

## BETWEEN PRINCIPLE AND PRACTICE: THE ILLUSION OF NEUTRALITY IN INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT MEDIATION

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**Abstract.** In contemporary international relations, mediator neutrality exists largely as a declarative ideal that conflicts with the realities of political and economic interests. Mediation practices by the UN, the OSCE, the African Union, and states such as Norway, Qatar, Indonesia, the US, and China demonstrate that impartiality is systematically compromised by structural factors. These factors include geopolitical priorities and the mediator's asymmetrical perceptions of conflicting parties. The analysis contrasts American and Chinese approaches to mediation: while Washington integrates mediation with the promotion of its values, Beijing emphasises economic pragmatism without abandoning engagement. The article examines three dimensions of neutrality (institutional, strategic, and perceptual) revealing its contingent nature. Findings suggest modern mediation functions as a «diplomacy of the possible», where strict neutrality yields to tactical flexibility, and negotiation effectiveness correlates with transparency regarding mediators' interests.

**Keywords:** neutrality; international mediation; UN; US; China; conflicts; diplomacy.

## МЕЖДУ ПРИНЦИПОМ И ПРАКТИКОЙ: ПОЧЕМУ НЕЙТРАЛЬНОСТЬ МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫХ ПОСРЕДНИКОВ В КОНФЛИКТАХ ОСТАЕТСЯ ИЛЛЮЗИЕЙ

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**Аннотация.** В современной системе международных отношений нейтральность посредников остается, сталкиваясь с реалиями политических и экономических интересов, декларативным идеалом. Опыт ООН, ОБСЕ, Африканского союза, а также таких государств, как Норвегия, Катар, Индонезия, США и Китай, демонстрирует, что посредничество неизбежно подвержено влиянию структурных ограничений, нарушающих беспристрастность посредников: зависимости от финансирования, геополитических приоритетов посредника и асимметричного восприятия им конфликтующих сторон. В настоящем исследовании особое внимание уделено сравнению моделей посредничества США и Китая. Выявлено, что Вашингтон сочетает посредничество с продвижением собственных ценностных установок, Пекин делает ставку на экономический прагматизм, что, однако, не исключает ангажированности. Выделены три аспекта нейтральности (институциональный, стратегический и перцепционный), раскрывающие ее условный характер. Показано, что современное посредничество трансформируется в «дипломатию возможного», где нейтральность уступает место тактической гибкости, а эффективность переговоров зависит от прозрачности интересов посредника.

**Ключевые слова:** нейтральность; международное посредничество; ООН; США; Китай; конфликты; дипломатия.

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## Introduction

The proliferation of intrastate and transnational conflicts in the international system of 21<sup>st</sup> century has intensified demands for third-party mediation. Contemporary disputes frequently transcend territorial boundaries through interconnected political, economic, and cultural networks, compelling external actors to engage in conflict resolution processes. Data from the Uppsala conflict data programme (UCDP) at Uppsala University indicate that 59 armed conflicts were active globally in 2023. While only 30 % of them concluded peacefully, mediation by states or international organisations proved instrumental in 70 % of these successful outcomes<sup>1</sup>. Such statistics, viewed against the backdrop of the rising incidence of international conflicts over the past decade (from 37 conflicts in 2013 to 59 in 2023) suggest a notable increase in mediation efforts. This, in turn, intensifies the fundamental challenges associated with mediation [1, p. 674].

In international relations, mediation refers to a form of third-party intervention in which an external actor, invited by the parties, assists in managing a conflict. Such interventions are typically ad hoc, tailored to each specific conflict without rigid procedures, with the mediator's role evolving throughout the engagement process, utilising non-violent approaches. Leading theorists in international mediation, J. Bercovitch and S. S. Gartner, emphasise that the perceived impartiality and trustworthiness of mediators, even high-ranking officials, are crucial for effectiveness. Dis-

putants will only consent to third-party involvement if they trust the intermediary to act fairly and consider their interests [2, p. 331–337].

Mediation outcomes depend, inter alia, on the mediator's capacity to guide disputing parties towards a mutually acceptable agreement. Scholars examining mediation in general, and its specific application to international conflicts, broadly concur regarding the desirable qualities of a mediator. However, the question of mediator neutrality remains a matter of debate. This article seeks to clarify the role and significance of the neutrality principle in the practice of international mediation.

Although mediation has featured prominently in diplomatic history for centuries, a dearth of scholarship specifically examines the nature and practical application of mediator neutrality. Foundational texts by scholars such as J. Bercovitch and S. S. Gartner [2], S. Vuković [3], I. W. Zartman [4], and A. Kydd [5] touch upon this concept, as do various case studies analysing particular international disputes.

