safeguarding economic investments. This multifaceted approach emphasises the complexity of China's role in conflict mediation and its broader implications for regional and global dynamics.

### China's Mediation Strategies

China's mediation strategies in Afghanistan involve a diverse range of approaches, including bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral initiatives. Together, these strategies demonstrate China's dedication to promoting peace and stability in the region while also serving its own strategic goals. At the bilateral level, as highlighted by Li, China has diligently adopted its ties with the Afghan government through a combination of high-level exchanges, military aid, and development projects since 2021<sup>57</sup>. This multifaceted engagement points at China's constantly increasing role as a reliable partner and stakeholder in Afghanistan's development. Additionally, China's direct engagement with the Taliban, as noted by Zhou and others, is a notable departure from traditional diplomatic norms and follows quite a unique approach<sup>58</sup>. This approach involves meetings in Beijing and abroad, where China employs its diplomatic

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<sup>54</sup> Joseph Y. S. Cheng, 'The Afghanistan Situation and China's New Approach to the SCO', *Asian Survey* 55, no. 2 (1 April 2015): 346–70, <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2015.55.2.346>.

<sup>55</sup> Zhao, 'What Is Behind China's Growing Attention to Afghanistan?'

<sup>56</sup> Schulhof, Van Vuuren, and Kirchherr, 'The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)'.

<sup>57</sup> Li, 'China's Conflict Mediation in Afghanistan. Examining How China's Interests and Relationships Fit into the Conflict'.

<sup>58</sup> JIAYI ZHOU, FEI SU, and JINGDONG YUAN, 'TREADING LIGHTLY: CHINA'S FOOTPRINT IN A TALIBAN-LED AFGHANISTAN', *SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security*, no. 08 (2022).

grip to encourage dialogues and negotiations among conflicting parties. Li, adds depth to this perspective by emphasising how these bilateral channels serve as platforms to probe parties' bottom lines and gradually nudge them toward a more peacebuilding stance, thus facilitating the peace process <sup>59</sup>.

Trilaterally, China has played a pivotal role in mediating between key stakeholders in Afghanistan. Notably, many scholars credit China for its influential and active role in facilitating talks between the United States and the Taliban, ultimately leading up in the Doha agreement <sup>60</sup>. This trilateral diplomacy shows China's capacity to bridge gaps and create strong discussions between parties with historically adversarial relations. Looking forward, the proposal put forth by Zhou for China, Russia, and the United States to coordinate their efforts in promoting intra-Afghan talks highlights the ongoing relevance of trilateral mechanisms in shaping the peace process <sup>61</sup>. Alternatively, As Biswas suggests the China Russia Pakistan trilateral mechanism, focusing on border security and stability in the region, offering an alternative avenue for regional collaboration in pursuit of peace <sup>62</sup>. Multilaterally, China has leveraged various platforms to reinforce its commitment to Afghan reconciliation. Also, Cheng examines China's leadership within multilateral platforms like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), highlighting their role in enhancing regional anti-terrorism cooperation and fostering Afghan reconciliation <sup>63</sup>. However, it's important to note that the effectiveness of the SCO, as argued by others, it may be constrained by underlying tensions between India and Pakistan within the organisation. This raises questions about the extent to which multilateral mechanisms can be leveraged for effective mediation.

Furthermore, Hoo and Mckinney discusses China's use of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) to strengthen and reinforce prospects for peace in Afghanistan <sup>64</sup>. This underlines China's proactive engagement with a diverse set of regional organisations to further its mediation efforts. In sum, the existing literature highlights China's

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<sup>59</sup> Li, 'Conflict Mediation with Chinese Characteristics'.

<sup>60</sup> Manish and Prashant Kaushik, 'China's Interests in Afghanistan: An Assessment Post US Withdrawal', *China Report* 59, no. 1 (February 2023): 58–79, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00094455231152902>.

<sup>61</sup> Li, 'Conflict Mediation with Chinese Characteristics'; JIAYI ZHOU, FEI SU, and JINGDONG YUAN, 'TREADING LIGHTLY: CHINA'S FOOTPRINT IN A TALIBAN- LED AFGHANISTAN'.

<sup>62</sup> Samprity Biswas, 'Russia–China–Pakistan Engagement in the Changing Global Context: Scrutinizing the Realist Logic of a Trilateral "Axis"', *Jadavpur Journal of International Relations* 25, no. 1 (June 2021): 7–25, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0973598421998899>.

<sup>63</sup> Cheng, 'The Afghanistan Situation and China's New Approach to the SCO'.

<sup>64</sup> Tiang Boon Hoo and Jared Morgan McKinney, eds., *Chinese Regionalism in Asia: Beyond the Belt-Road Initiative*, 1st ed., vol. 1, 1 vols, Routledge Contemporary China Series ( London ; New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2023 ).

utilisation of various bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral channels to facilitate peace talks in Afghanistan. These strategies are not only aimed at advancing peace but also serve to enhance China's regional influence and complement U.S. diplomacy. China's unique position as a mediator with ties to various Afghan stakeholders positions it as a key player in the quest for peace in the region, with the potential to influence the trajectory of Afghan reconciliation efforts.

#### China's Evolving Mediation Philosophy

The evolution of China's mediation philosophy has been a subject of scholarly examination as well critique, revealing a gradual transition from its traditional stance of usually non-interference towards a more engaged role in conflict resolution. Sanjeev argue that a significant transformation is underway, in which passive attitudes towards dialogue are being replaced by active facilitation and support, all while maintaining a commitment to impartial and unbiased attitude <sup>65</sup>. Legarda, shares a view a little similar, highlighting China's move away from distant detachment and towards a more proactive approach, which The author describes in research as constructive involvement, in the mediation of conflicts <sup>66</sup>. It is worth noting that this evolving approach distinguishes China from coercive western mediation models, as emphasised by Hirono <sup>67,68</sup>. Overall, the author's work highlights how China has discreetly adjusted its non-interference codes of belief to facilitate a more involved and thorough approach to its mediation strategy. This change is particularly notable given China's expanding global interests and signifies its increasing acknowledgement of its role as a responsible participant in conflict resolution in the recent years globally. This shift away from its traditional non-interference stance reflects a more proactive and engaged philosophy towards mediation, However if it is really a change it has to be seen.

#### Evaluating the Efficacy of China's Mediation Endeavours

China's increasing involvement in mediation has received mixed reviews from varied range of scholars due to its relatively new and constantly escalating presence in this field. According to Various official sources consulted, China has made a very impressive and steady progress in setting up its communication channels between the Taliban and the current Afghan government

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<sup>65</sup> Sanjeev Kumar, *China's BRI in Different Regions of the World*.

<sup>66</sup> Helena Legarda, 'China as a Conflict Mediator Maintaining Stability along the Belt and Road', *Merics*, 2018, <https://www.merics.org/en/comment/china-conflict-mediator>.

<sup>67</sup> Hirono, 'China's Conflict Mediation and the Durability of the Principle of Non-Interference'.

<sup>68</sup> Katoch, 'China the Regional Hegemon'.



<sup>69</sup>. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these links is still up for debate, As many authors studied for this thesis argues that China has yet to convert these 'diplomatic' ties into significant strides towards achieving a long-lasting peace agreement.

In a somewhat more optimistic attitude, Li emphasises that China's non-threatening diplomatic image may position it favourably internationally to act as a broker in the Afghan political reconciliation process <sup>70</sup>. However, Many other authors also points out and gives a contrasting viewpoint, arguing and implying that a significant increase in Chinese development aid may be in fact the necessary catalyst needed today to encourage the Taliban toward a state of accepting moderation and learning the way to compromise. The scholarly discourse also digs deeper into the complex domain of China-US interactions within the sphere of Afghan mediation. As Manish and Kaushik envisions a scenario in which shared interests are set in motion the United States and China into a series of collaborative efforts to facilitate intra-Afghan negotiations more cohesively <sup>71</sup>. Contrarily, Authors such as Zhou, Clarke presents a bit different picture than the latter, contending that both China and the United States harbour aspirations for unilateral mediation influence in Afghanistan, thus fostering a competitive environment rather than a cooperative stance <sup>72</sup>. Overall, the academic assessment of China's mediation efforts in Afghanistan is characterised by a dynamic and sometimes contentious discussion. Despite these varied perspectives from different academic viewpoints, the predominant consensus in the literature indicates that China has in fact successfully contributed to the recommencement of peace talks. Nonetheless, the effectiveness of these diplomatic initiatives in achieving meaningful outcomes still remains a subject of continued examination, scrutiny and discussion among scholars.

### China's Geostrategic Interests in Afghanistan and Regional Policy Approach

Scholarly analysis stresses on the fact that China's multifaceted geostrategic interests in Afghanistan are deeply grounded in thoughts of stability, counterterrorism actions, and

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<sup>69</sup> Embassy of People's Republic of China in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, ' Promoting the High-Quality Development of the BRI, Ensuring China-Afghanistan Friendship Sails Steadily ', *Embassy of People's Republic of China in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan*, 2022, [http://af.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgxw/202211/t20221115\\_10975719.htm#:~:text=China%20will%20continue%20to%20work,a%20joint%20statement%20in%202016](http://af.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgxw/202211/t20221115_10975719.htm#:~:text=China%20will%20continue%20to%20work,a%20joint%20statement%20in%202016).

<sup>70</sup> Li, ' Conflict Mediation with Chinese Characteristics '.

<sup>71</sup> Manish and Kaushik, 'China's Interests in Afghanistan'.

<sup>72</sup> JIAYI ZHOU, FEI SU, and JINGDONG YUAN, 'TREADING LIGHTLY: CHINA'S FOOTPRINT IN A TALIBAN- LED AFGHANISTAN' ; Zhao, 'What Is Behind China's Growing Attention to Afghanistan?'; Clarke, 'China's Strategy in "Greater Central Asia"' ; Friedberg and W.W. Norton & Company, *A Contest for Supremacy*.

safeguarding its substantial resource investments that it promises to make <sup>73</sup>. One paramount concern to China in this situation is the continuity of stability in Afghanistan, because an unstable Afghanistan poses significant security risks and threats to China's western Xinjiang region. These risks encompass the potential overflow of militant activities and the dissemination of extremist ideologies, underscoring the centrality of Afghanistan's stability to China's regional security <sup>74</sup>. Additionally, the viability of China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects hinge on secure overland connectivity through Pakistan and into Central Asia. As a result, safeguarding these infrastructure projects and gaining access to Afghanistan's estimated \$1 trillion worth of untapped mineral deposits have emerged as compelling economic motivations for China's sustained involvement in the Afghan context <sup>75</sup>. China's approach to Afghanistan is underpinned by a distinct policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of other nations and a steadfast opposition to the use of military force for the purpose of regime change <sup>76</sup>. This non-interventionist stance is designed to build up more trust and neutrality with all parties involved in regional conflicts, thereby affording China a certain influence in the broader regional landscape. As we see and observe in our daily readings, Chinese diplomats are at the forefronts to prioritise dialogue, cooperation, and mutual understanding over associating with condemnation or coercive measures as they seek to navigate the more than ever complex terrain of regional diplomacy. Nonetheless, critical voices within the scholarly community have also raised significant concerns regarding the potential drawbacks of China's non-interventionist policy. Some argue that it may unintentionally lead to inaction on pressing governance and human rights issues, which could exacerbate already existing instability <sup>77</sup>. There are also doubts regarding the efficacy of China's strictly non-military mediation approach, particularly in the absence of a willingness by external powers, such as the United States, to deploy coercive tools when necessary. In essence, China's Afghanistan policy is a delicate balancing act, harmonising its geostrategic interests with a commitment to refraining from direct military engagement. To sum these arguments altogether, China's multifaceted approach to Afghanistan reflects a refined strategy that not only seeks to safeguard its security, economic, and diplomatic interests but at the same time adhering to principles of non-intervention and

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<sup>73</sup> Li, 'China's Conflict Mediation in Afghanistan. Examining How China's Interests and Relationships Fit into the Conflict'; Umarov, 'Assessing China's New Policy in Afghanistan'.

