



TITLE: A RESPONSIBLE GREAT POWER WITH DOMESTIC CONCERNS? A NEOCLASSICAL REALIST APPROACH TO CHINA'S MEDIATION IN THE GREATER MIDDLE EAST

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Abstract

Since 2013, China's foreign policy has been characterised by assertive trends in regional politics but also, an increasing cooperative side in its mediation activities. This trend contrasts with previous disengagement in conflict-affected states under the non-intervention principle. Why has China increased its role as conflict mediator since 2013, concretely, in the greater Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and what are the sources of this behaviour? To understand how mediation serves China's international and domestic interests, I apply a framework based in Neoclassical Realism to the cases of South Sudan and Afghanistan intra-state conflicts, both unlikely cases for China's intervention due to the domestic sphere of the conflict. This article highlights how a changing international arena and domestic factors, such as leader perceptions, domestic economic and security concerns are forcing China to change its foreign policy and mediate abroad. The analysis concludes with reflections and implications of China's emerging role in mediation in the region and the limitations of the study.

Keywords: China, mediation-as-foreign policy, Afghanistan, South Sudan, neoclassical realism

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In current international relations, there is little doubt China will become a global power and a decisive player in the future. The question is what sort of power will be. Scholars have tried to understand Beijing's foreign policy, the future role China will play in international affairs, and what kind of strategies will use to achieve its national interests. However, much of the literature has focused on its increasing confrontational behaviour towards the international liberal order or in regional affairs regarding the South China Sea. Research on the cooperative side of its foreign policy, such as the emerging trend of conflict mediation, has been left in a marginal place.

Since 2013, the same year the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was unveiled, China has experienced significant changes in its international mediation activities. In 2018, China was mediating in nine conflicts, in comparison with only three in 2012 (Legarda, 2018). Seven out of these nine conflicts were located in the Greater Middle East¹, namely Israel-Palestine, Yemen, South Sudan, Iran, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Afghanistan and Pakistan, Syria and Israel and Palestine (see Table 1). The only exceptions were North Korea and Myanmar, both located in Asia Pacific. The geographic context and condensation of this policy raise some important questions: *Why has China increased its role as conflict mediator since 2013, concretely, in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and what are the sources of this behaviour? Additionally, how is China mediating?*

China's Mediation Initiatives in 2018

Conflict	Type of conflict	Main actors	Start of China's Mediation
Israel-Palestine	Inter-state	Israel and Palestine	Since 2003
North Korea	Inter-state	North Korea, South Korea and the US	Since 2003
Yemen	Internal internationalised	Houthi and Sunnis, GCC and Iran	Since 2011
South Sudan	Intra-state	Government and Sudan's People Liberation Movement - In Opposition	Since 2013
Myanmar	Internal internationalised	Myanmar government and ethnic armed groups	Since 2013
Iranian Nuclear issue	Inter-state	Iran and the US	Since 2014
Afghanistan	Intra-state	Afghan government and the Taliban	Since 2014
Syria	Internal internationalised	US, EU, GCC, Bashar Al-Assad regime and Syrian opposition	Since 2014
Afghanistan-Pakistan	Inter-states	Afghanistan and Pakistan	Since 2017

Table 1. List of China's Mediation Initiatives in 2018. Source: Author.

Touval (2003:92) described mediation as “part of foreign and domestic policy and not a separate activity taking place ‘within the context’ of international politics”. Therefore, to explain China’s growing role in mediation, we must apply a foreign policy analysis which introduces international and domestic variables. For this purpose, this article employs a methodology based on Neoclassical Realism (NCR). NCR takes into account both variables to explain why states ended up pursuing a particular foreign policy and its outcome. NCR defends that, while the distribution of power within the international system is the key independent variable, the foreign policy outcome is conditioned by intervening variables within the state itself, which represent domestic factors (Rose 1998). In the case of China, Wang (2005) already highlighted the centrality of domestic politics in foreign policy. This research analyses the role leaders’ perceptions, the protection of economic development and security interests have on China’s foreign policy, and specifically, on its mediation initiatives in the MENA region since 2013. NCR, therefore, presents itself not only as a suitable method to explain China’s behaviour in a shifting power distribution environment which alters Beijing’s strategic choices in foreign policy, but also to expand mediation-as-foreign policy theory.

The current international liberal order is increasingly facing pressures, as some of the policy prescriptions promoted by Western powers have failed to offer satisfactory solutions in Libya or Yemen (Hirono et al., 2019:2). Hence, it is essential to understand what are the drivers and goals of the foreign policy of a global power-to-be. As China's security interests expand, Beijing is progressively engaging in peacebuilding and peacekeeping, countering Western initiatives in developing countries. Concretely, an emerging trend of China engagement in other countries' internal affairs shows some tensions with its non-interference principle in conflict-affected states, like Mali or South Sudan. Understanding how China addresses conflict management allows us to have insights concerning the potential challenges or cooperation opportunities in conflict-affected countries which pose international security challenges, such as Afghanistan or Syria.

Mediation-as-foreign policy: Literature Review

Mediation refers to "a form of third-party intervention in conflict for the purpose of abating or resolving conflict through negotiation" (Zartman & Touval, 1985:31). While most analyses focuses on mediation as means to end armed conflicts or in the types of mediation and their impact on the outcome, adopting a prescriptive approach, the study of mediation has neglected its function as a foreign policy tool. Touval (2003) claimed mediation-as-foreign policy differs from mediation theory by focusing on a state pursuing a broadly conceived foreign policy in which the effective reduction of the conflict plays only a part, subordinated to the mediating state's primary domestic and foreign policy concerns.

Motivations of states to become mediators are defined through a rational-choice approach based on the strategic calculation of benefits when deciding to become a mediator. Potential goals include establishing a reputation as a peacemaker, fulfil moral imperatives, enhance prestige in the international arena, the expansion of the mediator's geopolitical influence and the protection of its interests if the conflict persists (Touval, 2003; Melin, 2013). As mediators must dedicate political and material resources while facing potential risks, states find their reasons in domestic and international interests, such as obtaining resources, influence or power (Melin, 2013:83).

