



**Analyzing China's Mediator Role in MENA -
More than Just a Global Responsibility?**

Jayshree Borah

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Author: Jayshree Borah

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Institute of Chinese Studies
8/17 Sri Ram Road, Civil Lines
Delhi 110 054, INDIA
Ph.: +91-11-23938202; Fax: +91-11-23830728
Email: info@icsin.org
Website: www.icsin.org

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jayshree Borah is a Doctoral Candidate at Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai. Previously she has worked as a Research Assistant at the Institute of Chinese Studies. She worked on various projects related to foreign policy and diplomacy at the Institute such as Kolkata to Kunming Forum (K2K initiative), ‘The Diplomacy of India and China: Content, Capacity and Methods’ etc. Her areas of interests are Chinese politics, foreign policy and ideology, leadership, norm and Non- Western theories and Global South Perspective, South-East Asia. She obtained her master’s degree from Department of political science, University of Delhi. She also holds an M.Phil. Degree from Department of East Asian Studies, University of Delhi. She has been a recipient many scholarships by Chinese Government and Indian Government, i.e. BRICS countries Fellowship by Chinese Ministry of Commerce 2014, China’s Indian Embassy Fellowship 2016-2017, and Chinese Government Scholarship 2017-2021. She has presented her research papers in numerous international conferences, most recently in New York Conference on Asian Studies (NYCAS), held in New York October 2019.

Contact: jayshreebrh@gmail.com

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Abstract

Most of the literature on China's relations with Middle East begins and ends with oil. As cited by Nigel Thalakada, China is pursuing a 'maxi-mini' strategy, maximizing its security and economic benefits while minimizing its responsibilities. China's insistent urge for peaceful political settlements to interstate conflicts not only preserves Chinese narrative of state sovereignty and non-intervention in external affairs of other states, but also helps it to maintain its desire to project its image as a responsible power, in line with international norms. With the Belt and Road Initiative and China's global rise and willingness to be a part of the global governance, by 2017, China has been found mediating in nine conflicts as compared to three in 2012. China's national interest also plays a role, as the instability in the Belt and Road regions could be detrimental to trade flow and investment. However, even though China has been sending special envoys to war-torn countries, China's special envoys are not entrusted with mediation roles, as are those from other major powers. The paper will analyse China's mediator role in Libya, Sudan, and Syria. In analyses of China's past mediation practices in the region, it also analyses other potential reasons for China's increasing mediation efforts in the Middle East that are completely divorced from except economic concerns.

Keywords: MENA, Middle-East, Belt and Road Initiative, Syria

Introduction

China's approach to dealing with states in distress has been perpetually different from the West. In both the Libyan and Syrian Crisis, China's policymakers have been asking for a peaceful settlement and agreeing to play the role of mediator. China's nonviolent mediator role dates back to the period under Deng Xiaoping's premiership. Since this time, China's leaders have been seen as asking for political solutions to avoid conflicts. For example, during his talk with Odvar Nordli, Prime Minister of Norway on 25 September 1980, Mao's successor, Deng Xiaoping, expressed deep concern about the Iran-Iraq war, urging both Tehran and Baghdad to settle their dispute through peaceful dialogue and to avoid an escalation of the conflict.¹ Additionally, when analysing cases of interstate conflicts, Chinese leaders are continuously highlighting slogans that hearken back to the ideas of "peaceful settlement" and "political solutions." However, mediation efforts taken by the non-western countries and organizations such as China, Qatar, and Algeria, or

¹ As quoted in Sun, D., & Zoubir, Y. (2018). China's Participation in Conflict Resolution in the Middle East and North Africa: A Case of Quasi-Mediation Diplomacy?. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 27(110), 224-243.

international organizations like the League of the Arab States and the African Union have not been taken seriously by the western scholars and media. Chris Alden and Dan Large have mentioned in the context of African peacebuilding that China is still a footnote in the literature of post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding studies (Alden and Large 2013). However, scholars like Sun. D and Zoubir. Y have emphasized the constructive role China has been playing in resolving regional conflicts, such as on the Korean Peninsula, Africa, South Asia and the Middle East (Chazia 2018). However, simply sending special envoys and being a part of the dialogue that work toward peace is not enough for China to be recognized by the international community. China's continuous urge for peaceful political solutions to interstate conflicts not only preserves its principle of state sovereignty and non-intervention, but it could also urge the international community to acknowledge China as the very responsible power the International Community urges China to be. Its mediation practice started since 2012, with Libya, when the country was hugely attacked by China's abstention of voting in UNSC resolution 1973, March 2011 on calling for all necessary means to protect civilians under threat and enforce an arms embargo, extending no-fly zone and tightening sanctions (Fung 2016). With the Belt and Road Initiative and China's global rise and more willingness to be a part of the global governance, by 2017, China was found to be mediating in nine conflicts as compared to three in 2012. China's national interest also plays a role, as the instability in the Belt and Road regions could be detrimental to trade flow and investment (Legarda and Hoffman 2018). This paper will analyse how China has strengthened its role as mediator in Libya, Syria and South Sudan, why it developed a desire or necessity to play such a role and what it means when it claims that its approach is different from the West. The latter part of this paper will then suggest a new perspective on China's involvement in interstate peace processes, which go beyond narrow economic interests. It suggests that if China's lead mediation process induces stability in those regions, it would ultimately create a moral obligation to support China in International forums.