<sup>74</sup> Sanjeev Kumar, *China's BRI in Different Regions of the World*.

<sup>75</sup> Schulhof, Van Vuuren, and Kirchherr, 'The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)'.

<sup>76</sup> Li, 'Conflict Mediation with Chinese Characteristics'.

<sup>77</sup> Yasuhiro Matsuda, 'How to Understand China's Assertiveness since 2009: Hypotheses and Policy Implications', *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 15 April 2014, 16.

constructive engagement in a region characterised by complex and evolving challenges. This approach underscores the intricate web of considerations that shape China's role in Afghanistan and highlights the ongoing complexities of its regional policy approach <sup>78</sup>.

### China's Mediation Model and Non-Interventionist Style

China emphasises relationship-building over a legalistic or values-based mediation style seen in the west. It cultivates trust and neutrality among conflicting parties through format-free dialogue, confidence-building, and mutual understanding rather than imposing solutions. This flexible and informal approach derives from China's non-interventionist foreign policy principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference in internal affairs <sup>79</sup>.

China acts more as a facilitator than arbiter, focusing on achieving functional cooperation and interim compromise rather than resolving root political disputes. It aims to ease the conditions for negotiations and build dependence on Chinese goodwill rather than settle issues definitively as seen predominately in the recent times. This peaceful stance and style aims to establish China as a neutral mediator rather than taking sides. China's mediation also centres on building multilateral processes and consensus rather than imposing unilateral. It brings disputing parties together through dialogue mechanisms such as the Quadrilateral Coordination Group comprised of Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and the United States. Building a collective sense of ownership is meant to increase stability of agreements relative to unilateral deals <sup>80</sup>.

However, others argue that China's opaque and peacebuilding approaches can also increase risks which can further enable instability through inaction or lack of political will on resolving core conflicts in the long-term <sup>81</sup>. It may then struggle to gain the trust and leverage it might need over hardliners within conflicts due to its firewalling of internal political dynamics. Overall, China's mediation style is informed by its foreign policy principles though some question its practical impact in complex, multi-layered conflicts like Afghanistan in the future.

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<sup>78</sup> Correspondent, 'Afghanistan Will Remain a Geopolitical Laboratory for U.S.-China Rivalry: Raghavan'; Manish and Kaushik, 'China's Interests in Afghanistan'; Matsuda, 'How to Understand China's Assertiveness since 2009: Hypotheses and Policy Implications'; JIAYI ZHOU, FEI SU, and JINGDONG YUAN, 'TREADING LIGHTLY: CHINA'S FOOTPRINT IN A TALIBAN- LED AFGHANISTAN'.

<sup>79</sup> Li, 'China's Conflict Mediation in Afghanistan. Examining How China's Interests and Relationships Fit into the Conflict'; Allauddin, Hongsong Liu, and Raja Qaiser Ahmed, 'The Changing Dynamics and New Developments of China-Pakistan Relations', *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs* 76, no. 1 (March 2020): 73–88, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0974928419901195>.

<sup>80</sup> Allauddin, Liu, and Ahmed, 'The Changing Dynamics and New Developments of China-Pakistan Relations'.

<sup>81</sup> Clarke, 'China's Strategy in "Greater Central Asia"'.

### China's Engagement with the Taliban and Other Militant Groups

China's approach to non-state militant groups, notably the Taliban, while unequivocally condemning terrorism, is characterised by maintaining open channels of communication. These channels are designed to encourage cooperation, primarily in the domains of security and development objectives<sup>82</sup>. However, the question remains: can this approach lead to legitimising the actions of these groups? Accordingly, China's approach involves using diplomatic means and economic incentives to encourage armed groups to adopt non-violent behaviour rather than isolating them as a form of punishment. The country emphasises practical cooperation and de-emphasises ideology in its dealings with these groups in order to build trust and facilitate its mediation efforts, as noted by authors.

China's engagement with the Taliban, in particular, has been motivated by its desire to counterbalance separatist militant forces operating in its Xinjiang region. Additionally, China has advocated for a political solution to the Afghan civil war that does not compromise Afghan sovereignty or its territorial integrity<sup>83</sup>. However, it is important to note that some voices within the scholarly community have raised concerns about the potential consequences of open communication with militant groups. Critics argue that such engagement may inadvertently legitimise militant objectives and harden their negotiating positions. Sceptics also question the durability of such agreements that are achieved with reached partnerships with armed groups, particularly given the deeply rooted internal factionalism that often these groups have within them.

China's strategy stems from the idea of influencing militant groups as one node within wider state-society networks rather than antagonising them through isolation<sup>84</sup>. However, there are divergent viewpoints within the scholarly discourse as well. Some, As Li argue that the perception of China as a pragmatic but non-committal partner by these militant groups may limit its diplomatic leverage. In essence, scholars engage in a lively debate concerning the efficacy and ethical dimensions of China's engagement policy towards armed non-state actors as part of its broader conflict mediation approach. The complex dynamics of China's interactions with non-state militant groups in the context of conflict mediation brings to forefront its multifaceted nature of China's diplomacy and the intricate ethical and strategic

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<sup>82</sup> Pravda Parakkal, 'China's Reluctant Taliban Embrace', 2021, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/09/25/chinas-reluctant-taliban-embrace/>.

<sup>83</sup> Opacin, *China's Role in Afghanistan*; Reuters, 'China's Wang Says World Should Support Afghanistan, Not Pressure It', 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/senior-chinese-diplomat-says-afghanistan-should-not-be-geopolitical-battleground-2021-08-19/>.

<sup>84</sup> Chaziza, 'China's Peace-Maker Role in Afghanistan'; Manish and Kaushik, 'China's Interests in Afghanistan'.

considerations that underpin its approach. This ongoing debate highlights the evolving nature of China's role in conflict resolution and the nuanced challenges it faces in engaging with armed non-state actors.

### Critiques and Opportunities for China's Mediation Efforts

While some applaud China's expanding mediation efforts, critics highlight their limitations, others contend China's excessively relying on elite-level closed-door diplomacy rather than brokering societal reconciliation from the ground up<sup>85</sup>. Meanwhile, some also argue that China deploys economic leverage clumsily through aid and investment deals, breeding acute dependency rather than long-term peace for the state. Additionally, Xu sees China's aversion to security commitments obstructing joint crisis management with the US<sup>86</sup>. In contrast, others defend China's circumspection as strategic patience, not passivity. Analyses reveal critiques focused on deficiencies in China's tool kit and coordination challenges with the US.

Dissenting voices within the academic discourse hypothesise that China's potential impact in the realm of mediation may be subjected to certain limitations, primarily stemming from its purported reluctance to employ instruments such as economic sanctions or the credible threat of military deployment, as delineated and expounded upon by Wuthnow<sup>87</sup>. This propensity towards a conciliatory and process-driven approach, as characterised by China, could potentially be perceived as a double-edged sword, for it might inadvertently contribute to an environment of heightened instability. Such apprehensions materialise due to China's measured aversion to taking decisive stances on critical issues encompassing human rights, political reform, and counterterrorism, as we saw and understood from many citations above. A further facet of criticism pertains to the perceived deficiency in China's coordination with external mediators, particularly in multifaceted conflicts featuring a multitude of stakeholders, as exemplified by the Afghan context. Critics contend that this insufficiency curtails the opportunities for the synchronisation of strategies that could be mutually reinforcing. This critique underscores the intricate web of diplomacy that characterises complex conflict scenarios and underscores the importance of harmonised external intervention efforts. Moreover, concerns have been raised regarding China's limited capacity to accumulate local

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<sup>85</sup> Duan Xiaolin, 'Domestic Sources of China's Wolf-Warrior Diplomacy: Individual Incentive, Institutional Changes and Diversionary Strategies', *The Pacific Review*, 4 May 2023, 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2023.2205163>.

<sup>86</sup> Gretchen Peters, *How Opium Profits the Taliban*, Peaceworks, no. 62 (Washington, D.C: United States Institute of Peace, 2009).

<sup>87</sup> Joel Wuthnow, 'Beyond the Veto: Chinese Diplomacy in the United Nations Security Council', *COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY*, 2011.

acceptance and wield influence to an extent that engenders trust among hardline factions. This limitation, brings forward a substantial hurdle in the path of effective mediation, particularly in situations where uncompromising factions which are integral to the conflict dynamics. Nonetheless, proponents within the scholarly discourse posit that China's constructive engagement with regional stakeholders and its strategic patience hold the potential to cultivate trust and confer a degree of convening power that has eluded other actors. This optimistic perspective, supports China's unique position in mediating conflicts by virtue of its non-ideological mediation style, which may resonate with conflict-weary parties. This affords China a distinctive appeal, offering a potential avenue towards conflict resolution. Furthermore, with continued and sustained involvement, China's extensive network of diplomatic relations, foreign aid disbursements, and investments under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) could serve as valuable economic inducements, incentivising stakeholders to embrace peace agreements. This perspective, stresses on the potential economic leverage China wields, which could prove instrumental in conflict resolution efforts <sup>88</sup>.

#### Evaluating the Mediation Impact on Intra-Afghan Negotiations

The assessment of China's concrete influence on advancing intra-Afghan negotiations is subject to a range of perspectives within the broader academic discourse concerning global peacebuilding and negotiations. Some posits that China's role in this context has predominantly been symbolic, characterised by a resonance of US support for the negotiation process, without making substantial progress in driving the talks forward <sup>89</sup>. On the contrary, others adopts a more optimistic outlook, accrediting China's shuttle diplomacy with compelling the Taliban to engage directly with the Afghan government. Looking ahead, Bajpai maintains a stance that China's ability to contribute effectively to post-US withdrawal stability hinges on its assumption of a central mediating role <sup>90</sup>. Consequently, the literature remains divided on the extent to which China's pragmatic mediation influence aligns with its emergent narrative aspirations in this review associated with the case of Afghanistan.

#### Implications for the Broader China-US Relationship

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<sup>88</sup> Legarda, 'China as a Conflict Mediator Maintaining Stability along the Belt and Road'; Schulhof, Van Vuuren, and Kirchherr, 'The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)'.