China's first experience in mediation was in 2003, with the establishment of the six-party talks with North Korea. Until then, China had refrained from participating in international mediation initiatives as the non-interference principle, introduced by Zhou Enlai in 1953, rigidly guided its foreign policy. Deng Xiaoping's "keeping a low profile" mantra further constrained its foreign policy, avoiding costly international commitments while focusing exclusively on national

development. Beijing considered neutrality more beneficial for its national interests, avoiding any provocation to other powers while protecting its sovereignty and territorial integrity (Chaziza, 2018).

When analysing China's mediation efforts, most literature has focused on China's strategies (Qian, 2010). In the MENA region, economic interests are considered as the only factor driving China's engagement. Scobell (2018:22) highlighted China's extra-economic activities in the Middle East while avoiding real political participation in conflicts. Evron (2015), analysing the Syrian and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, concluded Beijing's proposals were mainly a tool to promote its political role while limiting its responsibilities in regional politics. Analysts claimed China's approach to conflict was modest due to non-interference, prompting new research on the type of mediation and its relation with this principle (Alden & Large, 2015; Sørensen, 2019).

Sun and Zoubir (2017) were the pioneers of a comprehensive analysis of China's role in conflict resolution in the region, focusing on the use of economic and diplomatic instruments. Their research highlighted 'quasi-mediation' diplomacy, a pragmatic approach where China reacts ad-hoc to different conflicts, ranging from multi-dimensional engagement to indirect participation. The authors pointed out four factors which influenced Chinese policymakers' perceptions to decide its engagement: relevance to China's vital commercial interests, the scope of China's influence in the targeted country, the existence of great power consensus in the desired solution and the intractability of the conflict. Nonetheless, their analysis focused only on the most relevant variable for each conflict instead of a detailed operationalisation of the four, which failed to conduct an in-depth analysis of the cases, leading to contradictions between the variables. Burton (2019) challenged this approach through close observation of the Syrian, Libyan and Yemeni cases, as some of the indicators were relevant, such as economic interests; but instead, China's intervention was limited.

In sum, the literature regarding China's mediation is concerned about strategies, since the country has defended the non-interference in other countries' domestic affairs, often relying on descriptive and normative approaches. However, some have pointed to Beijing's willingness to increase its influence in regional and domestic affairs, namely economic concerns, as causes of the engagement, most of the literature fails to approach mediation as a foreign policy tool. As Touval (2003:91) suggests: "after stating mediation is initiated for political purposes, mediation theory takes over. Analyses do not follow up on the premise that political purposes generate mediation, instead, they proceed to discuss and evaluate it in terms of a prescriptive theory of mediation".

Hence, using a NCR framework, this article will contribute to the literature gap in China's mediation-as-foreign policy.

Neoclassical Realism (NCR)

NCR is an analytical theory which allows the study of foreign policy, explaining how states select their policy responses in regards to systemic stimuli. Hence, it allows to thoughtfully analyse and explain China's involvement in peace mediation activities as a tool of foreign policy to fulfil both, international and domestic objectives.

NCR starts with the acceptance of the Waltzian conception of structure and systemic incentives. Like other realist theories, NCR is state-centric, arguing competition for power and influence between states in an anarchic international system is the key defining variable of international politics (Lobell et al. 2009). However, neoclassical realists are sceptical about the international structure's exclusive explanatory power of foreign policy behaviour (Foulon 2015:637). Coined by Gideon Rose in 1998, NCR

incorporates both external and internal variables, updating and systematizing certain insights drawn from classical realist through. Its adherents argue that the scope and ambition of a country's foreign policy are driven first and foremost by its place in the international system and its relative material power capabilities. This is why they are realists. They argue further, however, that the impact of such power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex because systemic pressures must be translated through intervening variables at the unit level. This is why they are neoclassical (Rose, 1998:152)

NCR relies on a multi-level analysis to scrutinize both, the international system and the state unit by opening the "black-box", through the intervening variables, which hosts fundamental causal factors that are not products of the international structure and thus, addresses some limitations of a systemic approach. Ripsman et al. (2016) identify four categories of intervening variables, namely leader images, strategic culture, state-society relations and domestic institutions. These clusters are selected as they affect the three domestic processes which influence foreign policy responses, which are perception, decision making and policy implementation. Indeed, what makes NCR unique is the argument that both, systemic and domestic factors, are vital to understand a state's foreign policy choice (Rose, 1998:147).

A state's international behaviour - the dependent variable - is shaped by interactions between the international level - independent variable - and domestic level factors - intervening variables. As

this article aims to explain a specific foreign policy behaviour (mediation), the dependent variable is the increasing role in conflict mediation of China in the MENA region since 2013.

On the other hand, the independent variable of NCR considers the international system as the primary causal force in determining changes in a state's international behaviour. Hence, a state's place in the international system restrains and influences the potential policy choices of its units as states adapt to the threats and opportunities due to changes in their relative power position (Ripsman et al. 2016:2; Rose, 1998:154). One of the central indicators when assessing change in the international system is polarity and thus, different polarities lead to different dynamics and behaviours within the international system. China's rise has mainly taken place in a unipolar system dominated by the United States (US) after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Sørensen, 2013:369). Yet, the increasing economic and military relative power of China and the potential reemergence of Russia has prompted a debate about the end of unipolarity and the establishment of "a new era of great-power competition" (Allison, 2020). In the last decade, China overtook Japan's GDP in 2010 and by 2014, it surpassed the US' GDP in terms of power purchasing parity. Militarily, China's defence budget has increased to become the world's second-largest spender, reaching one-third of the US' (WB, 2019). Moreover, China is also surging in the technological domain, with nine of the world's 20 top tech companies, and is increasing its competitiveness in Artificial Intelligence, which can increase its military power with a smaller expenditure (Schoff & Ito, 2019).