Mediator neutrality warrants further scholarly investigation, particularly given the heightened potential for conflict in contemporary international relations and the consequential scrutiny of mediators' roles. This article offers a comprehensive analysis of neutrality in mediation, synthesising theoretical frameworks and examining diverse case studies from international conflicts.

## Theoretical perspectives on neutrality in international mediation

Early theoretical approaches, which reflected the logic of mediation as a pre-trial method of conflict resolution in civil law, identified impartiality as a fundamental and indispensable element; without it, mediation was rendered meaningless [3, p. 415].

However, subsequent research has demonstrated that, for international mediation to be genuinely effective, mediators must not only facilitate negotiations and propose possible solutions but also transcend the role of a neutral observer. I. W. Zartman, in [4], introduced the influential concepts of «mutually hurting stalemate» and «moment of maturity». The former occurs when belligerents recognise that continued confrontation incurs greater costs than potential negotiation benefits, thereby fostering conditions conducive to resolution. This realisation of futility, coupled with the perceived opportunity for an acceptable outcome through compromise, cultivates a moment of maturity. I. W. Zartman argues that in such circumstances, the mediator's role is critical. They must discern this moment of maturity, avoid precipitate action, sensitise parties to conflict costs, refrain from imposing external agendas, and crucially, avoid being perceived as an interested party, distinct from a party to the conflict. Indeed,

contravening these latter conditions risks prolonging the dispute [4, p. 6–15, 146, 178].

Philosophically, neutrality defined as the absence of declared or deliberate bias can be viewed as an ideal. However, given the intricate dynamics of international relations and the multiplicity of actor interests, achieving absolute neutrality in practice may prove an elusive, if not unattainable, goal. Nevertheless, neutrality remains relevant in international relations, where it typically defines a state's non-participation in military actions between opposing parties and its non-adherence to military blocs. However, within mediation, neutrality lacks objective criteria and is inherently subjective, as mediators are invariably influenced by a range of factors (political, economic, geostrategic, and ideological interests) rendering its practical application unique to each dispute.

A mediator's perceived neutrality is therefore critical for establishing trust between conflicting parties. Even when latent interests or limitations are acknowledged, an appearance of impartiality legitimises the negotiation process, fosters essential trust, and cultivates a sense of procedural fairness. This principle proves indispensable in contexts of deep mistrust, where the slightest

<sup>1</sup>Uppsala conflict data program [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://ucdp.uu.se/exploratory> (date of access: 14.03.2024).

hint of bias can shatter confidence in the mediator [6, p. 32–34].

Yet, while striving to maintain an image of impartiality, mediators inevitably risk their actions being interpreted as biased. This paradox occurs because conflicting parties typically assess the mediator's decisions through self-interested lenses, leading to accusations of bias even when mediators genuinely attempt to balance competing concerns. Such perceptions can erode trust and destabilise the negotiation process, as parties may attribute hidden agendas to the mediator's conduct. Consequently, mediation, intended to resolve disputes, can inadvertently escalate tensions, particularly amidst information ambiguity or when conflict stakes are high. Ultimately, the core challenge lies in the difficulty of achieving absolute impartiality when the very notion of impartiality is politically contested [5, p. 597–600].

### **The contingent nature of neutrality in mediation by international organisations**

Challenges to neutrality in conflict mediation affect even ostensibly impartial international organisations and mediating states. The UN, for example, is mandated by its charter (Art. 33) to seek the peaceful settlement of disputes that threaten international peace and security, and operates under the premise of impartial arbitration. However, the UN's governance structure<sup>2</sup>, in practice, imposes systemic limitations on its impartiality. A central issue lies in its reliance on the Security Council, where veto-wielding permanent members (China, France, Russia, the UK, and the US) can obstruct resolutions conflicting with their strategic agendas. This situation creates a paradox: the UN, ostensibly tasked with representing the collective will of the international community, often appears to act in ways that align with the interests of a limited number of powerful states. Several examples illustrate this point. In the protracted Western Sahara conflict (ongoing since 1991), the MINURSO mission has, for decades, failed to organise an independence referendum, largely due to French opposition, reflecting France's historical support for Morocco [7, p. 4–5, 13]. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict demonstrates similar dynamics. Here, repeated US vetoes have blocked resolutions critical of Israeli actions, undermining the UN's credibility among Arab states [8, p. 32]. Furthermore, the UN's funding structure makes it vulnerable to external pressures. Major donors can influence the organisation's policies through their financial contributions. For example, the US, contributing 22 % of the regular budget, has repeatedly used budgetary cuts as a diplomatic lever, thereby influencing the UN's programmatic priorities<sup>3</sup>.