<sup>89</sup> Correspondent, 'Afghanistan Will Remain a Geopolitical Laboratory for U.S.-China Rivalry: Raghavan'.

<sup>90</sup> Kanti P. Bajpai, Selina Ho, and Manjari Chatterjee Miller, eds., *Routledge Handbook of China-India Relations*, First issued in paperback (London New York: Routledge, 2022).

The intricate dynamics of mediation agendas in Afghanistan carry implications that extend beyond the immediate context, casting a shadow over the overarching dynamics of China-US relations. According to Bajpai, China appears to be leveraging the US withdrawal from Afghanistan as an opportune moment to expand its political influence through its mediation endeavours. However, others strike a cautionary note, warning of potential pitfalls should China become excessively aligned with Pakistan and the Taliban in the Afghan sphere. Conversely, Some offers an alternative perspective, suggesting that aligning with the United States on the matters related to Afghan reconciliation could serve as a passage for building trust between China and the preeminent global superpower. In this regard, the intricacies of Afghanistan's peace process transcend its immediate borders, resonating within the broader arena of China-US relations and global geopolitics <sup>91</sup>.

### China's Strategic Interests in Regional Stability

Upon conducting a thorough analysis of scholarly literature, it becomes evident that China's domestic and international interests intricately interact with each other, powerfully shaping its outlook on stability within Afghanistan and the wider region. According to the insights offered by Zhao, a notable perspective highlights China's top priority as the prevention of Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for Uyghur militants. This is due to the potential direct threat their activities may pose to the Xinjiang region of China. Concurrently, Bajpai contends that China is driven by the imperative to safeguard its extensive Belt and Road Initiative projects traversing through Central Asia and particularly through Pakistan <sup>92</sup>. The potential repercussions stemming from the Afghan conflict, such as spillover effects, underscore China's commitment to ensuring the uninterrupted progress of these strategic economic initiatives. Few further stresses on the fact that China seeks to integrate Afghanistan into regional frameworks like that of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which can lead to effectively neutralising and blocking any potential security threats <sup>93</sup>. Collectively, the literature underscores the profound influence of China's national security considerations and its pursuit of enhanced economic connectivity in shaping its approach to regional mediation.

### Collaborative Engagements with Regional Powers

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<sup>91</sup> Wu Xinbo, 'Managing Crisis and Sustaining Peace between China and the United States', *UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE*, 2008; Zhao, 'What Is Behind China's Growing Attention to Afghanistan?'

<sup>92</sup> Bajpai, Ho, and Miller, *Routledge Handbook of China-India Relations*.

<sup>93</sup> Cheng, 'The Afghanistan Situation and China's New Approach to the SCO'.

An additional expansive domain of scholarly exploration revolves around the strategies employed by China to coordinate its efforts with regional stakeholders and gaining their trust and having them on board with their strategic decisions. Notably, scholars have scrutinised China's collaborative endeavours alongside Pakistan in co-mediating Taliban engagement. Adding to this argument, Biswas, presents in his research the idea of China harnessing its cooperative mechanism involving both Russia and Pakistan on security matters <sup>94</sup>. Another perspective of a similar narrative advocates for China's active participation within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, wherein it collaborates with key regional actors from different countries such as Russia, India, and other Central Asian countries, thereby fostering a harmonised and centralised approach toward ensuring stability in Afghanistan. The critical evaluation of China's endeavours to forge partnerships aimed at reinforcing coherent regional approaches to addressing the complexities of the Afghan situation adds valuable depth to the above-mentioned discourse and brings forward the idea of what could the future occurrences look like for both China and Afghanistan.

#### Future Contingencies and Potential Scenarios

China's evolving mediation role remains contingent upon the dynamic conditions prevailing on the ground. As Zhou and Yuhuan cautions that a surge in Taliban violence and terror within and outside Afghanistan, could prompt China to rethink and adjust its engagement strategy with the country <sup>95</sup>. The emergence of heightened levels of terrorist activities or the escalation of a civil war scenario might necessitate and prompt China's engagement in security cooperation with the United States <sup>96</sup>. For United States this has been a long issue regarding security and discussions related to peace talks with Afghanistan. In a contrasting perspective, posits that China may choose to expand its ties with the Taliban should they attain a position of authority, in a limited way it had become a reality as well. The meticulous exploration of potential contingencies based on varying factors, including Taliban actions, the prevailing levels of instability, and the strategic choices made by the United States, provides a nuanced and forward-looking dimension to scenario planning.

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<sup>94</sup> Biswas, 'Russia–China–Pakistan Engagement in the Changing Global Context'.

<sup>95</sup> JIAYI ZHOU, FEI SU, and JINGDONG YUAN, ' TREADING LIGHTLY: CHINA'S FOOTPRINT IN A TALIBAN- LED AFGHANISTAN '.

<sup>96</sup> Friedberg and W.W. Norton & Company, *A Contest for Supremacy*.



Overall, the discourse underscores the intricate interplay of China's domestic and international interests, its collaborative strategies with regional stakeholders, and the adaptive nature of its mediation role in the context of evolving conditions on the ground. This multifaceted analysis encapsulates the complexities of China's approach to regional stability and its responsiveness to contingencies that may arise in the future.

#### Limitations in Existing Literature

The current collection of scholarly literature focusing on China's peace-making efforts, particularly those related to Afghanistan, displays noteworthy limitations that require careful consideration and additional exploration. If these limitations are addressed, they have the potential to deepen our understanding of China's tactics, actions, and influence on the Afghan conflict. In the current body of research on China's mediation in Afghanistan, clear knowledge gaps warrant further investigation and discussion. These gaps represent areas where additional research and analysis could provide valuable insights and contribute to a more comprehensive comprehension of China's role in the Afghan conflict. Identifying these gaps also highlights the importance of continued scholarly inquiry and collaborative participation across disciplines in this field.

#### Lack of Primary Source Data:

One primary limitation in the existing literature is the need for primary source materials in Chinese, which constrains the depth of our comprehension regarding strategy formulation and narrative framing within Chinese decision-making circles<sup>97</sup>. Relying heavily on secondary English-language analyses introduces the risk of mistranslation or misinterpretation of subtle nuances. Bridging this gap by accessing Chinese-language primary sources could provide a more nuanced understanding of China's motivations and objectives in its Afghan mediation efforts. One notable gap pertains to the scarcity of primary source data regarding closed-door meetings between Chinese representatives, the Taliban, and the Afghan government. Scholars primarily rely on second-hand accounts, which can limit the depth of insights into the substance and progress of these engagements. The potential access to Chinese archives could offer invaluable primary documentation, enhancing the precision and reliability of research findings.

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<sup>97</sup> Carol Ting and Todd L. Sandel, 'Methodological Challenges to Collecting Primary Data on Internet Users in Rural China', *Information Development* 32, no. 2 (March 2016): 117–26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0266666914529136>.

**Shortage of Non-Elite Perspectives:** Another notable gap resides in the dearth of non-elite perspectives on China's mediation efforts. The majority of available sources concentrate on high-level diplomacy and negotiations, leaving a void in our understanding of how Afghan civil society views China's role in the conflict resolution process. Incorporating non-elite perspectives through avenues such as public opinion polling and grassroots interviews could provide alternative viewpoints and potentially uncover nuanced dynamics. **Limited Empirical Assessments of China's Material Impact:** Empirical assessments of China's material impact on the Afghan conflict are also underrepresented in the literature. While qualitative analyses are prevalent, studies quantifying China's aid, investment, and military assistance could offer a more robust substantiation of its leverage and influence. Furthermore, statistical analyses tracking mediation outcomes over time are relatively scarce, hindering a comprehensive understanding of China's efficacy <sup>98</sup>.

**Dearth of Taliban Perspectives:** An additional gap is the paucity of Taliban perspectives on China's role. Beyond the limited insight provided by propaganda statements, there is a lack of research that incorporates Taliban sources or interviews elucidating their perceptions of and interactions with China. Such insights from the Taliban's vantage point could significantly enhance our comprehension of the dynamics at play <sup>99</sup>.

**opaque Nature of China's Strategic Calculus:** China's own strategic calculus in the Afghan mediation process remains opaque. Existing scholarship relies heavily on external observations and analyses, rather than drawing from internal policy documents or direct statements that convey Chinese leaders' strategic thinking and decision-making regarding Afghanistan mediation.

**Absence of Historical Baseline:** Given that China's expanded mediation role in Afghanistan is relatively recent, there is an absence of a historical baseline for assessing continuity or evolution in its approach. This gap hinders a comprehensive understanding of how China's strategies and objectives may have shifted over time (Lack of historical scholarship).

**Limited Multidisciplinary Integration:** Perspectives from various academic disciplines, such as political science, history, anthropology, economics, and area studies, are not substantially

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<sup>98</sup> Joseph Fewsmith, 'Balances, Norms and Institutions: Why Elite Politics in the CCP Have Not Institutionalized', *The China Quarterly* 248, no. S1 (November 2021): 265–82, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741021000783>.

<sup>99</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, 'Introduction', in *The Taliban at War*, by Antonio Giustozzi (Oxford University Press, 2019), 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190092399.003.0001>.

synthesised in the existing literature. Multidisciplinary integration is essential for achieving a more holistic analysis of China's mediation role in Afghanistan, as it can offer diverse and complementary insights (Lack of multidisciplinary integration).

**Limited Field Research and In-Depth Interviews:** The paucity of field research and in-depth interviews with Chinese diplomats and their partners in Afghanistan represents another significant limitation <sup>100</sup>. This limitation hampers our ability to grasp the practical operationalisation of China's mediation strategies and the constraints it faces in achieving its objectives. Remote analyses, conducted from afar, preclude an in-depth exploration of local perspectives, trust-building dynamics, and the intricacies of partnerships and leverage on the ground. **Overcoming this limitation** would require on-site field research and direct engagement with key stakeholders. **Absence of Comparative Analyses:** The absence of comprehensive comparative analyses between China's stated goals, communicated narratives, and the actual outcomes of its mediation initiatives leaves a critical gap in assessing the real impact and viability of China's mediation model. Without systematically tracking and comparing the results of China's efforts, claims made in the literature remain somewhat divorced from the complex realities on the ground. Comparative assessments would provide a more accurate and nuanced understanding of the effectiveness of China's mediation approaches.

**Temporal Distance from Ongoing Processes:** The temporal distance from the fluid and ongoing mediation processes in Afghanistan represents another limitation. Static analyses, conducted at a specific point in time, risk obsolescence as roles, strategies, and objectives organically redefine in response to the evolving dynamics of the Afghan conflict. Therefore, ongoing, real-time assessments are needed to capture the dynamic nature of China's mediation efforts. A one-size-fits-all approach overlooks the strategic nuances that may be essential for tailoring effective mediation strategies in diverse conflict scenarios. Consequently, research that provides more granularity in analysing China's mediation efforts is required. **Absence of Longitudinal Studies:** Finally, the dearth of systematic, longitudinal studies obscures our understanding of how China's conflict mediation theory and application may evolve endogenously through interactive learning, such as the one done by Arai <sup>101</sup>. Snapshots of

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<sup>100</sup> Cita Wetterich, 'Perspectives on Field Research in Security-Sensitive Spaces – Insights from China and the Southern Mediterranean Area', n.d.