To explain China's increasing role in the Greater Middle East, the interstate system is not enough to explain this phenomenon and thus, a closer look at regional dynamics is necessary. The MENA subsystem is defined as "permeable", due to other powers meddling in domestic and regional affairs. Concretely, the US was considered as a hegemon in the region at the end of the Cold War, ushering the so-called "Pax Americana" (Del Sarto et al. 2019:3). However, the aftermath of the Arab uprisings affected the tissue of relations and power distribution within the region. A "new Arab cold war" emerged, with intensifying rivalries between Saudi Arabia and Iran, establishing Gulf as the geopolitical centre of the region; while new regional players, like Turkey, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates expanded their material and ideational power in the region. In parallel, Washington has contradictorily been signalling its retreat from the region, with the withdrawal of Afghanistan and Iraq, Barack Obama administration's overcautious approach in Syria and Pivot to Asia, which led to a decline of its power in the region. The region emerged fragmented and multipolar, with several regional and global powers, such as Russia in Syria, increasing its influence and standing in MENA (Del Sarto et al. 2019:35). China is also one of the contenders,

thanks to its economic influence and unique position of friends to all Middle Eastern countries (Chaziza, 2018). Thus, despite the continuous presence of the US military in the region, the unipolar moment is long gone: the US is now only one among many players as traditional US allies diversified and strengthened their ties with Moscow and Beijing, gaining concessions and leverage (Del Sartro et al. 2019:43). Therefore, the impact of the international structure on China's behaviour is two-fold: China's increasing power accelerates the demise of unipolarity while the US' weakening position in the MENA region offers new systemic opportunities and constraints for Beijing.

Additionally, NCR brings the statesman back in by focusing on how leaders interpret international systemic opportunities and constrains through the relative power distribution and designing the role of their nation, which shapes their foreign policy (Rose, 1998). Interestingly, when Xi Jinping's leadership started in 2012, China began to strategically frame its international behaviour as a "responsible great power" (Mao, 2017). This new discourse arose from Beijing's perception of its growing power and relative capabilities, which allowed the country to meet growing international expectations and demands on China to play a more active role in managing and solving international crisis and conflicts. With the US' dubious willingness to continue providing international public goods and China's expanded interests and own stakes in how international conflicts are managed and solved, Chinese elites started to observe the limitations of "keeping a low profile" as the country could no longer free-ride. In October 2013, Xi Jinping urged Chinese diplomats to adopt the principle of "strive for achievement", considered as a proactive approach to foreign policy in line with improved Chinese power projection capabilities (Sørensen, 2019).

The change in the new leadership's perceptions of China's role in the international system due to its power capabilities may have influenced a more active role in conflict mediation. Through the use of the "responsible great power" framing to mediate in another country's affairs, China can expand its influence and interests benignly, fulfilling international and domestic expectations and dismiss criticism, in line with Touval's (2003) findings. Therefore, to measure the impact of leader perceptions in China's foreign policy, a discourse analysis will identify how elites justify their engagement in conflict mediation as a "responsible power" duty or obligation through language in official discourses, bridging the country's increasing power in the international system and the need to portray a responsible image to tackle down global distrust which can expand the status and prestige of the country (Lei 2011; Larsen 2018:65).

However, the change in polarity has also affected China's state-societal relations. To ensure domestic support and stability, Chinese leaders are aware of the liability to continuously deliver on economic growth and growing prosperity for the Chinese population. Unipolarity encouraged China to focus its attention and resources to domestic affairs, especially its economic development to increase its capabilities, while benefitting from the US' stabilizing role and avoiding confrontation with the hegemon. Through strong economic growth, Chinese society experienced improving life conditions, consequently impacting the relationship with the regime and their expectations. Hence, China's expanding role and interests globally are driven by its growing need for energy imports and raw materials to maintain domestic economic growth, which continues to be the priority for Chinese leaders, provided that the common good to citizens is the rightful source of political domestic authority (Sørensen, 2013:370). Thus, Beijing is increasingly experimenting in foreign policy and the limits of no-interference to protect Chinese investments and activities abroad to safeguard and maintain strong economic growth in conflict-affected countries, urged by Chinese citizens (Lantaigne, 2019). As Sun & Zoubir (2017) and Scobell (2018) highlighted, the *protection of economic growth* due to China's dependence in overseas and natural resources also influences China's role when conflict threatens its economic assets in another country. To test this variable, the economic significance of that country for China and its assets will be measured through trade statistics, significant projects and investments of Chinese companies in the country, oil share imports and participation in the BRI.

Finally, the third intervening variable addresses *security matters*. Byman (2015) argues that spillovers have led to other states to mediate or intervene in a conflict in other countries. Many civil conflicts spill over into neighbouring countries, with the Middle East being prone to this problem. These dynamics, which are accompanied by the risk of increasing violence, include massive refugee flows, terrorism and internal conflict within other states, creating an unstable region, potentially hindering the success of the BRI. In this respect, China's concerns are two-fold: national security and the security of its citizens abroad. Focusing on its national security, China is vulnerable to terrorism and extremism which may influence separatist movements in the Muslim-majority region of Xinjiang. China's territorial integrity is a non-negotiable element for the Chinese government, further enforced by nationalism (Wang, 2005). Furthermore, Chinese citizens abroad have been directly threatened by conflict, as in Libya or Yemen (Lantaigne, 2019). The Libyan experience, which forced the evacuation of 36,000 Chinese citizens in 2012, inspired national pride but also raised domestic expectations that China would protect its citizens elsewhere, fueling debate on the need to engage actively in global security affairs to prevent economic and human losses. In 2013, the protection of Chinese citizens and overseas interests as "China's

international obligations” was enshrined in its Defence White Paper (State Council, 2013). These two spheres of national security are of important relevance for Chinese citizens, who are concerned about the safety of overseas nationals but also, from potential terrorist attacks within the territory (Zhao, 2016).

To test the variable of security matters, three factors will be measured: first, the existing cases of kidnapping or assassination of Chinese nationals in the country, as inaction could lead to internal criticism as in the case of Libya or the PKO in Mali (Lanteigne, 2019); second, the potential links between terrorist groups and the separatists Uyghurs forces; and third, the evidence of spillovers of the conflict in other countries central to Chinese interests and the BRI.