Comparable challenges concerning influence and bias affect other international bodies, including the

Drawing from theoretical frameworks in international mediation studies, three key aspects of neutrality emerge in international mediator practice.

1. Institutional neutrality that relies on formal rules of engagement, such as those embedded in the mandates of organisations like the UN or the OSCE, or declared by mediating states. This dimension emphasises the absence of direct legal or political obligations to any conflicting party [2].

2. Strategic neutrality that refers to a mediator's deliberate avoidance of overtly advancing their own interests. This approach often represents a tactical choice, particularly when facing resource constraints or geopolitical complexities [3; 4].

3. Perceptual neutrality that concerns the conflicting parties' perception of the mediator as impartial, irrespective of the mediator's actual motivations [5].

AU and the OSCE. The AU, despite positioning itself as the continent's primary regional arbiter, confronts challenges similar to those faced by the UN. While the AU seeks to represent a unified African perspective, its actions often depend on the interests of its most influential member states, frequently overriding collective decision-making. During the Darfur crisis (2003–2020), the AU mission in Sudan faced criticism for its failure to confront the Sudanese government. This reluctance was largely attributed to the economic and political allegiances of key member states, notably Nigeria and South Africa, to Khartoum [9, p. 1046]. Furthermore, the AU financial dependence on external donors (primarily the European Union, China, and the US, who together provide up to 60 % of its budget) imposes significant structural limitations. Donors possess significant leverage to steer the AU's agenda towards their own objectives [10, p. 18]. Moreover, the guiding principle of «African solutions to African problems» is routinely compromised. External military interventions, such as France's 2011 actions in Côte d'Ivoire and NATO's involvement in Libya in the same year, coupled with insufficient regional conflict-resolution mechanisms, reveal systemic vulnerabilities in upholding this doctrine [11, p. 3–4].

Similarly, the OSCE, despite its commitment to indivisible security and collective dispute settlement, frequently serves as a platform where the competing interests of major actors (Russia, the US, and the EU) play out. In the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the OSCE Minsk group, co-chaired by the US, France, and Russia, struggled for decades to achieve a breakthrough, primarily because each mediating nation prioritised its distinct agenda [12, p. 155–157]. The OSCE's financial

<sup>2</sup>United Nations Charter [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.un.org/ru/about-us/un-charter/full-text> (date of access: 14.03.2024).

<sup>3</sup>Schaefer B. D. U. S. shouldn't squander financial leverage at united nations [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/commentary/us-shouldnt-squander-financial-leverage-united-nations> (date of access: 14.03.2024).

and operational reliance on individual member contributions also poses risks of partiality. A notable example is the 2017 closure of field missions in Tajikistan (office in Dushanbe) and Uzbekistan (centre in Tashkent), which significantly diminished the organisation's presence in Central Asia. This restructuring arose not from strategic necessity but from shifting donor priorities, notably those of the US (12 % of the 2017 budget) and Germany (10 % of the 2017 budget). These countries diverted financial resources towards so-called priority areas, notably the Ukrainian crisis and Balkan missions [13, p. 6, 8]. This reallocation leaves the OSCE vulnerable to prevailing political climates and, without enforcement mechanisms such as sanctions, relegates it to a weak mediator whose initiatives remain largely declarative.

### State mediators: balancing neutrality and national interest

Some nations, while presenting themselves as neutral mediators in international conflicts, often demonstrate a selective approach in practice, balancing declared impartiality against actual foreign policy priorities. Norway's engagement in numerous regional conflicts clearly illustrates this duality. The country's track record includes facilitating Israeli-Palestinian dialogue (1990s – 2000s), mediating the Guatemalan peace process (1990–1996), and contributing to peace negotiations between the Colombian government and FARC (2012–2016).

Norway's mediation in the Sri Lankan conflict (2000–2009) yielded ambiguous outcomes, which remain contentious compared to other cases. Oslo was perceived as favouring the Tamil side due to its close ties with the Tamil diaspora, which was seen to influence Norwegian policy [14, p. 179–180]. Similarly, despite apparent achievements with the Oslo I Accord, scholars contend that Norway's approach served Western interests rather than maintaining genuine neutrality [15, p. 10–12]. This example illustrates how even nations with sterling reputations as impartial mediators may face bias allegations when operating across diverse political landscapes.

The Gulf states have emerged as prominent mediators in contemporary conflicts, accounting for 37 % of international mediation efforts in the Middle East between 2010 and 2022 surpassing traditional Western actors<sup>4</sup>. Qatar exemplifies this trend, mediating in Lebanon (2008, 2021), Sudan (2023), and Palestinian reconciliation talks (2022). Its notable achievement was brokering the 2020 agreement between the US and the Taliban movement. T. Barfield's analysis acknowledges Qatar's formal adherence to neutrality but highlights scrutiny over Doha's historical links to Islamist groups, which fuelled doubts among observers [16, p. 312–315].