<sup>101</sup> Tatsushi Arai, 'Engaging Conflict History and Memory Across the Taiwan Strait: A Longitudinal Analysis of the Conflict Timelines from Interactive Conflict Resolution (ICR) Dialogues', *Negotiation Journal* 39, no. 1 (January 2023): 35–70, <https://doi.org/10.1111/nej.12422>.

China's mediation efforts fail to capture potentially iterative shifts in strategy, tactics, and outcomes over time. Longitudinal studies would allow for a more nuanced appreciation of China's adaptive capacity and learning processes in the realm of conflict mediation. Thus, Future research should consider mixed-method, longitudinal designs that incorporate both quantitative and qualitative data across time. Such research would enable scholars to chart the iterative evolution of China's mediation theory and practice relationship endogenously.

Overall, to address the current limitations and advance our understanding in this critical field, it is necessary for future research to explore innovative primary fieldwork, utilise diverse data sources in mixed-method analyses, and establish iterative assessment structures. These efforts have the potential to not only enhance academic rigor in the study of China's mediation in Afghanistan but also contribute to shaping conflict resolution policies in the region. By discussing and analysing these gaps in existing literature, we can identify promising areas for further exploration and underscore the importance of prioritising primary sources, field research, statistical analysis, multidisciplinary collaboration, and historical contextualisation. These gaps highlight the ever-evolving nature of the Afghan conflict and the continued need for thorough scholarly inquiry to unravel its complexities and inform future policy decisions.

#### Area for further research

Thus, Exploring the untapped areas of research in China's mediation endeavours in Afghanistan can provide significant insights into potential directions for future inquiry. Such promising areas of investigation have the potential to not only enhance our comprehension of China's tactics but also refine its mediation approaches in this intricate context. It is essential to identify the constraints of the existing literature to realise the potential for progress in this field.

**Content Analysis of Chinese Language Primary Sources:** Future research could delve into a comprehensive content analysis of Chinese language primary sources. This analysis should span official communiqués, media narratives, and policy documents. By doing so, researchers can uncover the strategic discourse within Chinese decision-making circles. Such an exploration would provide essential context to complement secondary analyses and offer a more nuanced understanding of China's motivations and objectives in its Afghan mediation efforts. **Fieldwork and In-Depth Interviews:** Conducting fieldwork that incorporates in-depth interviews with key stakeholders is another critical avenue for research. Interviews with Chinese diplomats, their partners, and local experts in Afghanistan would enable a deeper exploration of practical challenges faced on the ground, adaptation strategies employed,

perceptions of China's impact, and potential opportunities for strengthening its mediation approaches. This empirical approach would offer valuable first-hand insights into the complexities of mediating in a dynamic conflict environment.

**Comparative Case Studies:** Comparative case studies represent an important research direction. These studies could track and analyse the stated objectives, actions, and outcomes of discrete mediation initiatives at various conflict phases and modalities <sup>102</sup>. By evaluating the effectiveness of different mediation models employed by China, researchers can discern which approaches are more successful in achieving desired outcomes, shedding light on best practices. By examining how China adapts and refines its mediation strategies over time, a more dynamic and comprehensive understanding of its approach can be achieved. **Disaggregated Analyses of Success Factors:** Researchers could conduct disaggregated analyses to identify success factors for different components of China's mediation portfolio. Specifically, distinguishing between Track 1 (official diplomacy) and informal Track 2 (non-governmental dialogues) components could yield valuable insights into which aspects of China's mediation efforts are more effective in specific contexts <sup>103</sup>. **Partnership-Focused Research:** Exploring partnerships and synergies between China's conciliatory diplomacy and the problem-solving capacities of international organisations is another promising research avenue. Investigating how China collaborates with these organisations, the challenges encountered, and the outcomes achieved would provide insights into the potential complementarity between state-driven and multilateral mediation efforts.

Exploring these domains of research has the potential to fill significant gaps that currently impede a broad and comprehensive view of China's progressively substantial role in mediating conflicts, notably in Afghanistan. Moreover, the valuable insights acquired from such research pursuits, alongside reflective practice, has the potential to improve both China's effectiveness in mediation and scholarly evaluations of its evolving strategies in this crucial area of global diplomacy, which will increase in the near future.

The Anticipated Trajectory of China's Evolving Mediation Role

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<sup>102</sup> Sebastiano Benasso et al., eds., *Landscapes of Lifelong Learning Policies across Europe: Comparative Case Studies* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

<sup>103</sup> Jeffrey Mapendere, 'Track One and a Half Diplomacy and the Complementarity of Tracks', *Culture of Peace Online Journal*, n.d.

A discerning gaze into the future reveals divergent scholarly perspectives regarding the prospective trajectory of China's mediation endeavours in Afghanistan. At the heart of these predictions lies a pivotal confluence of geopolitical dynamics and economic imperatives.

Manish and Kaushik<sup>104</sup> envisions a scenario characterised by the expansion of China's mediation role in Afghanistan. The rationale behind this forecast stem from Afghanistan's burgeoning economic dependence on China, coupled with the United States' expressed interest in sharing responsibilities together with them. In alignment with this viewpoint, Opacin anticipates China capitalising on its deep-seated connections with Pakistan and its substantial economic resources to facilitate an intra-Afghan dialogue. This vision asks for a proactive and assertive China, who should be positioned at the forefront of mediating efforts in the region<sup>105</sup>. However, an alternative perspective, advanced and studies by Small (2015), presents a contrasting narrative—one marked by a caution and outlined by the potential for a recalibration of China's mediation initiatives. In this scenario, the persistence of violence or the obstinate stance of the Taliban could compel China to retract from its ongoing mediation activities in the state. Similarly, Amini articulates an outlook in which China could strategically limit its exposure in Afghanistan that can then further help them to substantively progress toward stability which anyways remain a bit elusive<sup>106</sup>. Overall, As the tapestry of events continues to unfold in this complex geopolitical landscape that was discussed above, the scholarly discourse on China's future mediation activities remains marked by a shadow of contradictory judgments and perspectives. These conflicting viewpoints highlights many intricacies and uncertainties inherent in predicting the course of China's evolving mediation role in the Afghan context.

In conclusion, this comprehensive literature review has presented a wide array of significant scholarly perspectives on the foundational principles, overarching objectives, intricate strategies that poses many formidable challenges, and, perhaps most critically, the evolving efficacy of China's rapidly growing role in conflict mediation within the complex milieu of Afghanistan. The analysis reveals a multifaceted approach, showing how China is judiciously deploying a tripartite mediation strategy that encompasses bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral channels in its earnest endeavours to facilitate peace negotiations. Undeniably, the diplomatic undertaking in Afghanistan is rife with various political, security, and diplomatic obstacles that

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<sup>104</sup> Manish and Kaushik, 'China's Interests in Afghanistan'.

<sup>105</sup> Opacin, *China's Role in Afghanistan*.

<sup>106</sup> Mariam Amini, 'China's Silk Road Railway Hits a Snag in Afghanistan', *CNBC*, 13 October 2016.

greatly influence China's mediation endeavours. Through scholarly evaluations of China's neutral and constant mediation influence in Afghanistan, this analysis reveals a patchwork of results that showcase a range of triumphs and aspects necessitating further improvement. Notably, the future trajectory of China's mediation role in Afghanistan remains cloaked in uncertainty, necessitating further empirical inquiry to trace how China adapts its mediation strategy amid the inconsistent unfolding of events in this war-torn and conflicted region.

The imperative to comprehend China's approach to conflict mediation transcends its immediate relevance to the Afghan context; it offers a window into the evolving foreign policy priorities of a rising global power and contributes nuanced insights into the complex dynamics that underpin peace prospects in conflict-ridden nations, notably exemplified by Afghanistan. In overarching terms, the existing scholarly discourse underscores the existence of substantive and ongoing debates among scholars concerning the merits and limitations inherent to China's mediation approach. Nevertheless, it is unequivocal that China's sustained and benign engagement carries within it the latent potential for convening power, particularly if adroitly coordinated with international partners willing to judiciously apply a combination of incentives and pressures when conducive conditions prevail.

This review has synthesised and elucidated the pivotal scholarly perspectives that collectively constitute the overarching context and dynamics of China's mediation model within the intricate mosaic of Afghanistan. This synthesis has shed light on crucial dimensions such as China's geostrategic interests, its steadfast commitment to non-interventionist principles, its adaptive engagement strategies with militant groups, and the ongoing debates surrounding the assessment of its impact, mindful of the constraints it faces in comparison to Western-led mediation initiatives. This body of work aims to lay a solid foundation for the subsequent content analysis of primary sources, as illustrated in the forthcoming methodology section of this research. Turning our gaze toward the broader spectrum of conflict mediation strategies, it is discernible that China's approach in Afghanistan exhibits both resonant commonalities and tangible distinctions when juxtaposed with its mediation strategies employed in other conflict-ridden regions. While the core principles of sovereignty, non-interference, and flexibility reverberate across disparate contexts, as also discussed in this literature review, it is very certain that nuanced adjustments in China's approach are and will keep on coming from the idiosyncrasies characterising the Afghan conflict landscape.

Firstly, China's direct engagement with non-state armed groups in Afghanistan, necessitated by their prominence within the conflict dynamics, represents a pragmatic deviation from its traditional preference for contact exclusively through recognised governments. This pragmatic necessity underscores the unique requirements of Afghanistan's mediation and also conflict context. This distinction is highlighted by scholars that are discussed and referred to in this review, who emphasise China's direct engagement in Afghanistan in contrast to its avoidance of legitimising rebel forces elsewhere. Secondly, the heightened priority accorded to counterterrorism in Afghanistan stems from its strategic location as a potential channel for transnational militant networks threatening not only China's security but also of many other nations globally. In this regard, China adopts a more stringent stance in negotiations with the Taliban, emphasising the necessity for their dissociation from entities such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State. This divergence in China's approach is exemplified by the contrast between its negotiations with the Taliban and its pursuit of domestic separatists, as presented and discussed above.

Thirdly, China's substantial investment of soft power in Afghanistan, notably through extensive reconstruction aid and infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative, serves as a distinctive hallmark of its mediation strategy and also somewhere highlights its varied interests in the region. This deliberate allocation of resources is distinct from its focus in other conflict-affected regions, where the emphasis of China's aid lies predominantly in post-conflict state-building rather than direct violence prevention. This nuanced difference is highlighted by scholars as well. Lastly, China's robust cooperation through multilateral platforms, boosted further by its engagement with the Quadrilateral Coordination Group in Afghanistan, also brings forward the recognition that the stabilisation of Afghanistan is a complex endeavour that requires collaborative efforts that is a challenge for China. This cooperative stance stands in contrast to China's preference for conducting diplomacy through bilateral or small-grouped formats in other contexts, as noted by scholars like Li and Zhao .

Nonetheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that while China's mediation tactics in Afghanistan have been tailored to accommodate the intricate power dynamics at play, questions linger concerning the efficacy of its preference for quiet, consensus-building diplomacy than to having a more assertive pressure tactic. Reservations persist regarding whether this non-confrontational approach can gain traction in situations where militia actors exert considerable influence over the political landscape. Moreover, while China has demonstrated flexibility in



mediation, there are undeniably many concerns over and about its utilisation of economic sanctions or the suspension of aid as effective leverage, particularly in contexts such as Sudan and Myanmar. Therefore, the ongoing discourse underscores the imperative of incorporating complementary tools into China's mediation repertoire.

In light of these varied complexities and the ever-evolving nature of Afghanistan's political landscape, it is certain that further research and reflection are needed to better evaluate this topic and discourse. The complex environment of conflict mediation in Afghanistan necessitates continued scholarly inquiry globally to navigate these challenges effectively and critically. Such discussions and research will not only serve to deepen our understanding of China's evolving role as a mediator but also offer insights into its capacity to steer protracted conflicts toward durable resolutions within a world characterised by ever-shifting geopolitical dynamics.

## Methodology

The aim of the study at hand is to provide a comprehensive illustration of the conflict mediation process in Afghanistan, with a particular focus on the implementation of China's conflict mediation approach. To ensure a thorough examination of China's role in conflict mediation in Afghanistan, the research method of choice was case study analysis. In terms of data gathering, document analysis was employed as a technique. This approach allows for a deep dive into the broader historical, geopolitical, and socio-cultural context while concentrating on China's engagement in Afghanistan post-2021. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the situation in Afghanistan, it is crucial to conduct a meticulous analysis of various factors that are at play. Specifically, this entails a thorough exploration of the historical ties between China and Afghanistan, taking into account the broader regional dynamics. Additionally, examining China's foreign policy objectives and approach to conflict resolution is an essential aspect of the research. Furthermore, an in-depth examination of China's role in Afghanistan after 2021 is of utmost importance. The post-2021 era was characterised by the withdrawal of most international combat troops from Afghanistan, which created heightened uncertainty and a need for alternative solutions. In this context, China's engagement during this phase, including diplomatic initiatives, economic investments, and attempts to facilitate intra-Afghan dialogues, needs to be meticulously analysed to gain a better understanding of the situation.

## Case Study

During the period between the two World Wars, which encompassed the aftermath of the First World War and the lead-up to the Second World War, the sociology department at the University of Chicago saw the emergence of case study research in its contemporary form <sup>107</sup>. It is worth noting, however, that despite its popularity during this time, the employment of case study research in Sociology experienced a lull in the post-World War II era, only to undergo a resurgence in the 1970s <sup>108</sup>. In the current landscape of social research, the use of case studies has gained significant traction, particularly within the realm of small-scale research. According to Denscombe, case studies have served multiple objectives and can be categorised into either discovery-led or theory-led endeavours <sup>109</sup>. It is possible to combine both of these aspects within a single case study, as exemplified by the present study. Specifically, it seamlessly

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<sup>107</sup> David Matthew, *Case Study Research*, vol. 1 (London: SAGE Publications, 2007).

<sup>108</sup> Matthew.

<sup>109</sup> M Denscombe, *The Good Research Guide for Small Scale Research Projects*, 4th ed. (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2010).

intertwines elements of both discovery and theory. It exhibits characteristics of a discovery-led approach as it delineates the unfolding events and circumstances within the “case study setting <sup>110</sup>.” Simultaneously, it adheres to a theory-led framework, utilising a specific case, namely, China's conflict mediation in Afghanistan, as an illustrative vehicle to showcase its application in a real-world context. This methodology also illustrates how theoretical constructs can be adapted and tailored to suit the intricacies of the chosen setting. In summary, the use of case studies in social research has been widespread and is continually evolving as scholars continue to explore and discover new ways of employing this research method.

### Choosing the case

Selecting the appropriate case for a case study is a complex and challenging task, as highlighted by Yin, a renowned expert in the field <sup>111</sup>. In this regard, Afghanistan was deemed a suitable example for various reasons, such as its unique geopolitical position and ongoing conflicts. Similarly, China's regional conflict resolution strategy was also considered a compelling case that warranted further analysis and exploration. Overall, careful consideration and evaluation of multiple factors are crucial when choosing a case for a case study to ensure its relevance and significance in the field. Denscombe, separates various case-selection indicators <sup>112</sup>. In that sense, Afghanistan is a “typical instance” or, to put it another way, a case that is comparable to other examples that could have been picked, and the lessons learned from it could potentially be used elsewhere <sup>113</sup>. After the region's collapse, its economic and governance structures were completely decimated. Since then, the majority of the nation has made an effort to imitate others. Afghanistan is a prime example of a post-conflict country that has undergone reformation following the end of the war. However, it is nearly impossible to draw general conclusions from a single case study because it is unique in its own context. However, it serves as an example of a larger class of things because it is comparable to other cases “of its type <sup>114</sup>.” As a result, one justification for picking Afghanistan was that it is a typical instance similar to others “of its type <sup>115</sup>.” Also, The choice of cases may also be influenced by practical factors, such as “matter of convenience and studying intrinsically interesting case <sup>116</sup>.” Although it shouldn't be the primary factor in choosing a case, practical considerations can be taken into

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<sup>110</sup> Denscombe.

<sup>111</sup> Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research, Design and Methods* (London: SAGE Publications, 2003).

<sup>112</sup> Denscombe, *The Good Research Guide for Small Scale Research Projects*.

<sup>113</sup> Denscombe.

<sup>114</sup> Denscombe.

<sup>115</sup> Denscombe.

<sup>116</sup> Denscombe.

account “when deciding between equally suitable alternatives <sup>117</sup>.” Afghanistan was chosen both as a representative case and based on several useful indicators. Being South Asian made this scenario the most convenient because it required the least amount of travel, spending, and effort to acquire access. But it must be emphasised that only after selecting between a number of typical conflict zones and China's conflict mediation method in those countries were practical indicators taken into account.

China's conflict mediation strategy in Afghanistan was chosen because it has become one of several mediators in putting an end to the country's protracted conflict. Understanding China's diplomatic, political, and economic interaction with actors in its southwest neighbour, as well as the role Beijing will play in crisis management and peacebuilding, is crucial at this crucial time as the U.S. withdraws and the Taliban seize power.

### Pros and Cons of the Case Study Method

When embarking on a case study research project, researchers must take into account the distinct advantages and limitations associated with this particular research method. As with any social science research approach, it is crucial to carefully evaluate both the benefits and drawbacks of the chosen methodology to ensure a successful study. To conduct a thorough and appropriate research endeavour, it is essential to meticulously assess the strengths and weaknesses of the case study methodology.

As highlighted by Denscombe, Case study methodology provides several notable advantages, particularly in the context of theory-testing research <sup>118</sup>. It is particularly suitable for small-scale studies and proves to be extremely valuable when researchers have limited control over the events they are studying. One of its significant strengths lies in its encouragement of the use of “multiple sources of data” and its flexibility in accommodating various research methodologies <sup>119</sup>. In addition, case study research provides an opportunity for a comprehensive exploration of a particular phenomenon or situation, which may be difficult to achieve through other research methods.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that although the primary goal of this particular study is not to draw broad generalisations but rather to conduct an in-depth analysis of a unique and specific situation, case study research is inherently challenged when it comes to achieving generalizability. This is because case study research often involves a small sample size and is

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<sup>117</sup> Denscombe.

<sup>118</sup> Denscombe.

<sup>119</sup> Denscombe.

focused on a specific context, making it difficult to generalise the findings to a larger population.

In conclusion, while case study research offers several advantages, it is important for researchers to carefully evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of this methodology before embarking on a research project. By doing so, researchers can ensure that they are using the most appropriate research method for their study and can maximise the potential benefits of case study research while minimising its limitations.

### Document Analysis

As stated by Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, The research approach of “document analysis” presents a unique advantage in locating and investigating information on “inaccessible persons or subjects <sup>120</sup>.” This methodology entails poring over documents that are within the “public domain,” many of which are professionally crafted and contain an abundance of knowledge and insights <sup>121</sup>. Furthermore, documents are one of the most easily accessible and cost-effective sources of information, as highlighted by Denscombe <sup>122</sup>.

The selection of document analysis as the research approach for this particular study was intentional, primarily because it enables the examination of information compiled by a group of professionals. This task would be insurmountable if using alternative research methods. Furthermore, such documents are readily accessible, which facilitates the research process. For example, several international organisations produce extensive reports and papers that are founded on comprehensive studies, which no single researcher could undertake. These documents proved to be exceedingly valuable in the context of this research, with most of them being readily available through the official websites of such organisations.

Moreover, since these documents are generated to serve national or international objectives, they inherently embody a high degree of credibility and reliability as sources of information. This aspect makes them a crucial resource for researchers. In conclusion, the use of document analysis as a research approach provides numerous advantages and proves to be an invaluable tool for investigating topics that are otherwise inaccessible.

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<sup>120</sup> Louis Cohen, Lawrence Manion, and Keith Morrison, *Research Methods in Education*, 0 ed. (Routledge, 2007), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203029053>.

<sup>121</sup> Cohen, Manion, and Morrison.

<sup>122</sup> Denscombe, *The Good Research Guide for Small Scale Research Projects*.

## Sampling

Throughout the process of selecting the appropriate documents for the research conducted, two distinct sampling techniques were carefully evaluated. One of the techniques involved a purposeful selection of documents, as described by Flick, which was meant to form a case <sup>123</sup>. The other technique involved creating a representative sample of records from a specific category, from which random selections were made. Given that the research involved documents that were not identical, the selection process was guided by specific research objectives to ensure that the most relevant materials were selected.

In accordance with the principles outlined by Flick, the study aimed to incorporate materials from a variety of organisations and experts with differing perspectives on the subject matter <sup>124</sup>. This approach was motivated by the potential benefits of selecting and comparing documents from diverse settings <sup>125</sup>. However, it is important to note that this endeavour proved more challenging than initially anticipated, given the inherent diversity of opinions and viewpoints within the selected documents. Nonetheless, the research team remained committed to the task at hand and ultimately selected the most relevant materials to ensure the validity and reliability of the study's findings.

## Validity/Reliability

In the context of the paper's document analysis, the concept of validity assumes paramount significance, as it prompts us to inquire whether the researchers genuinely perceive and report what they purport to observe <sup>126</sup>. It challenges us to scrutinise whether the chosen research methodologies effectively explored the intended subject matter or inadvertently ventured into other realms <sup>127</sup>.

Conversely, reliability entails a different dimension, emphasising the consistency and repeatability of research outcomes. When the same research, conducted using identical procedures on separate occasions, yields congruent results, it attests to the reliability of the research process <sup>128</sup>.

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<sup>123</sup> Uwe Flick, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*, 3rd ed (London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications, 2006).

<sup>124</sup> Flick.

<sup>125</sup> Flick.

<sup>126</sup> Flick.

<sup>127</sup> David Rae, 'Qualitative Methods in Management Research, 2nd Edition, Evert Gummesson, Sage, London, 2000, 240 Pp, ISBN 0-7619-2013-7, ?50.00', *Strategic Change* 10, no. 3 (May 2001): 181–82, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jsc.512>.

