

# The world's most hands-off Global Securitiser? China and “Political Solutions”

China has been showing an unprecedented activism in global security, taking on a more direct role in global security. Since its rise to global power status, the country has attempted to reconcile its image of “[responsible great power](#)” with its narrative of “[peaceful rise](#)”, developing a “cautious” approach that avoids meddling in foreign conflicts and disputes that could force Beijing to assume a clear position in favour or against one of the conflicting parties. Such a stance has been evident, for instance, in [China's voting behaviour](#) in the UN Security Council over the years with frequent abstentions in potentially controversial votes, particularly those involving the Global South.

However, the “interest” of Chinese diplomats in foreign conflict theatres has become a prominent feature in international media throughout 2023. Expectations for a more active Chinese role in global security management were accelerated by the release of several official documents, which, at the very least, revealed Beijing's newfound “special attention” to ongoing crises worldwide.

Three cases denote a potential “[interference with Chinese characteristics](#)” in foreign conflicts and disputes in the future, including the publication of position papers on the [Russo-Ukraine war](#) in February 2023 and the [Israel-Gaza war](#) in November 2023, and of the joint statement on the successfully “mediated” [Iran-Saudi deal](#) in March 2023.

China's position papers treat the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Gaza contexts, similarly, encourage a “political solution” (政治解决) brokered by the UN and centred around the will of the conflict-afflicted populations.<sup>[1]</sup>

Such an approach affords China the opportunity to exert influence on conflict resolutions while deflecting responsibility to supranational actors (such as the UN) and ascribing agency to the conflicting parties, thereby attempting to safeguard the country's non-intervention trademark.

The Iran-Saudi case follows a similar pattern, placing Tehran and Riyadh's roles under the spotlight and downplaying those of "mediators" such as China, Iraq, or Oman. The "Joint Trilateral Statement", for example, only gives active negotiating agency to Iran and Saudi Arabia. Tehran and Riyadh, in fact, "[express their appreciation and gratitude](#)" to Baghdad and Muscat for hosting multiple dialogues in 2021 and 2022, as well as to China for "[hosting and supporting talks](#)".

All three cases promote a political solution that places conflicting parties at the forefront and endorses hands-off Chinese "intervention". This stance aligns with Beijing's self-representation as a rising global power, distinguishing China's practices from the US' and making the "Chinese approach" more appealing to the eyes of states that witnessed or experienced firsthand instability following direct US military interventions.

Besides this, the documents emphasise humanitarian assistance and the protection of conflict-afflicted populations, thus reinforcing China's image of responsible great power that prioritises civilians and their wellbeing over great power politics. For instance, the Israel-Palestine position paper is especially vocal in inviting conflicting parties to "[refrain from depriving the civilian population in Gaza of supplies and services indispensable to their survival](#)". This statement echoes Chinese Foreign Affairs Minister Wang Yi who, on 15 October 2023, was also quoted saying that "[Israel's actions have gone beyond the scope of self-defence, and Israel should \[...\] stop its group punishment of the people in Gaza](#)".

Despite its recent revival, such an approach can be traced back to past instances of Chinese intervention. Indeed, [evoking and learning from](#) the past remains a crucial aspect of the country's foreign policy and its traditional pragmatism, even in contexts like global security, which had never been China's "strong suit". China's approach to Afghanistan, for instance, makes a strong case for understanding the origins and evolution of the current practice.

Afghanistan's instability has been [a central concern for China](#) in the past twenty years, partly due to geographical proximity and partly to fears of spillovers. From Beijing's viewpoint, the somewhat chaotic withdrawal of US troops in August 2021 has even exacerbated the potential for instability, if not in the Taliban-ruled country, at least around Central Asia, which has been prone to infiltration from Afghan militants in the past.

In [China's view](#), Afghanistan is intrinsically tied to Central Asia, and Beijing's efforts to normalise Afghanistan have been linked to attempts to integrate the country into the region – a strategy also [advanced by the US](#) in the past. Although Central Asians have not hidden their desire for a hands-on approach from China on issues related to Afghanistan's insecurity, the country has pursued a hands-off strategy, once again placing regional actors and supranational organisations under the spotlight.

This is particularly exemplified by the [Tunxi initiative](#), announced in March 2022 at the end of a Chinese-financed meeting between Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The summit, attended by Afghanistan's neighbours, aimed to assess the current situation in the country while also re-establishing dialogue between Russia and Central Asian states at a time of division and heightened tensions following the invasion of Ukraine two months prior. When looking at the Tunxi initiative, it becomes apparent that the same emphasis on regional agency is present – with the initiative encompassing neighbouring countries to Afghanistan that "pledge to support"

the country's reconstruction following the withdrawal of US troops. Although no direct mentions are made to organisations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the document remains clear in calling to "[relevant regional and international financial institutions to provide financing support for Afghanistan's reconstruction and development](#)". This once again emphasises the need for a concerted effort in which China participates but does not lead.

In sum, China has developed an approach to global security that attempt to balance intervention and non-intervention, emphasising "political solutions" mediated by supranational bodies, thus not fully committing to becoming a proactive global security force.

[1] The term "political solution" is not a novelty of China's foreign policy discourse. It has been used as a "safe heaven" whenever the country has been commenting on foreign disputes, conflicts, protests, or revolutions.

*This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the China Foresight Forum, LSE IDEAS, nor The London School of Economics and Political Science.*

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