Beyond direct levers like funding and binding decisions, international organisations especially those classified as weak mediators by objective measures can still exert pressure on negotiating parties. This influence extends beyond mere dialogue facilitation to include soft power tactics: shaping perceptions of norms, authority and legitimacy whilst maintaining an appearance of neutrality. Rather than true impartiality, these mediators exhibit what scholars term an outcome bias (advancing decisions aligned with their interests without explicitly supporting either party) [3, p. 416–419]. Despite employing soft power, major international organisations at both regional (the OSCE and the AU) and global (the UN) levels cannot achieve full neutrality in practice due to structural asymmetries in funding and influence. These limitations are systemic rather than incidental.

This example demonstrates how mediators' geopolitical affiliations complicate claims to absolute neutrality.

As Southeast Asia's largest nation and a leading ASEAN member, Indonesia has actively mediated regional disputes. Indonesia's successful mediation includes resolving various conflicts. Notably, in 2011 Jakarta drawing on its authority within ASEAN organised negotiations and facilitated the deployment of observers to monitor the ceasefire in the border conflict between Cambodia and Thailand<sup>5</sup>. Following the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, Indonesia undertook extensive efforts to address the ongoing political crisis, acting as the driving force behind the adoption of the Five-point consensus at the ASEAN special summit in April 2021. Jakarta prioritised halting violence, securing humanitarian corridors, and fostering dialogue between stakeholders. Yet these efforts faced immediate constraints, as the junta's refusal to comply undermined their effectiveness [17, p. 68–71]. While Western states imposed stringent sanctions, Indonesia employed soft power, maintaining bilateral engagement with regime officials, experience-sharing platforms such as the Bali Democracy forum, and civil-military exchanges, drawing on its own successful post-1998 military transformation as a model [17, p. 68–71].

Indonesia's mediation strategies, however, have recurrently encountered structural constraints when national interests clashed with its professed impartiality. A telling example was Jakarta's inability to facilitate progress in the South China Sea disputes (2012–2016), where economic dependence on Chinese investment and trade effectively constrained its capacity to mediate [18, p. 119]. Similarly, during the Rohingya crisis (2017–present), Indonesia limited its involvement to humanitarian aid, avoiding substantive political

<sup>4</sup>Uppsala conflict data program [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://ucdp.uu.se/exploratory> (date of access: 14.03.2024).

<sup>5</sup>Wijaya D. E. ASEAN'S role in Thailand's border conflict with Cambodia [Electronic resource]. URL: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/361764951\\_ASEAN%27S\\_ROLE\\_IN\\_THAILAND%27S\\_BORDER\\_CONFLICT\\_WITH\\_CAMBODIA](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/361764951_ASEAN%27S_ROLE_IN_THAILAND%27S_BORDER_CONFLICT_WITH_CAMBODIA) (date of access: 14.03.2024).

mediation to prevent straining relations with Myanmar, exacerbating regional migration pressures, or inflaming domestic Islamist movements<sup>6</sup>. These examples reveal the cautious nature of Indonesia's mediation, which tends to avoid risk when strategic considerations outweigh the prospective benefits.

International mediation inherently involves a paradox: even states lauded as neutral brokers must reconcile their stated impartiality with tangible geopolitical and economic priorities. The experiences of Norway, Qatar, and Indonesia illustrate that successful mediation hinges on reconciling these competing demands. Examples include Norway's engagement with diasporas, Qatar's «flexible neutrality» towards Islamist movements, and Indonesia's circumspection regarding Chinese investments. Such compromises invariably shape the practical application and strategic dimensions of their neutrality. A central limitation in contemporary mediation lies in perceived bias: when mediation efforts are viewed as aligned with the interests of a particular party (whether the Western bloc, the Islamic world, or regional powers) their effectiveness is significantly diminished. Consequently, state-led mediation now functions less as an impartial dispute-resolution mechanism and more as a form of «diplomacy of the possible». In this context, neutrality serves not as an absolute principle but as a tactical resource, deployed within specific political parameters and readily abandoned

should the conflict impinge upon the mediating states' strategic priorities.

Furthermore, mediation in international conflicts constitutes one diplomatic tool among many for achieving objectives that often extend beyond conflict resolution alone. This view aligns with S. Touval's analysis in [19]. Analysing international mediation during the collapse of Yugoslavia and the ensuing armed conflicts, he asserts that mediator impartiality and neutrality are rare and practically unattainable. S. Touval further posits that mediation serves as an instrument of foreign policy with dual purposes: an ethical one (conflict settlement) and a political one (the pursuit of national interests) [19, p. 178].