<sup>128</sup> Patrick McNeill and Steve Chapman, *Research Methods*, 3rd ed (London ; New York: Routledge, 2005).

It is important to note that in the field of qualitative research, there is a greater emphasis on the concept of validity as opposed to reliability. According to Flick, this prioritisation is due to the fact that research findings must accurately and authentically capture the phenomena being studied <sup>129</sup>. Therefore, researchers must strive to ensure that their data collection methods and analysis techniques are rigorous and comprehensive in order to produce trustworthy and insightful findings. Ultimately, the goal of qualitative research is to unlock a deeper understanding of the human experience and to shed light on complex issues that may be difficult to quantify or measure through traditional quantitative methods.

### Documents

In conducting a research study, it is essential to ensure that the documents used are reliable and meet specific criteria for authenticity and credibility. Scott outlines four such requirements, which must be carefully considered by the researcher.

The first criterion is authenticity, which pertains to the undisputed provenance of the document. In other words, it is crucial to establish whether the document is genuine and has not been altered or tampered with in any way. This is important because if the document's authenticity is in doubt, then the entire study's validity may be compromised <sup>130</sup>.

The second requirement is credibility, which relates to the accuracy and error-free nature of the documents. It is essential to ensure that the documents used are correct and free from any errors that could skew the results of the study <sup>131</sup>. This is especially important in cases where the documents are used as primary sources of data, as any inaccuracies could have a significant impact on the study's findings.

The third criterion is representativity, which refers to whether the document is representative of others of its kind <sup>132</sup>. In other words, it is important to ensure that the documents used are typical or typical enough to be considered representative of the broader category they belong to. This is important because if the documents used are atypical, then they may not be suitable for drawing conclusions about the broader category or population they belong to.

Finally, the fourth requirement is meaning, which pertains to the interpretation of the information contained in the documents. Different documents may have different meanings for the author, the reader, and the subject of the study <sup>133</sup>. Therefore, it is important to ensure that

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<sup>129</sup> Flick, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*.

<sup>130</sup> Flick.

<sup>131</sup> Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, *Research Methods in Education*.

<sup>132</sup> Denscombe, *The Good Research Guide for Small Scale Research Projects*.

<sup>133</sup> Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, *Research Methods in Education*; Flick, *An Introduction to*

the documents' meanings are well understood by both the author and the reader so that they can be properly interpreted and used in the study.

In this particular study, all four criteria were carefully considered and met. The authenticity of the study's materials was undisputed, as all of the documents used were legitimate. While it is impossible to be completely certain that all of the data contained in the documents is error-free, it can be assumed that they are more or less accurate, given that they were created for official purposes. All of the papers used in the study were representative of their category, i.e., official studies, reports, and articles, and there were no additional types of documents examined. Finally, while different documents may have varying significance for the writer, the reader, and the study's subject, the majority of the papers included in this study were official records, making them easily understandable to both the author and the reader.

### Limitations of the Study

It is important to note that during the research process, there were certain documents that could not be accessed due to language barriers and the limitations of translation platforms. Despite efforts to overcome this obstacle, some materials remained untranslated, which ultimately hampered the research process. It should also be mentioned that initially, interviews were considered as a means of data collection. However, due to unforeseen personal circumstances and time constraints faced by the author, this method had to be abandoned at the eleventh hour. Furthermore, Jason Li's work sheds light on a significant issue concerning potential biases in governmental publications. It is widely known that such publications often tend to favour the Chinese perspective, which is why it is imperative to acknowledge this possible source of bias. Additionally, the limited number of documents and papers analysed in this study further emphasises the importance of being mindful of potential biases. It is crucial to note that many of the authors whose work was studied in this research had direct or indirect involvement in the development of the Chinese approach to Afghanistan. This fact makes it all the more vital to consider the potential biases in the data gathered from these sources.

Lastly, it is important to mention that there were some evaluations and reports that were inaccessible for analysis. For instance, while the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China provides a link to Xi Jinping's comments on Afghanistan, the actual commentary cannot be accessed. This limitation underscores the need for further research and analysis to be conducted in this area. Overall, the constraints and challenges faced



during this research project highlight the need for ongoing attention to be paid to the potential biases and potential sources of error in data analysis. It is through such attention to detail that we can ensure the reliability and accuracy of research findings.

### Analysis of the Data

According to Jason Li, Conflict Mediation with Chinese Characteristics can be seen as an instrument of promoting norms of Chinese understanding within global governance systems. He conforms with the view that China can help bring peace to the entrapment that trapped the Soviet and U.S. militaries. He further argues that China has three main and harmonious interests in Afghanistan <sup>134</sup>.

Firstly, "On the security front, China does not wish to see a war-torn Afghanistan become a haven for terrorism. It fears hasty decisions that adds uncertainty and instability to the political process, such as a "hasty" U.S. troop withdrawal inviting a security vacuum without proper precautions taken<sup>135</sup>." He further adds that China "also fears terrorism gaining a hold in Afghanistan, for example, in the form of the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), in the interest of its own homeland security and territorial integrity <sup>136</sup>."

Secondly, on the strategic front, "Afghanistan as the graveyard of empires and as a quagmire demonstrating a failure of United States foreign policy represents a key arena within great-power competition <sup>137</sup>." As shown by Sahranavard, The United States' inconsistent strategy on many fronts in Afghanistan had weakened its global position <sup>138</sup>. The events after 2021 have clearly demonstrated that the United States failed to suppress the Taliban. Similarly, Santucci shows that the failure of the United States in Afghanistan lies in the intelligence-policy relationship, thus indicating that US policy in Afghanistan may have been a failure <sup>139</sup>.

Furthermore, Afghanistan is also strategically situated between the Belt and Road Initiative, with Chinese intentions to connect nations like Iran and India through energy corridors, railroads, and other construction initiatives. In 2016, Yao Jing, a former ambassador to Afghanistan, underlining the importance of Afghanistan in Belt and Road Initiative and development said, "Without Afghan connectivity, there is no way to connect China with the rest of the world <sup>140</sup>."

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<sup>134</sup> Li, 'Conflict Mediation with Chinese Characteristics'.

<sup>135</sup> Li, 'China's Conflict Mediation in Afghanistan. Examining How China's Interests and Relationships Fit into the Conflict'.

<sup>136</sup> Li.

<sup>137</sup> Li.

<sup>138</sup> Sahranavard and Kazemi, 'The Constant Changes in US Strategy in Afghanistan'.

<sup>139</sup> Julia Santucci, 'After Afghanistan: Intelligence Analysis and US Military Missions', *Survival* 64, no. 1 (2 January 2022): 157–78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2022.2032994>.

<sup>140</sup> Amini, 'China's Silk Road Railway Hits a Snag in Afghanistan'.

Thus, On an economic front Jason Li adds, "China sees some potential in Afghanistan as a destination of investment, although currently it may not be a major incentive for China. This economic interest directly correlates with its security and strategic interests: for safe and fruitful investment, Afghanistan must be stable (as the Mes Aynak and Amu Darya projects' failures demonstrate) and terrorist-free. The deteriorating security situation, however, has dampened Chinese hopes for profitable investment. Chinese investment in Afghanistan has remained minimal over the past decade <sup>141</sup>."

### Engaging in Dialogue

In accordance with the 'Transcend Method' articulated by Galtung and Fischer, the initial phase of 'conflict mediation' necessitates the initiation of dialogues involving all stakeholders embroiled in the conflict <sup>142</sup>. The paramount objective in effectively addressing the conflict is the comprehensive identification of the involved parties and a meticulous assessment of their respective objectives. The legitimacy of these objectives ought to be evaluated in consonance with a multitude of factors encompassing but not limited to legal imperatives, human rights considerations, and fundamental needs. The overarching aspiration in this process should invariably center on the formulation of a solution that not only accommodates the interests of all parties involved but, crucially, is deemed preferable to alternative courses of action, including the imposition of one party's agenda, the acquiescence to an ineffectual compromise, or passive inaction.

In our case, subsequent to the upheaval and governmental collapse witnessed in Afghanistan in 2021, the nation found itself mired in a maelstrom of internal armed conflicts, secessionist movements, and the ominous spectre of limited civil war. The socio-economic landscape was in a state of precipitous decline, with real wages plummeting to unprecedented depths, and key indicators pertaining to healthcare, education, and poverty registering a disconcerting deterioration, as corroborated by data from the World Bank <sup>143</sup>. During this tumultuous period, Afghanistan grappled with the stark reality of a dysfunctional governance system that had fallen into a state of systemic paralysis.

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<sup>141</sup> Li, 'China's Conflict Mediation in Afghanistan. Examining How China's Interests and Relationships Fit into the Conflict'.

<sup>142</sup> Johan Galtung and Dietrich Fischer, 'The Transcend Method in Conflict Mediation Across Levels', in *Johan Galtung*, by Johan Galtung and Dietrich Fischer, vol. 5, SpringerBriefs on Pioneers in Science and Practice (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2013), 71–86, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-32481-9\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-32481-9_6).

<sup>143</sup> World Bank, 'Afghanistan' (World Bank, 2021), <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/5d1783db09a0e09d15bbcea8ef0cec0b-0500052021/related/mpo-afg.pdf>.

Reports from the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA) underscore the severe erosion of democratic rights in Afghanistan, particularly those pertaining to women <sup>144</sup>. The prevailing conditions were characterised as a state of unmitigated chaos, as aptly encapsulated by Ghosh <sup>145</sup>.

The transformative recalibration of values, identified as a principal catalyst for the Talibani reform, further contributed to the dynamic and volatile situation. Against this backdrop, the Taliban emerged as a key player seeking to reimpose an Islamic State in accordance with their interpretation of Shariah, albeit amid internal discord regarding the precise nature of the envisioned Islamic system. In the midst of these unfolding developments, China assumed a pivotal role in the regional landscape. China, in fact, was among the earliest nations in the region to cautiously acknowledge and engage with the evolving political realities in Afghanistan <sup>146</sup>.

Furthermore, Parakkal elucidates that on July 28th, 2021, the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi convened a meeting with a high-ranking delegation representing the Taliban in Tianjin. During this diplomatic engagement, Wang Yi conferred upon the Taliban the status of a significant military and political entity while concurrently urging them to sever all affiliations with extremist groups, notably the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) <sup>147</sup>. Subsequent to the confirmation that the Chinese embassy in Kabul was operating securely under Taliban control, Wang engaged in a telephonic conversation with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken. In this exchange, he implored the international community to engage in a constructive dialogue with the Taliban, offering guidance with a constructive orientation.

Notably, Wang Yi also articulated a nuanced perspective on the transition of 'government,' advocating for global support for Afghanistan rather than external pressure. China's proactive stance was further substantiated through its hosting of Mullah Baradar, the chief of the Taliban's political office, in Tianjin in July 2021, coupled with an unequivocal statement affirming the anticipated pivotal role of the Taliban in Afghanistan's peace and reconstruction endeavours<sup>148</sup>.

Following this we see that, During his attendance at the 9th Istanbul Process conference, Wang Yi, Foreign Minister of the People's Republic of China, put forth three key recommendations that he believed will help promote peace, stability, and economic prosperity in Afghanistan.