What is Peaceful Mediator?

China's policy towards the Middle East is mostly based on its policy of non-interference in internal politics, which makes China a neutral player in conflict-zoned states. China regularly, through multiple vetoes in United Nations, makes its position against military intervention abroad clear. This also has yielded China an upper hand in claiming a mediator role in conflicts. Indeed, scholars of Middle Eastern Studies have pointed out that China's lack of political and historical baggage with Middle East and North Africa has proved to be advantageous when it seeks legitimacy as a neutral mediator (Chazia, 2018). In comparison to other Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman and Iran, China's core economic interests are also not directly engaged to Libya or Syria. Hence, conflicts have little direct impact on China. The aforementioned reasons help China claim its position as a peaceful mediator in conflicts in the Middle East. According to the reoccurring Chinese official statement, China is willing to play a constructive role in conflict mediation. The basic concept of constructivism comes from the idea that the middle way for addressing foreign policy and security concerns lies between isolation and more confrontation (Vodanovich

1999). China claims this constructive role mainly consists of sending special envoys and nothing beyond that. However, due to China's overly cautious approach, it is hard to say which side China has been taking, except the economic interest as mentioned by Middle East scholars. Is it just a claim made by the Chinese government or is Chinese involvement different from the West? What made its engagement different from the West is neutrality; China refused to support one side more strongly in the other in conflicts. Scholars who have researched Chinese mediation practices have termed it as either a quasi-mediation approach (Sun and Zubir 2018) or a 'wait and see' approach (Burton, 2019). China's approach is also closer to the Japanese concept of 'quiet diplomacy', the definition of which states inclusion, dialogue, and negotiation are more effective in securing foreign policy objectives than exclusion or overt coercion (Vodanovich 1999). This paper is specially focused on China's official documents. As for this research, I would argue that China has been most interested to play the role of a mediator than anything else. The next part addresses the question of what drove Chinese policymakers to take part in mediation and how much effort they paid to their mediation activities.

Libya

Since Libya's 2011 revolution that led to the ousting of Muammar Qadhafi, China's embroilment with Libya is interesting to look at. When the civil war broke out, western powers such as the United Kingdom, France, and the United States solely urged for intervention. China was still hesitant to take a stance on the Libyan civil war. When regional organizations such as the African Union and the Arab League were in favour of supporting UN Resolution 1973, China subsequently agreed on the no-fly zone. However, according to Liu Ti, China stated that terms such as Responsibility to Protect have emboldened Western Nations to seek greater intervention in Libya, which directly led to calls for regime change. Beijing opposed the US-supported NATO intervention on Qadhafi's troops. Chinese media has termed the airstrikes as a Western intervention in Libya, which was not supported by the Chinese government. At every possible opportunity, China voiced its opposition against Western intervention. For example, Hu Jintao informed French President Nicolas Sarkozy about how unhappy the Chinese side was to the bombings in Libya, reportedly saying that "the use of force is not an answer to problems" (People's Daily 2011). He also mentioned China's respect for the UN but that the military operation in Libya could violate the Security Council's original intention, as it could lead to civilian death and an increased possibility of provoking a humanitarian crisis. Two primary reasons given by China at that time were, it was going against the initial UN resolution and not serving China's foreign policy principle of non-intervention. Does that mean China would isolate itself from engaging in Libya? To answer this question, we need to look at China's relations with the Tripoli regime and Benghazi rebels. China maintained a neutral relationship with both groups and was providing humanitarian assistance to both groups. Remaining neutral to Tripoli and the rebel groups could be seen as a starting point of framing a difference with the Western policies towards Libya. It was also the point when Chinese policymakers started emphasizing on a peaceful political