To test the accuracy of the model and the identified variables, a comparative two case study will be employed, with a qualitative analysis of China’s mediation to explain the country’s increase in mediation in the MENA region. While several studies have already focused in the Israeli-Palestinian, Syrian and Iranian cases (Burton, 2019; Evron, 2016); the conflicts in South Sudan and Afghanistan, both countries lying at the limits of the region, have been overlooked despite being interesting cases. First, both cases are intrastate conflicts, which implies that mediation entails a certain engagement in another country’s domestic affairs, due to the role of non-state actors. China’s non-intervention principle should have made mediation and engagement in both cases unlikely, but contrarily, it shows a departure in its foreign policy (Parello-Duscher & Duchâtel, 2015:9). Second, both initiatives are influenced by different dynamics because of its geography and strategic significance, being the door of two continents but also affected by the tensions of the MENA region. Thirdly, China has been mediating in South Sudan since 2013 and in Afghanistan since 2014, and peace talks seem to have advanced ever since. South Sudan has been a marginalised conflict which emerged in 2013 and China intervened one week after the start, while Afghanistan has received high international attention since 2001, but China only decided to engage in late 2014. Additionally, in 2017, Beijing also started to mediate between Afghanistan and Pakistan, an interstate conflict considered key to achieving intra-Afghan peace. Thus, the long implication and improvement allow a clearer analysis of reasons, strategies and achievements of Chinese mediation, contrarily to the Syrian, Yemeni or Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which are still latent.

China’s mediation patterns: the case of South Sudan

In December 2013, South Sudan's civil war broke out in the capital, Juba, and swiftly developed into an inter-ethnic conflict which extended to the whole country. The outbreak is attributed to a power struggle within South Sudan's ruling party, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement, between Salva Kiir, President of South Sudan, and Riek Machar, former Vice-President after the country became independent in 2011; aggravated by the oil-based political economy of the country (Brosig, 2019:162). In attempts to end the civil war, multiple peace agreements were signed thanks to mediation efforts by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). The last one from September 2018, has established a transitional government with Machar as Vice-President once again in February 2020 (NYT, 2020). Nonetheless, clashes between rebel groups which refused to sign the peace agreement continue to cause instability.

The outbreak in 2013 left China with only two options: withdrawing and abandoning its economic assets – as Beijing did previously in Libya – or step in and participate in peace mediation. Surprisingly, as China opted for an active role and security engagement, South Sudan was described by scholars and diplomats as a foreign policy experiment for China, signalling an adjustment of its behaviour and its longstanding principle of non-interference (Large, 2018).

China first engaged with Juba through bilateral high-level exchanges, asking for restraint and negotiations between both parties. As oil imports had strategic importance for the South Sudanese government revenue, rebels forced to shut down northern oil fields, mostly owned by China National Petroleum Company (CNPC), causing economic losses of nearly US\$2 million a day in 2016 (ICG, 2017; Hodzi, 2019:185). Machar loyalists' threat to China's interests forced Beijing to arrange multiple meetings with the rebel forces to protect its assets, challenging its non-interference principle and showing a remarkable departure from negotiating only with legitimate state actors (Parello-Plesner & Duchâtel, 2015).

Additionally, China established itself as a table-setter in January 2014 after Juba's consent, a key element for China to act in another country (Shestenina, 2016). Foreign Minister Wang Yi held talks in Addis Ababa with the two warring parties, urging them to find a "reasonable solution" while obtaining the guarantee from the government and the rebels to protect its assets and nationals (Wang, 2014a). Nonetheless, to obtain this commitment, China hedged between both parties providing them with financial and other support, raising international criticism by Western powers (ICG, 2017:12). Criticism was further aggravated when, in 2014, an arms contract signed between the China North Industries Corporation (NORINCO) and the South Sudanese government before the war was made public. The embarrassment led China to halt the remainder of the contract

considering it as “inappropriate” (Gridneff, 2014). That was the first indicator that China was willing to play a peacemaker role in detriment of short-term economic gains and improve its image as a responsible stakeholder during negotiations.

In parallel, China sent Zhong Jianhua, China’s Special Envoy for African Affairs, to mediate within South Sudan and neighbouring countries since the beginning of the conflict, fearing a regional spillover due to the humanitarian and refugees’ crisis that emanated from it, with more than 2.2 million refugees fleeing the country (UNHRC, 2020; Hodzi, 2019:188). The regional dimension of its diplomatic engagement and fears of negative spillovers harming the region stability and China’s economic prospects in the Horn of Africa within the BRI project and the region stability, support the relevance of security matters. Additionally, China actively engaged and supported regional mediation initiatives by the IGAD and the African Union, supporting “African solutions” with funds and personnel. Within the IGAD-PLUS framework, which included the US-UK-Norway Troika, Chinese diplomats lobbied closed-doors consultations with Western powers, showing China’s cooperative engagement with other great powers (SCMP, 2014).

However, China was set for a modest role, excepting Wang Yi’s initiative in January 2015 to convene a “Special Consultation in Support of the IGAD-led South Sudan Peace Talks”. The outcome was a five-point plan, including Beijing’s demand to protect all personal and assets of international entities, also enshrined in UN 2206 resolution. Yet, after another failed ceasefire the same year, the Security Council (UNSC) unanimously adopted sanctions against both parties despite China’s concerns of the US’ lobbied resolution as a means of a powerful actor against a sovereign state (Brosig, 2019:171). Its reluctance and doubts about effectiveness led China to abstain in latter resolutions to renew sanctions.

Within the UN framework, China also supported the extension of the existing UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). Before the conflict, Chinese non-combat personnel were already part of UNMISS, but in 2015, the first infantry battalion of Chinese troops was deployed under Chapter VII to fulfil the UNSC responsibility to maintain peace, another symbol of the regime’s experiment but also of fulfilling its international duty following the new leaders’ perceptions. Yet, the deployment of the first battalion in PKO advancing a complex security engagement did also experience its setbacks. In 2016, Chinese peacekeepers got caught in a crossfire in Juba and two eventually died, which caused national outrage against the government² (Kuo & Huang, 2016).