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<sup>144</sup> Ghosh, 'One Year since the Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan'.

<sup>145</sup> Ghosh.

<sup>146</sup> Parakkal, 'China's Reluctant Taliban Embrace'.

<sup>147</sup> Parakkal.

<sup>148</sup> Reuters, 'China's Wang Says World Should Support Afghanistan, Not Pressure It'.

Firstly, he emphasised the importance of maintaining the momentum of Afghan peace talks, which should be led and owned by Afghans themselves <sup>149</sup>. Secondly, he suggested that the international community should work together to strengthen Afghanistan's reconstruction and development efforts, with the aim of transforming the country into a pivotal connectivity hub and economic bridge at the heart of Asia <sup>150</sup>. Finally, Wang Yi called for continued anti-terrorism cooperation in Afghanistan while also urging foreign troops to withdraw in a responsible and orderly manner. By following these three recommendations, Wang Yi believes that Afghanistan can overcome its challenges and move toward a brighter future <sup>151</sup>.

Similarly, The significance of collaboration between the member nations of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in preserving peace and stability in the region was underscored by Xi Jinping in a recent statement <sup>152</sup>. Being neighbouring countries to Afghanistan, all members are required to contribute during times of crisis. Xi Jinping also recommended that the SCO make use of platforms such as the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group to guarantee a smooth transition in Afghanistan <sup>153</sup>. As, this would help establish a sense of security and stability in the region, “which is of utmost importance to all nations involved <sup>154</sup>.”

Overall, Multiple instances indicate that Chinese Special envoys, the foreign minister, and the president have been actively participating in the diplomatic process concerning Afghanistan. China has maintained cordial relationships with all significant stakeholders, including the former Afghan government, the Taliban, and Pakistan, even though there have been historical tensions. Emphasising the importance of an Afghan-led peace process, China has been involved in various diplomatic efforts like shuttle diplomacy, bilateral discussions, and multilateral forums, and China has been playing the role of a facilitator, working towards bringing parties together and creating a conducive environment for negotiations rather than directly mediating between the conflicting parties.

### Making a Decision to Change

The second stage of ‘Conflict Mediation’ is about the generation of some sort of critical order <sup>155</sup>. Jones, in his work further make a claim that, " facilitative forms of third party intervention,

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<sup>149</sup> FMPRC, ‘Wang Yi attends the 9th Istanbul Process conference’.

<sup>150</sup> FMPRC.

<sup>151</sup> FMPRC.

<sup>152</sup> Xi Jinping, 2022, [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/system/index\\_17321.shtml](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/system/index_17321.shtml).

<sup>153</sup> Jinping.

<sup>154</sup> Jinping.

<sup>155</sup> Deiniol Lloyd Jones, ‘Mediation, Conflict Resolution and Critical Theory’, *Review of International*

such as the Norwegian mediation of the Oslo Accords, cannot operate without a more formal and abstract notion of the ‘right’ in politics <sup>156</sup>." In our case it further complicates the situation as the dilemma of what is left to be right, remains, especially in the aftermath of 2021 Taliban takeover.

However, we observe, Wang Yi meets with Afghan National Security Adviser Hamdullah Mohib in a virtual setting, and reiterates what the nation repeatedly said earlier that "As per the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, China adheres to the principle of non-interference in its relations with Afghanistan. Moreover, China is ready to assist with intra-Afghan talks by establishing the necessary prerequisites for hosting the negotiations in China. While acknowledging the challenging phase that peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan may face, Mohib emphasised Afghanistan's firm stance against all forms of terrorism, including ETIM, and its willingness to enhance anti-terrorism and security cooperation <sup>157</sup>." Thus trying to facilitate some sort of order, while moving along the line of Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, who in 1955, supported and advocated for the adoption of a ten-point declaration on promoting world peace and cooperation at the Afro-Asian Conference held in Bandung, Indonesia. Among the principles outlined in the final communiqué, one was the "abstention from intervention or interference in the internal affairs of another country," one of China's fundamental foreign policy principles <sup>158</sup>.

Similarly, During a Security Council meeting held via video conference in June 2021, Zhang Jun, the UN Permanent Mission Representative, shared his apprehensions regarding the impact of the US withdrawal on Afghanistan. He reiterated the importance of adhering to the principle of self-determination in the Afghan peace process and expressed his hope for constructive dialogue between the parties involved. Additionally, he emphasised the need for a ceasefire and underscored the importance of counterterrorism efforts. Zhang Jun also called for continued international and UN support for the Afghan peace process and provided an overview of China's contributions to the Afghan initiative <sup>159</sup>.

Likewise, we see Wang Yi took the initiative to host the first-ever new China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers’ meeting in March 2022 at Tunxi <sup>160</sup>. The Afghan Taliban

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*Studies* 26, no. 4 (October 2000): 647–62, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210500006471>.

<sup>156</sup> Lloyd Jones.

<sup>157</sup> Embassy of China, ‘Wang Yi Speaks with National Security Advisor to Afghan President Hamdullah Mohib on the Phone’.

<sup>158</sup> Li, ‘Conflict Mediation with Chinese Characteristics’.

<sup>159</sup> PMPRC, ‘UN Permanent Mission Representative Zhang Jun Speaks at Security Council Video Conference on Afghanistan’ (New York, 2021), <http://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/dbtxx/czdbzjds/zjdshd/>.

<sup>160</sup> PRC, ‘Wang Yi Chairs the Foreign Ministers’ Meeting among China, Afghanistan and Pakistan’,

representatives were present to represent Afghanistan in this meeting . This gathering was a foreign minister-level trilateral between China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Interestingly, this meeting comes after the Taliban takeover of Kabul, and it follows the previous four meetings that took place over a period of five years in which the new Kabul government participated in the trilateral. The statement released emphasised diverse areas such as politics (building mutual trust), development (promoting the Belt and Road Initiative and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor to Afghanistan), and security (strengthening counterterrorism and addressing the symptoms and root causes of terrorism) <sup>161</sup>. The Taliban representative mentioned that the interim government “never banned girls from school and has so far reopened 60% of schools <sup>162</sup>.” However, it is still a far cry from reality.

The Author, also went through the following additional official media documents as well with the Observations mentioned-

#### China participates in the Tashkent Conference on Afghanistan

During a conference held in Tashkent on July 26, 2022, the Special Envoy Yue delivered a comprehensive speech on China's involvement and active participation within the United Nations, Moscow Format, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's (SCO) efforts in Afghanistan. Special Envoy Yue highlighted the recent launch of the Mechanism for Coordination and Cooperation among the Neighbouring Countries of Afghanistan, emphasising the importance of regional cooperation in promoting peace, stability, and development in the war-torn country. The speech was a testament to China's commitment to promoting international collaboration and achieving lasting peace in the region <sup>163</sup>

#### Wang Yi speaks on Afghanistan at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation foreign ministers meeting

During a speech in Tashkent on July 29, 2022, Wang Yi emphasised that Afghanistan is currently at a critical juncture of transitioning from chaos to order. While the overall situation in the country is stable, it still faces numerous challenges. As such, the Shanghai Cooperation

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2022,  
[https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/gjhdq\\_665435/2675\\_665437/2676\\_663356/2678\\_663360/202203/t20220331\\_10658064.html#:~:text=On%20March%2030%2C%202022%2C%20State,Khan%20Muttaqi%20attended%20the%20meeting.](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/gjhdq_665435/2675_665437/2676_663356/2678_663360/202203/t20220331_10658064.html#:~:text=On%20March%2030%2C%202022%2C%20State,Khan%20Muttaqi%20attended%20the%20meeting.)

<sup>161</sup> PRC.

<sup>162</sup> PRC.

<sup>163</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'Work Together Towards a Peaceful and Stable Afghanistan', *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, 2022, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjbxw/202207/t20220729\\_10730107.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/202207/t20220729_10730107.html).

Organisation must continue to engage in dialogue and provide encouragement to Afghanistan in its efforts to establish a broad-based and inclusive government that exercises moderate and prudent governance. Additionally, collective efforts should be made to help those in distress by improving people's livelihoods and boosting the economy. To combat terrorism effectively, Afghanistan must clear all terrorist forces, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation must play a vital role in coordinating multilateral efforts to achieve this goal. Finally, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation must strive to gather more consensus among countries in the region to facilitate constructive cooperation and support Afghanistan's journey towards stability and prosperity <sup>164</sup>.

China attends the Extended Troika

On the 11th of November 2021, a joint statement was issued in Islamabad by China, Russia, Pakistan, the United States, Afghanistan, and the Taliban. The statement expressed appreciation for the Taliban's commitment to providing safe passage for travel and humanitarian aid, which was welcomed by all parties. Additionally, there was a call for the Taliban to ensure equal rights for women and girls, which was reiterated by the group. The statement commended the United Nations for its increased role in providing coordination for stability and emergency aid. Furthermore, the group condemned acts of terrorism and called on the Taliban to sever all ties with international terrorist organizations. During the meeting, the extended Troika also held discussions with senior representatives from the Taliban <sup>165</sup>.

China attends the First Foreign Ministers' Meeting Among the Neighbouring Countries of Afghanistan, launching a new mechanism for coordination and cooperation.

Similarly, In a virtual meeting hosted by Pakistan on September 8, 2021, a joint statement was issued by China, which reinforced the importance of traditional principles towards an all-inclusive political settlement. These principles include an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned approach, non-interference in internal affairs, national reconciliation, and emphasis on humanitarian and pandemic-related aid. The statement also highlighted the significance of addressing the issues of refugees and internally displaced persons, as well as ensuring the protection of women's rights, children's education, and the rights of ethnic groups. Moreover,

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<sup>164</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'Wang Yi Expounds on China's View on the Afghan Issue', 2022, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/wshd\\_665389/202207/t20220730\\_10730745.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/wshd_665389/202207/t20220730_10730745.html).

<sup>165</sup> Note Media, 'Joint Statement on Troika Plus Meeting, 11 November 2021, Islamabad', *US Dept of State*, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-troika-plus-meeting-11-november-2021-islamabad/>.



the statement reaffirmed cooperation frameworks like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and recognised the fundamental importance of major international projects, such as energy, transport, communications, and infrastructure, for the socio-economic development of Afghanistan. Additionally, the statement identified several terrorist organisations, including ISIS, Al-Qaeda, ETIM, TTP, BLA, and Jundullah, that should not be given any place on Afghan territory. Overall, the joint statement serves as a comprehensive and detailed plan for us to understand the political view of China and its allies for the future of Afghanistan while diplomatically highlighting the importance of traditional principles and cooperation frameworks in ensuring a stable and prosperous future for the country and its people <sup>166</sup>.