resolution and offered mediation. As Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister Zhai Jun, in United Nations Security Council meeting on Libya stated "only dialogue between the Security Council and the AU High-Level delegation could provide an important platform for the international community to find a peaceful means to solve the Libyan crisis" (People's Daily 2011). He also confirmed Chinese support for AU's diplomatic mediation efforts to solve the crisis. China maintained contacts with the two parties of the conflict in Libya and promoted peaceful means, including dialogue and negotiation to resolve the crisis (People's Daily, 2011). In June 2011, to initiate an end to the conflict, China's high-level delegation initiated talks with both parties. On June 2, Chinese ambassador to Qatar, Zhang Zhiliang, met with senior officials of the Libyan opposition National Transitional Council (NTC), followed by minister counsellor of the Chinese embassy in Egypt, Li Lianhe's visit to Benghazi where he inspected the humanitarian situation and the property left by Chinese enterprises. To show the policy of neutrality, on June 8, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi discussed the issue with Abdul Ati Al-Obidi, the Tripoli regime's special envoy of the Libyan government (People's Daily, 2011). As NTC was recognized as the legitimate regime of Libya, China was the last UN Security council member to recognize its legitimacy. It was a tricky decision for Chinese policymakers, as the foreign ministry's statement to NTC states that Beijing honours the decisions of the Libyan people. However, it did clearly desire that the new government should honour the contracts China had with the Qaddafi regime. This shows that China's neutral and ambiguous position was, in fact, a part of its national interest. However, more effort in China's role in mediating was expected. China could have taken the opportunity to initiate debates in the UN, to bring some international pressure on the West against military intervention, or more coherent cooperation could have taken between the AU, the Arab League, and the West to stop the strikes through coordination.

In post-war Libya, China supported the UN peace talks in Libya in the post-Qaddafi period. In March 2015, the United Nations Support Mission in Libya unveiled a six-point plan to end the crisis. Since then, the UN is organizing peace talks to mediate the Libyan parties. Chinese Government also requested the neighbouring countries to take a vigorous part in the peace process. In 2017, the Tunisian Prime Minister's visit to China, Chinese FM Wang Yi, explicitly discussed the issue. Chinese Charge d'Affaires to Libya Wang Qimin, in a meeting with Khaled al-Meshri, the newly appointed head of the Libyan Higher Council of State, in the capital Tripoli, in October 2018, "assured him China's support for a political settlement within the UN plan to end the division" (Xinhua, 2018). Scholars have suggested China's hedging towards the UN-recognized Government National Accord (GNA) for economic reasons. However, China was still pursuing its policy of neutrality.

After Libya, China's veto against no flying zone gained enormous criticism in Western media. China was also more determined on its principle of state sovereignty and non-intervention, as it realized the UN resolutions 1973 and 1940 were taken in the Libya crisis were a pretext for regime change (Pauley 2018). The-then Chinese ambassador to the United Nations, Li Baodong, explicitly referenced Libya: "The original intention of resolutions 1970 (2011) and 1973 (2011) was to put an end to violence ... [we] are

opposed to any attempt to wilfully interpret the resolutions or to take actions that exceed those mandated” (UNSC 2011c)²

Syria

The Syrian civil war started in 2011, initially as a peaceful uprising against President Bashar al-Assad. The peaceful uprising soon became a violent battlefield with different stakeholders' involvement. The Jihadist groups, Islamic State (IS), Syrian Democratic Force (SDF), an alliance of Kurdish and Arab militias, the involvement of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, Israel, Iran and other global actors outside the Arab world, such as Russia, US, UK, France made the situation graver.

After Libya, China has decided to play a more pro-active approach (Yao, 2013). It was also an opportunity to play the responsible power holder role by engaging more in the conflict resolution. So, since casting the vetoes, it has felt obliged to play a ‘creative’ or ‘constructive’ role by spreading and putting into practice its preferred norms on conflict resolution based on its normative convictions that intervention should not be made on behalf of rebellious forces, and that the R2P norm should be equally applied to all parties in the violence (Lee and Chan 2016).

Till 2017, China has vetoed six UN resolutions on Syria. First was in October 2011- China alongside with Russia vetoed against the sanctions resolution drafted by European Countries. In 2012, China again vetoed UNSC resolution on the Arab-Western Peace plan that was to step down Syrian President Al-Assad. On its role as constructively engaging with peace talks, China has been involving itself with talks with the Syrian National Dialogue Forum since its inception in 2013, which was established by several opposition organizations and pro-government personnel in Syria. The then Chinese Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, Zhai Zun held talks with a delegation from National Dialogue Forum, and stressed on political solutions for the Syria crisis. Along with that, he also mentioned the importance of regional forums like National Dialogue Forum along with the UN peace talks (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China 2013)³. Since 2013, China has been hosting delegations from both sides, the government and opposition, referred to as Western-backed opposition by Reuters (Reuters, 2016). In 2013, before the SNDF delegations, in February, Syria’s Vice Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad visited China. In 2016, both Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moualem and Syrian National Coalition (SNC) President Khaled Khoja paid a visit to Beijing separately and held a high-level meeting with Foreign Minister Wang Yi where the agenda of the meetings was to gain political solution for Syrian people (Reuters, 2016).⁴ In 2014, Wang Yi pinpointed five proposals for political settlement on the Syria issue, and China’s high-level delegation attended

² Statement by Ambassador Li Baodong, see United Nations Security Council document 2011c, 21.