When observing the motives behind China's involvement in South Sudan, most analyses start and end with oil. South Sudan is the third-largest reserves of crude oil and gas in Africa, but its oil imports represent a mere 2% of China's oil consumption. However, its oil industry retains symbolic corporative importance as the first successful overseas project for CNPC in the 1990s, where it invested more than US\$7 billion in the Sudanese oil fields before independence (EIA, 2014). China is also the principal investor of the country, but instability put multiple projects and loans on hold (ICG, 2017:20). Comparatively, while China-South Sudan economic relations may not be significant as bilateral trade reached only US\$1.12 billion in 2013; China constantly urged the protection of "personal and property safety of Chinese people and initiatives" (MOC, 2019; Yi, 2013) in official statements since the beginning of the conflict and in most of the official statements. The violent conflict and attacks towards oil facilities forced the evacuation of more than 500 CNPC employees and Chinese citizens that had businesses in the country, reminiscing the Libyan evacuation (ICG, 2017:9). The imminent and clear threat to both, investments and citizens in the country, forced Beijing to take part in the conflict to obtain the commitment of the parts to protect both assets, highlighting the relevance of economic and security concerns. Moreover, the increasing reference of citizens' protection as a responsibility, fulfilling domestic obligations, frames China as a responsible power.

However, Wang Yi denied critics of China's being a selfish mediator, refuting the narrow oil argument, by stating its mediation is "completely the responsibility and duty of a responsible power, and not because of China's interests" (China Daily, 2015). Additionally, Beijing has also delivered modest donations of humanitarian assistance without any conditionality, in contrast with Western members. Although comparatively small, China has provided US\$49 millions of humanitarian assistance and US\$10 million to the World Food Programme and has built multiple infrastructure projects (Large, 2018). China's "sense of responsibility" to preserve South Sudan's economy was also signalled by the special envoy Zhong Jianhua (cited in ICG, 2017:11). As oil accounts for 98% of the South Sudanese government revenue, with CNPC being the majoritarian stakeholder, China's withdrawal would prompt a collapse of the country's economy if oil production halted (Large, 2018). The protection of oil facilities was, therefore, also supported by the international community as few could envision the rebuilding of the country without oil revenues. These two statements, and the NORINCO moratorium, show how China's elites saw its mediation as a responsibility to contribute to global security public goods through the pacification of the conflict and the development and reconstruction of the youngest nation in Africa.

In sum, China's peace mediation had a combination of political and security concerns based on its economic interests, but also reflected wider considerations. China was not only acting as a "responsible world power", but also a "practical great power", while the US grew disaffected of the failed peace process despite all the aid directed (Tiezzi, 2015). Chinese economic clout became a type of political influence for both parties, allowing Beijing to demand peace before deepening economic and developmental relations, especially since South Sudan's addition to the BRI in 2018 has established the country as a door to East and North Africa. Moreover, China's ambivalence to US-lobbied sanctions and final opposition fulfilled IGAD members' expectations for China, who has also framed itself as a developing country with a similar history of Western oppression and colonialism (Brosig, 2018). China achieved a better image within the IGAD members due to its support for sovereignty and the contestation of the usefulness of sanctions, which confers a geopolitical dimension to the conflict as China presented itself as an alternative of Western dominance (Lei, 2011:352). As a first salient case, it allowed Beijing to obtain experience to further contribute to mediation in other countries. Yet, the intractability of the conflict, mainly due to political dynamics in South Sudan, has forced China to adapt its active role towards a wait-and-see approach, while also experiencing for the first time the challenges of achieving peace (Large, 2018:175).

China's mediation patterns: the case of Afghanistan

After the 9/11 attacks, the US-led bombing of Afghanistan ended with the rule of the Taliban in the country. Hamid Karzai became then the head of an interim government while the Taliban forces escaped through the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region and fought against the NATO-led security mission in Afghanistan, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). In 2014, with the conflict still ongoing, President Obama announced ISAF's withdrawal, even if nearly 14,000 American troops are still deployed there. The same year, President Karzai, after 13 years in office, stepped down and a new president, Ashraf Ghani, was elected (Hirono, 2019:8). After a decade being the epicentre of America's war against terrorism, the country stills unstable, facing a weakened economy and a destitute population. Moreover, not only these conditions affected Afghanistan peace and stability but also to bordering regions and countries (Zhao, 2016:899).

On February 2020, the US and the Taliban signed a peace deal which will lead to the withdrawal of US troops out of Afghanistan, a key demand from the group to engage in peace talks (Al Jazeera, 2020). However, intra-Afghan peace has not yet been achieved and a relaunch of the negotiations between the government and the Taliban has yet to happen.

Between 2001 and 2014, China was considered a free-rider of the American security umbrella due to its low profile during the Afghan war (Kaplan, 2009). However, after the ISAF's withdrawal, China became an active actor aiming to the national reconciliation between the Afghan government and the Taliban, a surprising reaction due to Beijing's reluctance "to take high-profile foreign policy risks" (Tiezzi, 2015).

The first effort of China was the celebration of the Istanbul Process in Beijing in November 2014, to promote an "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned reconciliation", emphasizing the country's independence and sovereignty (Wang, 2014d). Since President Ghani asked for China to mediate, Beijing stated the urgency for regional consensus and cooperation to advance Afghanistan's security and economic reconstruction during the country's political and security transition for the region's stability (Wang, 2014b). Besides, China has actively engaged in regional and international processes, like the Kabul Process or the Afghanistan group in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. China has also conducted bilateral and trilateral talks with the most prominent actors, indispensable for the peace process, such as India, Pakistan, Russia, Iran, Tajikistan and the US, together with Afghanistan (Zhao, 2016:902). Most notably, China joined the Quadrilateral Coordination Group in 2016, which included the US, Afghanistan and Pakistan and thus, institutionalised China-US cooperation in this issue. The multilateral forum aimed to create a roadmap of national reconciliation, inviting the Taliban to join the peace talks, but with modest results (Hirono, 2019).