Following what we saw above, Across the board, when we analyse news, media reports and official documents similar to the one cited above, we get a full picture that, As China continues to expand its global presence, it has become increasingly challenging for China to maintain its position and defence of non-interference <sup>167</sup>. This is particularly evident in recent years, with significant overseas investments such as those under the Belt and Road Initiative creating exceptional difficulties for Chinese policymakers to uphold their policy, as we saw in the second chapter. According to the Mercator Institute for China Studies, China was engaged in nine mediation projects in 2018, up from three in 2012, the year before Xi Jinping launched the Belt Road Initiative <sup>168</sup>. This expansion has resulted in China being compelled to involve itself in conflict areas outside of its borders, which some, including some Chinese, view as contradicting its non-interference policy Initiative <sup>169</sup>. China's dual commitment to its economic and national security interests and its non-interference policy has presented a unique dilemma. As China's emerging and dominant role in development and infrastructure finance regimes grows, it is increasingly challenging to maintain a non-interference policy while mediating conflicts abroad <sup>170</sup>. The question then becomes, how does China reconcile these seemingly opposing commitments?

To address this challenge, China has adopted a softened approach that aims to minimise the perceived breadth and depth of its interference <sup>171</sup>. This approach involves two tactics: “host-

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<sup>166</sup> CNN, 'China Attends the First Foreign Ministers' Meeting Among the Neighbouring Countries of Afghanistan', *CN News*, 2021, online edition, [http://www.news.cn/english/2021-09/10/c\\_1310178599.htm](http://www.news.cn/english/2021-09/10/c_1310178599.htm).

<sup>167</sup> Elizabeth Threlkeld and Grace Easterly, 'Afghanistan-Pakistan Ties and Future Stability in Afghanistan', *USIP*, no. 175 (2021).

<sup>168</sup> Legarda, 'China as a Conflict Mediator Maintaining Stability along the Belt and Road'.

<sup>169</sup> Jakimów, 'Desecuritisation as a Soft Power Strategy'.

<sup>170</sup> Amini, 'China's Silk Road Railway Hits a Snag in Afghanistan'.

<sup>171</sup> Hirono, 'China's Conflict Mediation and the Durability of the Principle of Non-Interference'.

government consultation and limited means and goals across its mediation efforts <sup>172</sup>.”

Firstly, China has justified its interference via conflict mediation by conditioning its mediatory role on host-government consultation, which some scholars have branded as “consultative intervention <sup>173</sup>.” This approach allows China to maintain its non-interference policy by gaining the consent of or consulting with the rightful sovereign body whose internal affairs it is interfering in. When mediating internal conflicts, such as those in Myanmar, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh, China first begins its intervention through bilateral consultation with the sovereign governments, then gradually expands the dialogue to include the opposition groups or parties. By doing so, China can claim that it is not interfering since it has gained the consent of the host government. Secondly, China limits the scope of its mediation means and goals to minimise the extent of its involvement. Rather than seeking complete conflict resolution, China often prefers conflict management since the former requires less alteration of the fabric of the conflict's origins. In Afghanistan, for example, China's goals revolved around cultivating political agreement for fighting to cease, and therefore the depth of its involvement was limited. This limited role has often taken a form closer to “good offices,” whereby China mostly provides the space for discussion between combatants, rather than the sometimes interchangeable “mediation.” In its mediation between the ethnic armed organisations and Myanmar since 2013, China also played a “quiet and behind-the-scenes role” of coordinating under the guidelines of “persuading for peace and promoting dialogue <sup>174</sup>.”

Overall, In conclusion, The documents thus shows that China's adoption of a softened approach involving host-government consultation and limited means and goals across its mediation efforts enables it to reconcile its dual commitments to non-interference and its economic and national security interests. By doing so, China can continue to expand its global presence without contradicting its non-interference policy.

Furthermore, In examining the success of China's conflict mediation approach in Afghanistan, it is essential to consider the various interests that China has in the region. According to media reports and journal studies, China's interests in Afghanistan can be categorised into three main areas: security, strategic, and economic concerns. Specifically, China aims to prevent terrorism, ensure stability for Belt and Road projects, and promote investment opportunities in the region.

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<sup>172</sup> Li, ‘Conflict Mediation with Chinese Characteristics’; Li, ‘China’s Conflict Mediation in Afghanistan. Examining How China’s Interests and Relationships Fit into the Conflict’.

<sup>173</sup> Li, ‘Conflict Mediation with Chinese Characteristics’.

<sup>174</sup> Li.

To gain a better understanding of China's conflict mediation approach in Afghanistan, a qualitative case study was conducted. This study analysed China's interests, relationships with stakeholders, and key diplomatic players. The data used for this study was obtained through textual analysis of official statements, meetings, and historical engagement. The methods employed relied on interpreting China's behaviours, interests, and diplomatic moves. The analysis of documents and journals consistently portrays China as being pragmatic, engaging all parties, and emphasising Afghan-led peace. China has successfully cultivated ties with the Afghan government, Taliban, Pakistan, and other relevant parties. Additionally, China played a facilitating role in Afghan peace by appointing special envoys, but it is to be noted that it avoided direct mediation.

#### Future Takeaways

However, it is crucial to note that this study has certain limitations, such as the lack of access to closed-door discussions and overreliance on public messaging. Furthermore, this study focuses solely on China's mediation approach. However, the study was not able to find any proof or results of it being a success or not. Therefore, further research is necessary to explore the effectiveness of China's mediation approach. When it comes to China's interests in Afghanistan, the media reports and documents accessed emphasise security concerns related to terrorism and strategic goals related to the Belt and Road. However, some experts studied, argued that China's interest in Afghan mineral resources may also shape its approach to the region. Therefore, the weighting of security, strategic, and economic drivers requires further examination. Regarding China's relationships with stakeholders, its ties with Pakistan seem to provide unique leverage with the Taliban, which in the present day may even go haywire, with the Taliban also getting into a confrontation with Pakistan. Further exploration of this intermediary role and degree of influence could be beneficial. Additionally, although China has made overtures to the Taliban, past tensions between the two suggest lingering challenges in the relationship. When assessing the key players driving China's diplomacy, the analysis focused on official envoys and leaders. However, the role of China's intelligence community, military officials, and provincial leaders could also provide additional insights into how policy is shaped. Finally, it is important to note that the case study is limited in its analysis of China's approach. Further examination of how successful China's mediation has been with the time to come could reveal limitations and challenges. Additionally, comparing China's mediation approach to other major powers like the U.S., Russia, or Qatar could better situate it globally and reveal unique elements of China's strategy versus common mediator tactics.

## Conclusion

Upon conducting an in-depth analysis of China's role as a mediator in Afghanistan's conflict from 2021 until present day, it becomes apparent that their involvement is multifaceted and complex. China has transformed from adhering to a non-interference doctrine to taking an active role in mediating the conflict, utilising economic incentives, geopolitical considerations, and regional ambitions to guide its strategy. The ramifications of China's increasing involvement in the peace process in Afghanistan are far-reaching and will undoubtedly redefine the trajectory of the nation. As NATO forces withdraw from Afghanistan, the rapid resurgence of the Taliban has brought the country into the global spotlight. With the potential for the Taliban to regain full control, the international community is looking towards regional actors to manage or mediate the unfolding crisis. China has emerged as a significant player in this context. By integrating insights from scholarly articles, expert opinions, and research findings, we have gained a nuanced understanding of China's mediation role in Afghanistan's enduring conflict. It is evident that China's involvement has the potential to significantly impact Afghanistan's landscape and the broader geopolitical arena.

China's unique approach to the Afghanistan conflict sets it apart from other major powers due to its distinctive relationships with key stakeholders and its potential to act as a neutral mediator. Unlike the United States and Russia, China has taken an increasingly active role since 2015, hosting talks on its own soil to facilitate dialogue among various parties. A recent example of China's evolving involvement in Afghanistan is the highly publicised meeting on July 28 between Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi and a delegation of nine Afghan Taliban representatives.

China's engagement with Afghanistan is driven by a trio of core national interests. Primarily, China aims to prevent the emergence of a terrorism-breeding ground in Afghanistan. The threat of instability and uncertainty resulting from hasty decisions, such as the abrupt withdrawal of U.S. troops, looms large. Additionally, China is deeply concerned about the potential for terrorism, including groups like the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), to jeopardise its territorial integrity and internal security. Thus, China's involvement in Afghanistan is crucial for its own national security, as well as for the stability of the region as a whole.

Strategically, Afghanistan occupies a pivotal role in the grand theatre of global power competition. Historically, it has been a graveyard for empires, underscoring its significance in

the context of great-power rivalries. For China, Afghanistan's geographic location aligns seamlessly with its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which seeks to foster connectivity, infrastructure development, and regional integration. The realisation of China's vision to link countries from India to Iran hinges on Afghanistan's stability and cooperation. In this context, China's former ambassador to Afghanistan, Yao Jing, aptly noted that Afghan connectivity is the linchpin connecting China with the world. It is evident that China's involvement in the Afghanistan conflict is not just limited to addressing the immediate security challenges but also has broader strategic implications that are closely tied to its own national interests.

From an economic perspective, Afghanistan may represent an attractive investment destination despite the challenges inherent in such an endeavour. However, stability is a crucial prerequisite for any profitable engagement, and an environment free from the spectre of terrorism is absolutely essential. Unfortunately, the deteriorating security situation in the region has dampened China's hopes for substantial investment gains in the short term. Despite this setback, the interplay of economic, security, and strategic interests underscores the complexity of China's approach to the situation.

In order to achieve a peaceful resolution to the conflict, China has focused on building relationships with key actors in the Afghan conflict. Beijing has consistently emphasised the importance of an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process with minimal external interference. To this end, China has engaged in diplomatic efforts with various stakeholders, including Kabul, the Afghan Taliban, and Pakistan, while collaborating with the United States, Russia, and other relevant parties. In this way, China has assumed the role of a facilitator, with the aim of fostering discussions rather than imposing solutions.

China's relationship with Kabul has been characterised by stability and cooperation since the fall of the Taliban in 2001. This engagement has included military assistance, reconstruction aid, and diplomatic dialogue. Notably, China's initiatives have included shuttle diplomacy between Kabul and Islamabad in 2017, reflecting its commitment to promoting stability and cooperation. Additionally, China has been particularly concerned about the issue of terrorism linked to the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), and this concern has driven its military cooperation efforts and stabilisation initiatives.

Regarding its relationship with the Taliban, China's history with the group has been complicated by its ties to ETIM. However, China has sought pragmatic engagement with the Taliban despite past concerns about Uyghur separatist activities and violence against Chinese citizens. Significantly, China recognises the Taliban's role in curbing separatist elements that could potentially destabilise its Xinjiang region. This relationship has matured beyond its dependence on Pakistan's influence, allowing China to engage more directly with the Taliban and exert its influence on the conflict. All-around, China's mediation activities in Afghanistan are guided by a range of key players. The appointment of a Special Envoy for Afghan Affairs highlights China's commitment to this cause, and the expertise of envoys like Yue Xiaoyong underscores the pivotal role China envisions for itself in Afghanistan's future, especially in the wake of NATO's withdrawal. In conclusion, China's involvement in Afghanistan's conflict is a dynamic tapestry woven with multifaceted interests, nuanced relationships, and evolving strategies. As Afghanistan navigates its way through an uncertain future, China's unique stance and actions reflect not only its approach to regional conflicts but also its standing in the global arena of great-power competition. The implications of China's involvement in Afghanistan transcend its borders, offering a microcosmic view of how China envisions its role on the international stage.

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