³ The source of most of the statements of Chinese leaders are retrieved from Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China’s official website, here after it would be referred as FMPRC.

⁴ Head of Syrian opposition SNC to visit China this week. (2016, January 04). Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-china-idUSKBN0UIOPG20160104>

11 talks related to Syria, where Foreign Minister Wang Yi repeatedly asked both the Syrian parties and the international community for an immediate peace settlement. In 2015, Chinese special envoy to the Middle East, Gong Xiaosheng, attended the third international pledging conference for Syria. In 2015, among five high-level important meetings, one noted is the National Dialogue Forum. Delegations of follow up committees visited Beijing and talked with Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Ming. In October 2015, Vice Foreign Minister Li Baodong, on behalf of the Chinese government, proposed the "Four Steps" framework for political settlement of the Syrian issue: firstly, relevant parties should cease-fire and stop violence immediately, and commit to combating terrorism; secondly, guided by the UN, relevant parties in Syria should launch comprehensive, inclusive and equal dialogues and consultations to introduce specific arrangements of the political transition process as soon as possible based on the Geneva Communiqué. Thirdly, enhance international guarantee, and play the role of the main channel of the UN in mediation; fourthly, initiate the post-war reconstruction process to showcase the peace dividend to all parties in Syria (FMPRC, 2015). In 2016, Wang Yi met the President of National Coalition for the Syrian Revolutionary and opposition forces. The Chinese government officials attended 9 high-level meetings in the same year, including special envoy's visit to Syria in December. In December 2017 and January 2018, two high-level delegation-visited Beijing on the invitation of the Chinese Government. In those meetings, the Syrian side expressed thanks to China for its fair stance and precious support on the Syrian issue (FMPRC, 2017).

While China still was taking part in UN initiated peace talks at Geneva, its own initiatives were also going along with the process. For instance, there were a substantial number of visits by Chinese envoys to Syria from 2014. In 2018, for instance, Xie Xiaoyuan visited Syria twice and held talks with the UN Special Envoy to the Secretary-General. On March 14, 2019, Assistant Foreign Minister Chen Xiaodong visited Syria (FMPRC, 2019). Moreover, in 2015 China finally joined as a participant in the National Dialogue Forum, where Xie stressed that "China is making efforts to bring all Syrians interested in stability and peaceful resolutions to the negotiating table. He underscored that China maintains relations with both the government and the Syrian opposition. Beijing also interacts with Russian counterparts and representatives of the United Nations" (Sputnik 2018).

Although, there is growing criticism from Western Media, for supporting the Assad regime for its business interest.⁵ However, China's non-political interest in Syria also means the Assad regime will face little pressure to address the ongoing underlying grievances that caused the war (Lyall, 2019). China's 2015 Counter-Terrorism law also provides China the leverage to involve military means to combat terrorism, as it is

⁵ For reference see Syria allies: Why Russia, Iran and China are standing by the regime, <https://edition.cnn.com/2013/08/29/world/meast/syria-iran-china-russia-supporters/index.html>; Hemenway, Dan, Chinese strategic engagement with Assad's Syria <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/chinese-strategic-engagement-with-assad-s-syria/>

one of the key principles of peace talks.

South Sudan

China first experimented with deeper involvement in Sudan in response to powerful international criticism (culminating in calls to boycott the 2008 Beijing Olympics) of its support for Khartoum, which was fighting a brutal counter-insurgency campaign in Darfur. Using its influence with the Sudanese government and in the UN Security Council, China helped ensure the deployment of UN peacekeepers to Darfur in 2008 (International Crisis Group, 2017). China's involvement with resolving conflict in South Sudan has been termed as a fresh episode in Chinese foreign policy, considering it is going beyond China's traditional principle of non-intervention. Civil war broke out in South Sudan in December 2013. Rebels with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army - In Opposition (SPLM/A-IO) targeted and ruined oil base and annihilated South Sudanese workers on Chinese-owned oil plants. Which directed to the evacuation of Chinese workers in emergency conditions.