China assumed the Afghan-agency in decisions regarding national reconciliation, thus settling for a facilitative and table-setting approach. China's involvement was accompanied by increasing frequent high-level bilateral exchanges aiming towards strategic cooperation in defence, security and economy to enhance national reconstruction, political transition and peace talks. In 2014, China designed a special envoy for Afghan affairs, being the first time Beijing named an envoy for one specific country to help mediation (Chaziza, 2018:148). During the process, China defined itself a "responsible supporter, contributor and constructor of the Afghan Issue" (Wang, 2014c) and highlights its efforts in Afghanistan as an example of its responsibility to provide the international community with public goods (State Council, 2019). These statements show how Chinese leaders framed the country's role in Afghanistan as fulfilling its responsibilities; and some argue that, without China's involvement, the peace process won't have had advanced as much (SCMP, 2020).

China supports “political reconciliation among all factions”, including the Taliban (Wang, 2014b), concerned about an increase in terrorist activities or insurgency in the Xinjiang region if Beijing does not cooperate with both factions. China’s advantage in the Afghan peace talks is its positive perception and good relations with all major players. As China didn’t participate in the Afghan war, it has not aroused the dislike of any political faction, as opposed to the US, whom the Taliban are suspicious of. Also, China and Pakistan maintain an “all-weather strategic partnership”, which means China can use its clout over Pakistan to bring the Taliban in the negotiation table (Zhao, 2016:901). This privileged position allows China to facilitate talks between both warring parties.

China has met multiple times with the Taliban, as Beijing and considers the group a core political actor in the country and for its future (Hirono, 2019:12). A Taliban delegation first visited China in November 2014 and both parties have increased their contact ever since, with China conducting shuttle-diplomacy when tensions threatened the peace talks between parties, such as in September 2019 after President Trump broke negotiations (Al Jazeera, 2019). This deeper engagement with all the parties, allowed China to broke secret encounters between the Taliban and Afghan officials in Urumqi in May 2015. However, the China-brokered peace talks between the two parties in Murree, Pakistan, in July 2015 and January 2016, were a remarkable success of Beijing’s involvement (Hirono, 2019:11).

Since 2017, China has also mediated between Afghanistan and Pakistan after President Ghani blamed Pakistan for sheltering terrorists and urged deeper counter-terrorism cooperation. After going between the parties, Wang Yi established a trilateral meeting of foreign ministers in December 2017, which paved the way to further cooperation. Additionally, they also discussed the inclusion of Afghanistan within the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which materialised in 2018. Through the launching of the BRI, Beijing has initiated its march-westwards with the inclusion of Afghanistan in 2018 as it represents “the lock or the door” to reach Central Asia and the Middle East (Zhao, 2016:899). If the economic incentives to work together are successful, China will be able to connect to South, Central and West Asia.

Many analysts argued China actions were directed to fill a “vacuum” created by the US’ withdrawal, but China’s engagement is not simply the product of systemic factors (Clarke, 2016:5). Firstly, China has denied this argument (Xinhua, 2019), and has failed to militarily engage further than training Afghan security forces and joint counterterrorism operations (Chaziza, 2018:150). China’s engagement and disengagement with Afghanistan shows a constant preoccupation with negative spillovers: China is concerned of any potential spillover into Central Asia and Xinjiang

Uyghur Autonomous Region of terrorism, extremism and non-traditional security threats, like weapons or drug trafficking (Zhao, 2016:890). China is worried that religious militancy in Afghanistan may fuel Islamist insurgency in the Xinjiang border with Afghanistan, which is vulnerable to terrorist spillover due to claimed links with the East Turkestan Islamic Movement. Beijing is especially concerned with this threat to national unity and domestic stability, as it has blamed the increase in terrorist attacks since the BRI presentation to the Uyghur terrorist group (Chaziza, 2018; Clarke 2016). This security dimension of the conflict and its link to China's national stability and security gives shows the relevance of the variable of security, but it is not exclusive, as the threat has been aconstant since the 1990s.

China's participation is also related to the development of Afghanistan as means to achieve peace, through investments, infrastructure development and trade. While in 2014, China pledged US\$327 million for the next three years, far from previous commitments done between 2001 and 2013, it has refrained from using economic incentives to both warring parties but the Afghan government and the Taliban are aware of China's economic potential as China has increased its investment in Pakistan, with the CPEC worth US\$62 billion and in Central Asia, where countries have received a US\$31 billion commitment (Clarke, 2016:572).

While Chinese-Afghan trade is increasing, reaching US\$544 million in 2017, Afghanistan is not a significant trading partner for China (MFA, 2014). However, Afghanistan has the world's largest unexplored reserves of copper, coal, iron, gas, among others; with a value of US\$1 trillion. China started to invest in these resources in 2007, with the three-billion project of a copper mine in Mes Aynak, Afghanistan's largest deposit. In 2011, the CNPC also invested US\$400 million to develop oil facilities in Amu Darya, but both projects have stalled and been delayed due to multiple attacks, and a dozen kidnappings and killings of Chinese workers by the Taliban (Zhao 2016:893). As in South Sudan, while economic relations are not remarkably significant, China has potential projects that could supply Beijing with natural resources for its economic development if the country stabilised, but that could be under threat with a resurgence of the Taliban, supporting the relevance of economic concerns.

In sum, China has evolved from calculated indifference to active engagement. Its security concerns have increased after the presentation of the BRI and the ISAF withdrawal in 2014, while its economic prospects are on pause in the quest of Afghanistan's stability to resume. However, as in South Sudan, its engagement exemplifies China's aspiration to establish itself as a powerful actor with the potential to resolve one of the largest-standing conflicts in the region. In 2019, Wang Yi

said that “Afghanistan has never been so close to peace as today” (Wang, 2019). In the next 18 months, US troops may abandon the Afghan territory, while intra-Afghan problems haven’t been solved, as the latest election shows (SCMP 2020). It is yet to see if Beijing will be there and “bear the cost of being a major power”, as some argued in 2014 (Global Times, 2014).