When considering mediation as a vehicle for foreign policy, its implementation inevitably reflects the ideological frameworks and values prioritised by mediating states. This is particularly evident with major regional and global powers. In this context, the alignment or divergence of cultural and value factors can influence perceptions of the mediator's neutrality, thereby colouring their actions positively or negatively. One might tentatively categorise mediators as Western (the US, EU nations, Norway, etc.) or non-Western (China, Qatar, Indonesia, etc.). However, this distinction fails to capture the complexity of how conflicting parties perceive mediator neutrality, or how mediators themselves conceptualise neutrality within international conflict resolution.

### **The Western approach to international mediation: the US as a prominent actor**

Western mediators typically promote a liberal model of conflict resolution, grounded in democratisation, human rights, and market reforms. The US represents the most prominent proponent of this approach and serves as a focal point of liberal ideology in contemporary international relations. Its mediation efforts are underpinned by unparalleled military capabilities including the world's largest defence budget and nuclear arsenal alongside economic dominance, with the US dollar facilitating approximately 25 % of global trade and its economy constituting a quarter of global GDP. Technological innovation, driven by corporations such as «Apple», «Microsoft» and «SpaceX», further reinforces its influence, as does its network of alliances spanning NATO members, Asia-Pacific partners and Middle Eastern states. This combination of strengths contributes to its role as one of the most active international mediators in diverse conflicts. Indeed, data from J. Bercovitch and G. Schneider for the period 1950–90 show that the US conducted 84 (24 %) of the 355 analysed single-state mediations, establishing it as the most active mediator in international conflicts during the Cold War [20, p. 157–158].

After 1990, the US continued its active engagement in international mediation, though its role evolved

amidst a transforming global political landscape. This transformation included the dissolution of the USSR, the increased influence of actors like the EU and the UN, and the rise of new regional powers. The US mediated in conflicts across most global regions, with particularly pronounced engagement in the Middle East and North Africa. This focus was driven by negotiations concerning Israel, strategic energy supplies, and counter-terrorism efforts. In Europe, its mediation included resolving conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and seeking to influence disputes in the post-Soviet space. The US has served as a mediator in approximately 30 to 40 international conflicts, depending on whether one counts direct or indirect participation and official or non-public mediation efforts. Its peak activity occurred in the 1990s and early 2000s. Since then, mediation has declined in prominence, with US foreign policy increasingly favouring diplomacy backed by power.

This history underscores the US' extensive experience and considerable success in international mediation. Yet, unlike nations such as Switzerland, the US is not widely perceived as a dedicated mediator country. This perception likely arises from an often inconsistent application of neutrality in its mediation efforts. For example,

<sup>6</sup>Indonesia and the Rohingya crisis: IPAC report No. 46. Mindanoo : Inst. for Policy Analysis of Conflict, 2018.

when analysing US mediation during the Cold War, J. Bercovitch and G. Schneider identify several factors that explain its frequent engagement. These include its hegemonic status in the bipolar system, which provided resources, influence, and coercive capabilities. Its capacity to offer potent economic and political incentives, such as financial assistance and security guarantees, also made it an attractive mediator for conflicting parties. Additional elements included its permanent UN Security Council membership, ideological ties to the Western bloc (often leading to mediation in conflicts involving NATO countries or pro-Western regimes), and established regional dominance. The negligible mediation activity of the USSR during this period (undertaking only five cases) further enabled the US to largely monopolise this function. Significantly, J. Bercovitch and G. Schneider do not identify US neutrality as a key determinant of its mediation activities [20, p. 153–158].

US mediation practices typically balance formal adherence to impartiality with pragmatic accommodation of strategic priorities. When conflicts fall outside core geopolitical priorities, US mediation can display substantial neutrality. The Northern Ireland settlement, culminating in the 1998 Belfast agreement, is a notable example. Senator G. Mitchell's personal impartiality and the tailored negotiation procedures he established enabled him to maintain an even-handed approach between the parties [21, p. 96–118]. Such instances, however, remain exceptions that confirm the rule: American neutrality in mediation is selective and ultimately determined by broader foreign policy objectives.

American mediation in strategically important regions often deviates from classical impartiality by actively promoting a liberal settlement model, as evidenced by the post-conflict structuring of Bosnia in the Dayton accords (1995). Here, US mediators championed ethnic power-sharing mechanisms and Western democratic institutions. These measures were imposed despite their limited resonance with local political traditions, which led to resistance among parts of the population [22, p. 352–361]. Similarly, in Afghanistan, mediators led by the US imposed a centralised democratic model, gender quotas, and liberal norms while marginalising culturally embedded practices. Disregarding traditional mechanisms such as *jirga* (tribal councils) ultimately hampered negotiations with the Taliban [23, p. 89–95].