The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), a regional body of the horn of Africa launched mediating the rebel groups, which was supported by both Western and Chinese government. IGAD's chief mediator, Seyoum Mesfin, a former Ethiopian foreign minister and ambassador to China, provided Beijing a recognized and reliable entry into the mediation. High-level official meeting with both the parties in South Sudan has been a part of China's diplomacy since the outbreak of civil war. Zhong Jianhua, who replaced Liu as a special representative on African affairs in 2012, arrived in Nairobi as IGAD launched its mediation process. In response to IGAD's request for China's engagement, Beijing pushed up its engagement. Between 2014 and the signing of a peace agreement in August 2015, China was consistently engaged and supportive of the mediation process.

On September 23, 2014, at the invitation of China's Foreign Ministry, a delegation headed by Dhieu Mathok Diing Wol, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the South Sudan opposition party arrived in China for a visit. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Ming met with the delegation and exchanged views mainly on peacefully resolving the current South Sudan conflict.

From December 18 to 20, 2014, Special Representative of the Chinese Government on African Affairs Zhong Jianhua visited South Sudan and met with President Salva Kiir Mayardit and Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Barnaba Marial Benjamin of South Sudan respectively. Both sides exchanged views on the latest updates of the government of South Sudan on the formation of the transitional government, the progress of the peace talks in Addis Ababa as well as the role of China in the peace course of South Sudan (FMPRC, 2014).

It was followed by Minister Wang Yi's visit to Khartoum in January 2015, to host the Special Consultation in Support of the IGAD-led South Sudan Peace Process. Where he held joint talks with the conflicting parties of South Sudan and relevant parties of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). China's Foreign Ministry called

the meeting a “China-brokered Special Consultation in Support of the IGAD -led South Sudan Peace Process. In 2016, Zhong Jianhua and his delegation visited Ethiopia and met with Gally, Chief Assistant of the leader of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in-Opposition Riek Machar, member of the leading committee of the opposition and representative of the opposition in Ethiopia and African Union (FMPRC, 2016). Every year since 2014 Chinese Ambassador in Juba, regularly meeting with South Sudan's leadership and exploring ways for the countries peace and development. Recently, in April 2019, Ambassador of China to South Sudan met with H.E. Gen. Taban Deng Gai, First Vice President of the Republic of South Sudan. Besides, holding diplomatic talks other actions China has been engaged are providing funds to IGAD, coordinating policy and strategy with the IGAD mediation, and also with other Western special envoys engaged in the South Sudan peace process, especially with the US and the EU.

China also is providing military supervision to IGAD Monitoring and Verification Mechanism (MVM), which is responsible for overseeing the cessation of hostilities. It also has appointed Major-General Chaoying Yang, the deputy force commander, the second most senior military position, of the UN peacekeeping force in South Sudan. China also has been actively lobbying the chair of the Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (JMEC), the peace agreement's oversight mechanism to appoint as one of the two deputy chiefs of staff (the number three JMEC secretariat official), a serving Chinese diplomat, and providing unconditional financing to JMEC (Verjee, 2016).

Same Pattern of Engagement

China's engagement with those three civil wars shows the same pattern of engagement. First is supporting the UN mandate for initiating peace talks. Secondly, going beyond the UN to provide a platform initiate peace dialogue between the opposition parties, which has been referred by Chinese scholar Yun Sun as “special envoy Diplomacy” (Yun, 2015). What makes China's involvement different from other actors is it's the ability to bring all the opposition parties to the negotiating table (Chazia, 2019). For example, the role-played by China's former special envoy Wu Sike's and current special envoy to Middle East Gong Xiaosheng's duty was to engage political forces, regional countries and Western countries to coordinate positions and promote political conciliation. Since 2002, five envoys are appointed for the Middle East, Wang Shijie (2002-2006), Sun Bigan (2006-2009), Wu Sike (2009-2014), Gong Xiaosheng (2014-2019), and newly appointed Zhai Jun. Records had shown that they have made more than 70 trips to the Middle East to mediate the regional crisis and host dialogues. While the number of visits is growing, the outcome of these visits is yet to have any concrete results. Mostly, all the official documents in the Chinese ministry of foreign affairs stated almost the same statement for every visit. Rather than deep involvement, balancing between regional policies is also one of the approaches China has been deploying in this region. Mostly, China follows the bandwagon of regional organizations, hardly taking any initiative solely. For example, in South Sudan, China's policies are determined by what is IGAD's position is. However, in some rare instances, such as Wang Yi's five proposals to political

settlement on Syria issue, which includes cease-fire and a political transition could be seen as China has been seen initiating policies on its own.

What role Belt and Road Initiative plays?