Emerging patterns? The relevance of security and leader perceptions in China’s foreign policy

Until recently, Chinese elites perceived China’s capability to project power insufficient, which forced its withdrawal rather than intervention in foreign countries (ICG, 2017:4). South Sudan illustrates the increasing power projection capabilities of China through the evacuation of nationals in 2014 and 2016 and the deployment of the first battalion in PKO, which was accompanied with increasing support to PKO under Xi Jinping. Moreover, both cases show how China’s economic power has become more fungible to be used as potential incentives to bring parties together and engage in mediation. This type of influence, accompanied by more resources towards diplomatic measures show the relevance of leader perceptions, as Chinese elites frame their engagement as the behaviour that a responsible great power would have in providing global peace and security goods.

The second intervening variable, the protection of economic growth, also receives support: in South Sudan, China rapidly intervened when oil installations felt under rebels’ control. Yet, in Afghanistan, China only intervened after the ISAF withdrew, under a self-help rationale: China had to promote an Afghan-peace to ensure that its interests and future projects won’t be threatened, especially the BRI, with a potential regional spillover. However, this argument also shows some discrepancies: China’s economic interests in South Sudan were also threatened in 2012 when tensions between Sudan and South Sudan arose and the oil production halted; as well as in Afghanistan, the projects were paused long before the US withdrawal. In both cases, China kept a low profile and did not intervene, which seems to signal that protection of economic assets is a necessary condition to fulfil domestic expectations but cannot solely explain China’s role, contrarily to Scobell (2018) argument. A rival explanation could also be a policy adjustment after the lessons learned from Libya. As a result of the lack of mediation and the intervention by Western powers, China saw nearly US\$20 billions of economic assets destroyed in Libya (Shesterinina, 2016:820). With this case in mind, Chinese diplomats are cautious of their inaction and have increased the protection of their economic assets overseas.

Finally, both conflicts had significant spillovers, like terrorism and humanitarian crisis, and Chinese citizens have been attacked. While in Afghanistan the terrorist threat has been a constant since the 1990s, both countries have increasingly strategic importance to Beijing: both countries act as a hub for two continents where Beijing needs stability for the sake of the BRI success. Yet, a significant difference arises between both cases: China's security engagement in South Sudan in contrast with the reluctance to occupy the former US role in Afghanistan. While Afghanistan is more linked to national security and is under domestic scrutiny, North Africa is allowing Beijing to test new roles in global governance (Large, 2018).

In sum, while the three variables are visible in both cases, a linkage between them can be outlined. Before 2012, when China saw its economic interests threatened in risky environments and security threats were also constant, Beijing response was to withdraw or to keep a low profile. Now, since Libya, the protection of Chinese assets and nationals has become a new foreign policy priority, forcing a revision and flexibility in its principles of sovereignty and non-intervention (Hirono et al., 2018). The protection of these two assets is only possible in a changing international context where China has the capabilities and its costs of intervention are lower. These two factors allow China to have a more visible role and engage in mediation, framing itself as a responsible great power to enhance its domestic legitimacy with the protection of its interests, responds to Western powers expectations of international responsibilities and increasing its prestige and influence in developing countries.

China's increasing mediator role in foreign policy in a post-unipolar environment

Since the 1990s, the Middle East emerged as a vital region for Beijing's interests as China became a net importer of oil which depended on the political and military regional stability. The MENA region also emerged as an significant source and destination of trade and investment, most notably in energy and infrastructure. Besides, China expanded its political connections with the Middle East with high-level visits, the establishment of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum and military cooperation to secure sea-lanes, like in the Gulf of Eden. This context helped bloom economic relations: by 2018, almost half of China's oil imports came from the region and Beijing became the largest trading partner and the largest source of direct investment for most MENA countries. By 2019, 21 states have signed with China joint BRI projects (MFA, 2019).

However, the Arab Spring wrecked the previous tissue of relations that had prevailed in the region between local players and world powers. This systemic stimulus, American attention elsewhere

from MENA and containment in China's eastern front would explain a higher engagement in the region. Surprisingly, China perceived with fear US' disengagement from the region, emphasizing the lack of clarity of the threats and opportunities in the international system (Sørensen, 2019:6). China is reticent to redirect substantial resources and taking the US' place in the region: it has not engaged militarily or established any bases until recently⁴. But upheavals and emerging regional conflicts, starting with the Libyan civil war, jeopardised Chinese interests and Beijing had to intervene to safeguard its citizens and growing commercial interests. In face of the US retreat and due to China's capabilities and expanded economic and security interests, Beijing can no longer afford to free-ride and stay outside conflicts (Lantaigne, 2019).

Under the new leadership, new features of international responsibility emerged within Beijing concerning China's perceptions of its role in the world. Arguably, in the eyes of Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), its legitimacy comes now not only from maintaining domestic economic growth but also from the image of a strong and respected "responsible great power", able to protect its interests in the international sphere (Mao, 2017:189). However, despite these newfound capabilities and emerging opportunities, Beijing is also conscious of its still-limited power projection capabilities and influence, which could threaten China's rise if the country over-commits itself to provide global security goods. Thus, it was its leaders' perceptions of a new active role in international affairs and the need to protect its interests to fulfil domestic expectations that pushed China to cautiously increase its role as a conflict mediator in the region.

This new approach characterised by its engagement in mediation seems to pinpoint the socialisation of China within the global liberal order following expectations of a great power, which can no longer hide behind its non-interference principle. However, while adhering to many international norms regarding security issues, China is increasingly proposing alternatives to Western norms, distinguishing itself with foreign policies different than the "hegemons". In the process of mediation and peacemaking, China is trying to form certain principles that suit its interests to become the code of conduct in the process of conflict resolution (Sun, 2017).

First, China prefers a table-setting approach, keeping a low-profile and leaving agency to local governments and regional organisations, keeping a low profile. China tries to differentiate itself from a "hegemonic idea", avoiding the control of the process by defining the agenda. Acting under the umbrella of multilateralism with regional actors, China assumes that these organisations add legitimacy to out-of-region actors and allows China to obtain a political cover of international criticism of expanding its geopolitical influence (Mansour, 2019; Tiezzi, 2015).