Furthermore, in certain conflicts, the US abandons neutrality to openly support one party. Washington's

historically asymmetric, pro-Israel stance in Middle Eastern peace processes illustrates this tendency. During the 2000 Camp David talks, for instance, the American delegation dismissed key Palestinian demands concerning Jerusalem's status as unrealistic, thereby prioritising Israeli proposals [24, p. 6–12]. A comparable dynamic occurred in the Balkans. Despite formal declarations of neutrality during the Dayton accords (1995), the US significantly curtailed the involvement of Bosnian Serbs, whom it viewed as the losing side. The American team consequently focused dialogue on Bosnian Muslims and Croats, effectively excluding Serbian representatives from drafting crucial provisions of the agreement [22, p. 224–225].

However, the degree of American impartiality can be influenced by the institutional context, among other factors. When mediating the Eritrea–Ethiopia border dispute (1998–2000), the US prioritised regional stability. It refrained from direct intervention or imposing harsh pressure, operating instead primarily through established institutional channels. These included the UN and the Eritrea – Ethiopia Boundary Commission, whose creation America actively supported. The US also contributed to proceedings in the Permanent Court of Arbitration, maintaining procedural impartiality throughout the process [25, p. 409–413]. However, in the absence of neutral international mechanisms such as UN involvement, regional organisations, multilateral groups, or observation missions to oversee the implementation of agreements the US has often shaped mediation processes according to its own priorities. In the Colombian peace process (2012–2016), for example, Washington concentrated on security concerns, largely excluding issues of land rights and social inequality. Addressing these structural causes of the conflict would have conflicted with US interests<sup>7</sup>.

US mediation strategies typically blend formal neutrality with active promotion of liberal democratic norms as exemplified by the Dayton accords and the Belfast agreement (1998). While pragmatically effective in certain contexts, this model risks provoking local backlash when perceived as imposing culturally alien values. Over time, such tensions erode the perceived legitimacy of US mediation, jeopardise durable peace outcomes, and call into question the feasibility of genuinely «impartial» mediation when cultural and political agendas are inevitably embedded in the process.

### **A non-Western approach to international mediation: China as an emerging actor**

China now stands as the principal rival to the US in global politics, advancing a markedly different message to the international community. Unlike the US, China only established itself as a global development leader in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. It now possesses the world's

second-largest economy by nominal GDP and serves as the «global manufacturing hub» through its extensive production and supply networks. Furthermore, China maintains the second-largest military budget, fields a modernised army, and promotes its interests through

<sup>7</sup>Chavarro J. S. US interests and the Colombian peace talks [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.coha.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/U.S.-Interests-and-the-Colombian-Peace-Talks.pdf> (date of access: 14.03.2024).

initiatives such as the «Belt and road» and multilateral forums such as BRICS, APEC, and the SCO. Before Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening-up policy (1978), China's foreign engagements were regionally circumscribed, often framed by ideological solidarity with anti-colonial and communist movements. Examples include involvement in the Korean War (1950–1953), the 1954 Geneva conference on Indochina, mediation in Cambodian-Vietnamese conflicts (1970–80s), and African conflicts in Angola and Mozambique during the 1970s. As J. Bercoff and G. Schneider observe, China, despite holding permanent membership on the UN Security Council, was notably absent from international conflict mediation between the 1950s and 1990s [22, p. 159–161]. They argue that substantive diplomatic activity emerged only after president R. Nixon's 1972 visit, catalysing Beijing's political liberalisation. Even then, China's contributions focused less on mediation and more on UN peacekeeping: financial support began in 1982, followed by its first deployment of peacekeepers in 1990 [26, p. 257–258].

Initially cautious towards intervention, China prioritised multilateral frameworks under UN auspices. Since the 2000s, however, Beijing has substantially increased its participation in peacekeeping missions, for example, in South Sudan, Mali, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. China has become the largest contributor of troops among the permanent members of the Security Council, deploying over 40 000 peacekeepers to 25 UN missions [27, p. 98].

China's regional ascendancy, coupled with its growing political, economic, and strategic interests, has driven the diversification of its diplomatic tools. Within this framework, mediation now serves dual purposes: shaping dispute outcomes and advancing broader foreign policy aims. Over the past decade, China's activity as a mediator has grown considerably. For the first time in 2002, at the height of the Second Intifada, China appointed Wang Shijie as its first special representative to the Middle East and subsequently advocated for peace talks, even proposing a trilateral dialogue involving itself, the Palestinians, and the Israelis<sup>8</sup>. Empirical data indicate Chinese mediation in 24 domestic and international conflicts between 2002 and 2024. Concrete steps to de-escalate tensions occurred in 18 (75 %) of cases, while the remainder 6 involved initiating mediation, forging dialogue, or offering related assistance<sup>9</sup>.