A 2017 study by Merics Institute has shown that China's emphasis on mediating in conflicts has increased after the announcement of the Belt and Road project in 2013. Mostly China-Middle East scholars have agreed on the fact that China's increasing role in the Middle East mediation process, does related to the implementation of BRI (Chaziza, 2018). Dating back to 2016, China's Arab Policy Paper, security co-operation was not in the core 1+2+3 framework. Where under the banner of Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road energy security policy and infrastructure construction and investment capacity co-operation was the prime objective of China's engagement with Middle East (Arab Policy Paper, 2016). Hence, it is not surprising that Belt and Road do play a role in China's increasing mediating role. When at the global level, BRI covers 140 countries and two-third of the world populations, a recent data analysis (September 2019) provided by Development Reimagined group cites that 100% of Middle countries are interested and involved in BRI (Development reimagined, 2019).

In terms of the aforementioned countries with constant civil wars, China has been successful in convincing Libya to join OBOR. In July 2018, Libyan Foreign Minister of Presidential Council Mohamed Sayala signed a memorandum with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, where Libya officially joined China's Belt and Road Project. As, the Libya Observer has reported the Libyan council does recognize the Chinese role in finding a peaceful solution to the Libyan crisis and its contribution to the reconstruction of Libya (The Libyan Observer, 2018). South Sudan also has officially joined the Belt and Road Project in September 2018. Syria also is deeply interested in the BRI project. Presidential Political and Media Adviser Dr. Bouthaina Shaaban had participated in the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation held in Beijing in April 2019. China's aforementioned meditation practices did help China earning the trust of the conflict-zoned countries to invite China for its post-war reconstruction. It, on the other hand, helps China gaining business opportunities in the Middle East. Even though recognizing the economy as a part of China's increasing role in mediation, we cannot deny China's growing interest in taking part in the Middle East's security domain. The recent Middle East Security Forum held in Beijing in November 2019, where Chen Xiaodong, China's Assistant Foreign Minister emphasize China's approach to peace and security would be to providing a platform for dialogue and consultation to resolve hotspot issues in the Middle East. Chen, also emphasizes multilateralism as China's security policy choice in the Middle East over unilateralism. The forum also adheres to China's development first model in the realm of peace and security.

Recognition Among States

As we could understand from the preceding cases of Libya, Syria and South Sudan, the role China is offering to arrange the table for negotiations but leaving the outcome to be decided by regional African organizations. In an interview with Reuters in 2014, Zhong Jianhua, special representative of the Chinese government on African affairs stated, "We are not the party to propose our own initiative, at least at this stage. So, we urge all parties concerned to respect an African solution proposed by African parties". In effect China has persevered to be merely a host, pursuing confronting parties to bring into the table. For example, In South Sudan, when the crisis was stimulating, China hosted a "special consultation meeting" in Khartoum that included South Sudan's belligerent parties, Ethiopia, Sudan, and IGAD.

Xi Jinping repeated the idea, and stressed on dialogues as the main mechanism for combating civil wars. Xi, in his first meeting at the Arab League Headquarters, in 2016 stated:

"The key to addressing differences is to enhance dialogue. Use of force offers no solution to problems, neither will zero-sum mentality bring enduring peace. The process of dialogue could be protracted, and may even suffer setbacks, but it entails minimal adverse after-effects and produces the most sustainable outcome. Parties to the conflict should begin a dialogue, identify their biggest common interests, and focus on advancing the process of political settlement. The international community should respect the will and role of those directly involved, the neighboring countries and regional organizations, instead of imposing a solution from outside. For dialogue to succeed, there is a need for utmost patience and flexibility" (Xinhua, 2016)

Chinese approach of African solutions to African problems might have generated criticism of playing just a limited role among the west (Reuter, 2016). Surveying at the statements given by the African leaders' indicates, it has advanced to believe China as more eminent in comparison to Western nations regarding resolving their internal affairs.

In 2018, in his meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping South Sudan's President Kiir profoundly acknowledged China's approach in Africa. Kiir remarked, "*South Sudan highly commends China for treating all countries as equals in international affairs regardless of their size and supporting all countries in independently choosing development paths in line with their national conditions.*" He appreciated China's efforts to facilitate the domestic peace process in South Sudan and its significant role in safeguarding world peace and stability" (Xinhua, 2018). South Sudan Ambassador to Ethiopia and the AU James Morgan likewise seems to hold notable reliance on China. Morgan asserted "China is urging everybody to arrive at peace without sanctioning anybody. China doesn't take sides in the South Sudan civil war and Chinese peacekeepers' role in South Sudan has been positive" (Xinhua, 2018).

He also denoted to China's stand that Africans should solve Africa's problem as an assertive action. "China's role in South Sudan peace talks is to make sure peace and stability return to the country that satisfies all South Sudanese parties."