Second, China emphasises the importance of development in resolving intra-state conflict. China argues that the root cause of regional insecurity is economic stagnation, high unemployment, poor infrastructure, rapid population growth rather than democracy deficit. China thus proposes the concept of “developmental peace” based on its own developmental experience, focusing on economic assistance to MENA instead of promoting democracy, rooted in the Western ‘liberal peace’ concept (Alder & Large, 2015).

Third, China stresses the “consent of the host state” to start any action that relates to another state’s domestic politics, linking it with the notion of state sovereignty. As the previous cases showed this liability in mediation, Beijing is increasingly asking for consent concerning the concept of “responsibility to protect” after the Libyan intervention. Chinese elites are wary of Western powers’ attempts to force regime change in the MENA region, mirroring potential threats towards the CCP. This concern is behind China’s vetoes on Syria in the UNSC, fearing intervention to change regimes, finding then convenience in Russia’s position to oppose a Libyan-styled operation in Syria (Mansour, 2018:10). This position benefited governments facing potential domestic contestation and also Beijing, as some MENA countries publicly backed what Beijing calls its “deradicalisation” efforts in the Xinjiang, showing support for China’s sovereignty (Putz, 2019).

Yet, a rising tension has emerged between the conception of sovereignty through China’s promotion of an inclusive approach with non-state actors in mediation, as negotiations imply some recognition towards these actors. China is becoming more flexible in identifying what is considered as interference, due to the requirement to hedge against uncertainties brought by regime change or parts of the territory under de facto control by opposition forces. China has not only engaged with rebel factions in South Sudan and Afghanistan, but also in Syria and Yemen, hosting in both cases government and opposition figures, balancing its posture in both conflicts in hopes to accelerate peace negotiations and to distinguishing itself from the West, and Russia in the Syrian case, as a helpful partner in the mediation (Burton, 2019).

But is Beijing being successfully building peace? Excluding South Sudan, Afghanistan and Iran, China is a newcomer in mediation and its efforts have failed so far and its participation has been limited due to its newcomer status. Nonetheless, the structural changes occurring in the region offer Beijing an important opportunity to increase its influence vis-à-vis other great power. In many ways, MENA countries are engaging with China as an attempt to hedge their bets against US predominance. Hence, China wants to mitigate the perception of a looming “China Threat”,

especially in the developing world, as it needs to build trust to continue a deeper engagement for the success of the BRI and its “peaceful development”. Besides, China has already expressed its will to participate in the reconstruction of war-torn countries like Syria and Yemen.

In sum, the NCR framework is helpful to explain how a systemic stimulus in the region is being interpreted and adapted by Chinese elites, responding to domestic and international demands. Mediation enables China to play a larger role in international affairs and fulfilling its international responsibilities towards the international community and its population. Firstly, China’s initiatives respond to Western powers’ critiques of freeriding and to the demands to become more active in global governance. Secondly, China defends the principles of sovereignty and developmental peace, which are welcomed by the Global South and establishes China as an alternative provider of security in the developing world. Thirdly, Beijing can show that diplomatically, China is a respected power that can maintain a strategic equilibrium with great powers but is also able to protect its core interests in the international arena when threatened.

Conclusions

The article shows the viability of NCR to explain changes in Chinese foreign policy and mediation through the observation of structural and domestic variables. China’s increasing role arises from a shift in global power away from unipolarity together with a reconfiguration in the MENA region with the US retreat. However, domestic factors, such as the new leadership’s perception on China’s role and capabilities, the liability of providing economic growth to maintain domestic support and the reduction of negative spillovers, especially the safety of Chinese citizens which are perceived as an obligation of the regime towards its nationals, are essential to explain this change.

The comparison of the two cases highlighted how China’s engagement in mediation responds to the protection of its economic growth and the potential negative spillovers threaten its security and strategic interests. However, these findings contradict previous literature that economic interests are sufficient conditions to China’s expanding role in the region: economic assets had previously been threatened, like in Libya, but China’s choice was withdrawal. Moreover, these two hypotheses represent an obligation the CCP has towards its citizens to ensure its legitimacy, which highlights the importance of state-society relations in Chinese foreign policy.

Arguably, Chinese elites’ perceptions have a determinant influence on foreign policy. The new leadership has established the mediator role as a response to China’s enhanced capabilities and

power in a context where the US is retreating of its international role, which threatens China's security as it can no longer free ride. Xi Jinping stated in 2017 that security could not be achieved while others are in turmoil and thus, China "should extend a helping hand to them" (Xi, 2017). Through the creation of a discourse based on international responsibility, Beijing legitimates the reconfiguration of its principle of non-interference and uses its power to assert interests and values which contradicts those of the West, but also, its five principles of peaceful coexistence.

This finding suggests that the material distribution of power in the structural variable of NCR limits the understanding of power, as was already criticised by liberals and constructivists. The US' decline accompanies a crisis of the liberal world order and values, which are being challenged by China and Russia, to the relief of some developing countries. This opposition allows China to achieve support and establish stable relations with developing countries which are key for the success of the BRI and to continue developing to gain material capabilities and power in the long-term.

However, China's engagement in mediation has been unequal and cautious: while South Sudan and Afghanistan can be characterised by a high Chinese participation, it is not the case of Yemen or Syria, where China seems to accommodate other powers interests, such as Russia in Syria or Saudi Arabia in Yemen. China is reticent to deeply compromise and overextend itself in international security as that could damage China's development and rise. Thus, one limitation of this dissertation is the lack of generalisation of the findings. Contrarily to neorealism, NCR relies on an ad-hoc choice of intervening variables, obtaining descriptive accuracy in detriment of generality and predictive power. Thus, future research efforts should focus on what makes China mediate in certain conflicts and not in others and what explains its level of participation in different conflicts.

Notes

¹ The definition of the “Greater Middle East” used in this article follows the definition and countries included in PERTHES, Völker. “America’s “Greater Middle East” and Europe: Key Issues For Dialogue”. *Middle East Policy*, 2004, 11 (3):85-97.

² Weibo sites cited in the articles covering this are no longer accessible due to censorship, thus it is not possible to know the dimension of the critique.

³ See Lanteigne, 2019.

⁴ In 2017, China opened its first military base in Djibouti.

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