The Chinese approach to international mediation represents a distinctive blend of formal neutrality and strategic pragmatism. Central to this model is the deliberate avoidance of moral assessments and public condemnations, favouring instead technical assistance to facilitate settlements. During its 2023 mediation between

Saudi Arabia and Iran, for instance, China framed the conflict as a routine diplomatic issue, avoided partisan language and maintained negotiation confidentiality. The main incentive for both sides lay in the prospects for investment and economic cooperation [28, p. 141–143].

A second defining element of the Chinese approach is the extensive use of economic inducements. While Western nations frequently employ political pressure or sanctions, Chinese mediators offer economic incentives including infrastructure investments, trade advantages, and collaborative projects [29, p. 65–67]. This pragmatic strategy was particularly apparent in the Sudan and South Sudan case, where Chinese negotiators prioritised economic stability and oil investment protection over political reform [30, p. 40]. However, this emphasis on economic interests, especially within the Belt and road initiative's framework, can undermine perceptions of neutrality. This tension underscores the challenge of reconciling China's professed neutrality with its strategic economic priorities.

Finally, Beijing's commitment to institutional restraint is reflected in its preference for multilateral frameworks, such as ASEAN+, AU, SCO, and BRICS. This strategy allows China to minimise direct intervention, devolve political responsibility to regional bodies, and bolster both the legitimacy of its actions among conflicting parties and its image as an impartial mediator. By operating through forums like the SCO or BRICS, China can also present its interests as collective, thereby avoiding unilateral accountability. The approach to the conflict in Myanmar is illustrative: China, while not the sole intermediary between the military junta and the National Unity Government, has supported ASEAN's Five-point consensus and maintained communication channels with both sides. The limitations of China's professed neutrality become evident when its interests clash with those of other external actors. In Myanmar, Beijing formally endorsed the negotiation process. However, it simultaneously legitimised the military junta by blocking UN resolutions condemning the regime, supplying it with weaponry, and pursuing infrastructure investments<sup>10</sup>.

China demonstrates a similar approach to the Kashmir dispute between India and Pakistan. While not an official mediator and publicly urging dialogue, Beijing effectively supports Pakistan. This support includes arms supplies, obstructing UN Security Council resolutions (2020–2022) that condemned terrorist attacks originating from Pakistan, and financing infrastructure projects in Pakistani-administered Kashmir. Furthermore, Beijing strategically uses the Kashmir issue to apply pressure on Delhi, particularly within the broader competition for influence in South Asia [31, p. 92–110].

<sup>8</sup>China's approach to Palestine and Israel: towards a greater role? [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://mecouncil.org/publication/chinas-approach-to-palestine-and-israel-towards-a-greater-role/> (date of access: 14.03.2024).

<sup>9</sup>Legarda H. China as a conflict mediator. Maintaining stability along the Belt and road [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://meric.org/en/comment/china-conflict-mediator> (date of access: 14.03.2024) ; Sadhasivam S. C3S CW special: an overview of China's mediation efforts across the globe [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.c3sindia.org/post/cw-special-an-overview-of-china-s-mediation-efforts-across-the-globe-by-ps-vaishnavi> (date of access: 14.03.2024).

<sup>10</sup>Maizland L. Myanmar's troubled history: coups, military rule, and ethnic conflict globe [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.cfr.org/background/myanmar-history-coup-military-rule-ethnic-conflict-rohingya> (date of access: 14.03.2024).

The Chinese model of mediation operates within a dialectic of principle and interest. Its declared neutrality proves effective in conflicts considered peripheral to Beijing's core concerns. However, this neutrality erodes in regions of strategic importance. China ensures confidentiality in negotiations, refrains from moral judgement, maintains dialogue with all parties, employs economic incentives rather than political pressure, and supports mediation through existing international mechanisms. It minimises its public presence and demonstrates patience with protracted processes. These attributes often distinguish China's approach favourably from that of Western mediators, potentially fostering a more impartial basis for mediation. Yet, despite these perceived strengths, the Chinese approach faces significant criticism. Firstly, mediation efforts appear largely confined to regions integral to the Belt and road initiative, where China's substantial economic presence can create subtle leverage. Secondly, the emphasis on confidentiality obscures the impartiality of China's role. Thirdly, its engagement with international structures is sometimes viewed as a means to advance national ambitions or to fragment a united international stance towards one of the conflicting parties. Finally, Beijing's willingness to engage in parallel military co-operation with one party to a conflict, and to overlook allies' violations of international law, undermines its credibility as a neutral mediator capable of facilitating swift and effective conflict resolution. This situation presents a paradox: although China has significantly expanded its mediation experience and, consequently,

its influence, Beijing's role remains contentious due to persistent systemic double standards.