Syrian leaders likewise have applauded China's perpetual drive for political conciliation. In 2014, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visit to Syria and after his separate talks with Syrian Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Walid Mualem and President of Syria's main opposition bloc Syrian National Coalition Ahmad Al-Jarba seemed to influence both the two Syrian antagonistic sides to endorse a political settlement is the only correct way out of the crisis. In the same visit, both the leaders acknowledged "the Syrian people value their friendship with the Chinese people, view China as their true friend and appreciate the positive efforts made by China for the political solution of the Syria crisis" (Xinhua, 2014).

Along with the peace talks, China's veto and criticism on west lead sanctions have also earned China popularity among the North African states.

In April 2014, when the U.S. declared sanctions on the regime of South Sudan. Chinese diplomats were seen to be consequently meeting with South Sudan's senior officials which also includes now Prime Minister Kiir and encouraging them to follow more compliance and pragmatism rather than "taking the West head-on". (International Crisis Group 2017). In February 2017, Beijing supported Russia and cast its sixth veto to protect Assad's government from the Security Council action. The veto prevents a proposal by Western powers to inflict sanctions over accusations of a chemical weapons attack (SCMP 2017). After the veto, in an interview with Hong Kong-based Phoenix TV in 2017, Assad praised China's embroilment in vetoing UN sanctions on Syria.

Thus, it could be argued both Sudan and Syria are comfortable with China's global leadership, and on occasion not deferring to give apparent compliance to China as a trustworthy nation.

If we look at Wendt's theory, as the identity of "self" depends on the "other". Wendt has referred this as "role-taking" and "altercating" behaviour of states. From the interaction, three types of roles could be generated: "the state is considered an "enemy" if their behaviour is aggressive towards the self; the state is considered a "rival" if their actions are based on indifference or selfish competition under which they cooperate, or the state is considered a "friend" if relations and communication are harmonious and friendly. The definition of their "self" is based on mutual perception in the form of one of those three types. Here, China's part in the peace process of North Africa has earned China the identity of a harmonious and friendly nation, not only gives China economic leverage but the strong political connection among these countries. If China wants to lead a post western order, the recognition of these countries would be the utmost importance of China.

China's involvement with the peace process with a no-string-attached approach has helped China earn the favour of these states, however using of statements like "We

are not the party to propose our own initiative, at least at this stage" by Chinese leaders also puts us in question is China in future would more involved in taking direct initiative and would it be related to China's post-war reconstruction led business opportunities?

Is it Possible to Create a Moral Debt?

While most of the literature concerning China's relation with North Africa, related to peacebuilding efforts and how that reflects on norm-making and norm following (Alden 2014, Alden and Large 2013), China's role in conflict resolution in South Sudan is mainly for the oil industry (Anthony and Hengkun 2014, Large 2008, 2009, 2015), debates regarding China's adherence to non-interference principle in Africa (Aidoo and Hess 2015, Wang 2013, Xu 2012), debates over Beijing's response to the crisis in Libya and the principle of Responsibility to Protect (Gowers 2012), Driven by commercial interests, China is taking the unusual step of mediating between rival South Sudanese factions (Tiezzi, 2014).

This author would suggest a new term related to China's engagement with the peace process of North African countries. As, the countries have already accepted China's mediator role in their crisis, which on paper is not intervening in their state-sovereignty but still helping towards the development of the region. If the China-lead peace process brings stability in these countries, it could create a moral obligation in those countries to support China in international forums. Even though in International Relations, there is no such term as Moral Debt, we could refer to China's history with African nations, where shared ideology played its role and with the support of the majority of African countries has helped China gain permanent membership at the United Nations in 1971. In the present time, already these North African countries have agreed to be a part of the BRI project, while a lot of other nations either still reluctant or had a dubious yes to BRI.

The official Belt and Road Portal website mentions that till now China has signed 197 co-operation documents under the banner of BRI, with 137 countries and 30 international organizations by October 2019. 40 African countries are part of the list out of 55 African countries along with the African Union (Official Belt and Road Portal, 2019). All the North African and Middle East countries have signed MOUs under the Belt and Road project, Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Malta, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Palestine, Yemen, Ethiopia, and Sudan.⁶

Even though all countries in the North are already part of BRI economic corridor, 14 East and West African countries are yet to sign any MOU with China on BRI. Ideology and China's internal politics still plays a significant factor for these countries not

⁶ The list of countries was made by the information provided by state information centre known as Belt and Road Portal <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/> and from The Hong Kong Trade Development Council's official website <http://china-trade-research.hktdc.com/business-news/article/The-Belt-and-Road-Initiative/The-Belt-and-Road-Initiative-Country-Profiles/obor/en/1/1X000000/1X0A36I0.htm>

going aboard with BRI. Hannah Ryder, a research scholar from development reimagined, a Beijing based consultative service noted that Eswatini (formerly Swaziland) one of the country that has not signed Belt and Road because of its recognition of Taiwan. Another two African countries Sao Tome and Principe and Burkina Faso became part of BRI only after severing ties with Taiwan as recent as 2016 and 2018 (Quartz Africa 2019). Hence, it is not surprising that instead of China's economic and now diplomatic support with mediating conflicts China does expect to pay the debts by these countries in one economic (as already mentioned by scholars oil and natural resources) or other form of gaining political support.