The analysis reveals stark contrasts between the approaches of the US and China to conflict mediation. The US actively promotes liberal values, frequently employing public negotiation formats and leveraging sanctions or military threats. It typically favours formalised processes, often involving institutions such as the UN or the NATO. Conversely, China adheres to principles of non-interference and national sovereignty. It influences conflicting parties primarily through offers of investments and infrastructure development. Beijing typically conducts its mediation discreetly, favouring confidential bilateral negotiations or engaging non-Western frameworks like the SCO or BRICS.

Despite these differences, parallels emerge. Both powers maintain a perceptual stance of neutrality and concentrate their diplomatic efforts in regions of strategic significance: the Middle East and Europe for the US, Africa, South and Southeast Asia for China. Both utilise economic investment as a tool to incentivise engagement in negotiation processes. Furthermore, they exercise their veto power within the UN Security Council to shield allied states. Mediation also serves as a vehicle for advancing their respective strategic interests: for the USA, the promotion of its values, and for China, the safeguarding of its investments. Ultimately, neither state, despite their disparate methodologies, fully achieves neutrality in practice. This is likely attributable to their substantial and inherent influence on international processes and global politics.

## Conclusions

The findings of this research indicate that absolute neutrality in international mediation remains an aspirational ideal rather than an attainable reality, as evidenced by both theoretical scholarship and empirical analysis.

Despite professed commitments to neutrality, states and international organisations still cannot fully disentangle their mediation efforts from political, economic, and geostrategic interests. Absolute neutrality, therefore, is illusory. Conflicting parties nonetheless demand at least its semblance. As a result, «impartiality» often becomes a tactic in negotiation, stripped of substantive ethical meaning.

Mediation activities by entities such as the UN, OSCE, AU, and individual nations including Norway, Qatar, Indonesia, the US, and China, exhibit consistent structural limitations that compromise neutrality. International organisations often depend on major donors for funding and face institutional barriers, such as the veto power within the UN Security Council. This effectively renders them vehicles for advancing powerful members' agendas. Similarly, national mediators, even those reputable for neutrality, must reconcile ethical responsibilities with pragmatic considerations, adapting their approaches to shifting political contexts.

The effectiveness of mediation depends largely on how parties perceive the mediator's neutrality. This

perception establishes legitimacy and fosters trust. Yet this trust is fragile, vulnerable to asymmetric interpretations by conflicting factions. For mediators like Norway, whose credibility rests on an impartial stance, such dynamics risk exacerbating tensions, particularly in contexts of entrenched mutual suspicion.

American and Chinese mediation models differ fundamentally in their approaches. The US frequently employs pressure, such as sanctions or military threats, and utilises formal structures like the UN and the NATO, often combining mediation with the promotion of liberal democratic values. China, conversely, leverages economic investments and informal fora (SCO, BRICS, etc.), emphasising non-interference and primarily using mediation to safeguard its investments. Despite these differences, similarities exist: both powers endeavour to project neutrality, pursue their respective strategic objectives, and employ their UN veto power to protect allies. Ultimately, their global influence precludes either nation from achieving genuine neutrality in mediation.

A synthesis of established scholarship (J. Bercovitch and S. S. Gartner, I. W. Zartman, A. Kydd, S. Vuković, etc.), alongside empirical analyses of conflict mediation by international organisations and states, distinguishes three facets of mediator neutrality at the international level: institutional, strategic, and perceptual. This

framework enhances our understanding of how different mediators implement neutrality principles in practice and the specific characteristics they embody.

Institutional neutrality is most commonly associated with international organisations or small and medium-sized states, such as Norway or Indonesia within ASEAN, for whom the reputation for impartiality is essential. Strategic neutrality, by contrast, functions as a calculated approach to advance specific negotiation outcomes and is commonly employed by powerful states like the US and China, as well as multilateral bodies. Perceptual neutrality, based on subjective assessment, appears across all mediator types but becomes most

salient when major international actors engage in mediation despite objective evidence suggesting partiality.

Contemporary international mediation increasingly reflects a shift towards «diplomacy of the possible», wherein neutrality evolves from an absolute ethical standard to a flexible instrument shaped by structural realities. This shift does not diminish neutrality's value as a conflict de-escalation mechanism, even if it takes the form of managed compromise in which parties acknowledge the mediator's inherent interests. Enhancing mediation effectiveness depends less on absolute neutrality and more on transparent disclosure of interests, enabling parties to develop realistic assessments of negotiation prospects.

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