Another area where China is benefiting from Middle East countries is their neutrality towards Chinese policy in Xinjiang region. Most of the Middle East countries, despite being mainly Muslim countries, by far have ignored China's dealings with the Xinjiang region. As a result of constant Western criticism on China's policies towards the Uighur Muslims, especially after US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's statement where he accused the Chinese government of "methodically attempting to strangle Uighur culture and stamp out the Islamic faith" (CNS News, 2019). Ambassadors of 37 countries sent a joint letter to the President of the UN Human Rights Council and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, where they appreciated China's contribution to International Human rights cause and support China's Xinjiang Policies. Out of the 37 countries, were members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), an organization that is often vocal about hostility towards the Muslims. Most of the member countries of OIC are from the Middle East and North Africa. The OIC Countries that signed the letter are Algeria, Angola, Bahrain, Belarus, Bolivia, Burkina, Faso, Burundi, Cambodia, Cameroon, Comoros, Congo, Cuba, DR Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Gabon, Kuwait, Laos, Nigeria, North Korea, Omen, Pakistan, Philippines, Qatar, Russia, Myanmar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tajikistan, Togo, Turkmenistan, UAE, Venezuela, Zimbabwe (The Diplomat 2019).⁷

In his 2019 visit to China Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has openly supported China's Xinjiang Policies, as the Chinese state media quoted him "It is a fact that the peoples of China's Xinjiang region live happily in China's development and prosperity," "Turkey does not permit any person to incite disharmony in the Turkey-China relationship. Turkey firmly opposes extremism and is willing to increase mutual political trust with China and strengthen security cooperation" (China Daily 2019, Middle East Eyes 2019). In fact, as recent as in November 2019, Middle East Forum hosted by Beijing has accused the involvement of the international community in the security affairs has been hugely getting biased treatment on the name of "so-called human right". Which in a way has also portrayed China's uncomfortable relationship with the term Human rights and trying to catch the attention of the Middle East audience, where the forum was attended by more than 200 academics and diplomats from the Middle East (FMPRC 2019)

⁷ The official document enlisting countries is yet to published by UNHR.

The two huge China-led forums, the Forum of China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC, established 2000) and the China Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF, established 2004) also have a deep impact on China's diplomacy towards African countries as a whole and it also influences peace and security process in North African countries. As the format of both the forums allows to allows genuine coordination by regional countries to exert their full diplomatic weight. This format preserves China's relative strength vis-à-vis individual participants, allows for time-efficient bilateral diplomatic meetings and even stimulates competition amongst members. Beijing has notably used membership of FOCAC as an inducement to Taiwan's remaining African allies to sever ties with Taipei. While FOCAC is the more prominent format, both serve as an important framework to organize and continuously develop relations with North Africa through regular summitry and numerous specialized subsidiary structures (ensuring follow-up on FOCAC Action Plans and pursuing cooperation on tourism, technology, and research) (Bayes, 2019). 53 African countries are already member of FOCAC.

The 2018 FOCAC plan of action goes even further, calling for an ongoing China-Africa Peace and Security Forum and China-Africa Law Enforcement and Security Forum, and commits both sides to more intelligence sharing. It also pledges to support programs in consular services, immigration, and justice and law enforcement, including running an annual anti-corruption course that aims to train 100 African officials by 2021. For police, there will be more exchanges, donations of equipment and training, and formalized engagement with the African Police Cooperation Organization (Kovrig 2018). Along the lines of these forums, capacity building programs for African professionals and officials with skills based on Chinese expertise and experience will enhance the handling of potential conflicts internally. Sponsoring as many human resource development programs is also a way for Chinese foreign policy to set norms and diffuse its expertise for the other Global States to follow (Benabdallah 2017).

According to Foot the states that often play the role of norm entrepreneurs and have already persuaded the majority of states to the norms led by them. China through its mediating process could be part of the internal governmental mechanism of these North African states and through the capacity building programs can influence the mindset of young diplomats and potential leaders in China's favour. However, since, now is the time, North African countries need China the most, not only economically but also to resolve their political tension. They are playing along with China's line, but we have to wait and see, if China's "moral debt trap" works on these countries, once they are stabilized politically and economically. It would be interesting to see whether they will use their bargain power in China or not.

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