

Research Reports

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"Research Reports" are compiled by participants in research groups set up at the Japan Institute of International Affairs, and are designed to disseminate, in a timely fashion, the content of presentations made at research group meetings or analyses of current affairs. The "Research Reports" represent their authors' views. In addition to these "Research Reports", individual research groups will publish "Research Bulletins" covering the full range of the group's research themes.

China's Mediation Diplomacy in Myanmar

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1. China's Increasingly Active Mediation Diplomacy

Mediation diplomacy is the process of managing conflicts through the power of outsiders, with the consent of the parties involved, using diplomatic means rather than force or legal methods.¹ Mediation diplomacy is familiar to Western European countries such as Switzerland and Germany, but in recent years emerging powers have also used mediation diplomacy to strengthen their international presence.²

In the 21st century, China has also begun to focus on mediation diplomacy as a tool to increase its voice and influence on the international stage. In employing mediation diplomacy, China often chooses issues with a high international profile on which multilateral mediation diplomacy is already underway, and it is particularly interested in issues involving countries along the routes of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).³

The Panglong Conference in Myanmar and mediation over the Rohingya issue, while both ongoing, are important cases that will affect China's own social stability and the future of the BRI. This paper will identify the characteristics of China's approach through its mediation diplomacy in the Myanmar conflict.

2. Myanmar: The Panglong Conference and the Rohingya Issue

Many countries are committed to mediation diplomacy in Myanmar's peace process. Nippon Foundation Chairman Yohei Sasakawa, who became the Special Envoy of the Government of Japan for National Reconciliation in Myanmar in 2013, has visited Myanmar over 100 times,⁴ and the Japanese government has supported Myanmar's democratization through economic cooperation, financial assistance, and human resource development.

China also embarked on mediation diplomacy in Myanmar around 2013 because fighting between the National Army and the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), a rebel group in Kachin State, escalated from June 2011, and armed clashes had continued intermittently in northeastern Myanmar near the Chinese border even after the peace process led by the Thein Sein government began to take hold.

2.1 The Panglong Peace Conference and the Panglong Agreement

Although the signing of the ceasefire agreement in 2015 had restored peace in the Thailand-Myanmar border region, clashes in the China-Myanmar border region had not ceased but rather intensified.

To facilitate a resolution of the clashes in northern Myanmar, a China-sponsored peace conference in Panglong was held from August 31 to September 4, 2016. However, there was a huge gap between the Myanmar government, which demanded disarmament, and the ethnic minority forces, which demanded autonomy, and armed clashes between the Northern Alliance⁵ and the Myanmar National Army became more intense from October 2016 onward.

In March 2017, many refugees flowed into China to escape the clashes. Against this backdrop, China hosted the second Panglong Peace Conference from May 24-29, 2017, urging the ethnic minority forces to sign a ceasefire agreement.⁶ Prior to the second conference, Sun Guoxiang, Special Envoy for Asian Affairs, met with representatives of the Northern Alliance in Kunming. These efforts resulted in the Northern Alliance representatives also attending the Panglong Peace Conference, and the Panglong Agreement was signed by the participants. However, the Panglong Agreement failed to make significant headway in preventing clashes, and conflicts continued after the conference.

Then, on July 11, 2018, the third Panglong Peace Conference was held in Nay Pyi Taw.⁷ No agreement leading to a resolution of the conflict could be reached at this conference. Negotiations between the Northern Alliance and the government then continued until shortly before the coup,⁸ but the conflict continues.

On February 1, 2021, the Myanmar military overthrew the government led by State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi and seized power in a coup d'état. Following the coup, the National Unity Government (NUG) was established in September 2021, with Kachin State politician Duwa Lashi La as acting president, and all-out war was declared against the military. Some democratic groups

opposed to the military have joined forces with ethnic minority armed groups to wage guerrilla warfare in various parts of the country.⁹

In this context, China is trying to maintain ties with former State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi and the ethnic minority armed groups, while at the same time strengthening its relationship with the government led by the top military official. China has also expressed its opposition to unjustified intervention by outside parties while supporting the five-point consensus reached by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) on the Myanmar issue.¹⁰

Based on these principles of action, the Chinese government provided 10,000 vaccine doses to the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) in July 2021, and in the same month provided 736,000 doses to the Myanmar government.¹¹ From August 21 to 28, 2021, the Special Envoy for Asian Affairs Sun Guoxiang visited Myanmar and met with Min Aung Hlaing, the head of the Myanmar Armed Forces. Sun's request to meet Aung San Suu Kyi was denied, however.¹² During his stay in Myanmar, Sun Guoxiang also held talks with some ethnic minority armed groups fighting the junta, but four organizations within the Northern Alliance are reportedly refusing to negotiate with the junta.¹³

2.2 The Rohingya Issue

In late August 2017, Myanmar security forces conducted a sweep against Rohingya armed groups, causing more than 600,000 Rohingya to flee to neighboring Bangladesh.¹⁴

China had been engaged in mediation diplomacy over the Rohingya issue even before this Rohingya crisis erupted, and offered to mediate when Sun Guoxiang visited Bangladesh from April 24 to 27, 2017.¹⁵

In November 2017, the Chinese government launched a three-stage initiative of "ceasefire, return, and development (*zhibao, qianfan, fazhan*)".¹⁶ Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Bangladesh and Myanmar and, as a result of his visit, both Myanmar and Bangladesh on November 23 agreed on a policy to return refugees quickly. On January 16, 2018, the two governments further agreed to complete the repatriation within two years.¹⁷

Although its mediation diplomacy had not produced tangible results, China continued its efforts. On January 19, 2021, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Luo Zhaohui hosted a tripartite online meeting with Bangladesh and Myanmar over the Rohingya refugee issue. The online meeting was to realize the pilot initiative on refugee return proposed by Wang Yi during his visit to Myanmar the week before, but China strongly insisted on the policy of "move first, experiment first (*xianxing xianshi*)" and tried to realize the first return as soon as possible. The participating countries was reported to have agreed to hold the tripartite meeting on a sustained basis, to eradicate poverty, to take COVID-19 countermeasures, and not to internationalize the Rohingya issue or make it a political issue.¹⁸

3. Changes and Characteristics of China's Mediation Diplomacy

In the 21st century, China has been actively engaged in mediation diplomacy. From China's perspective, its mediation diplomacy in Asia can play an important role in enhancing its presence as a major power, stabilizing the surrounding environment, and promoting the BRI. For these reasons, China has been actively engaged with hot issues pertaining to conflicts.

Many countries have been pro-actively extending their diplomatic efforts to Myanmar's domestic disputes and engaging in mediation diplomacy. If mediation diplomacy has two approaches – the "facilitative approach," as seen in the mediation diplomacy of Switzerland and Norway, and the "directive approach," as seen in the mediation diplomacy of the United States and Russia,¹⁹ China's mediation diplomacy at this stage falls somewhere in between. In order for its mediation diplomacy to bring about ceasefires and peace, China is using vaccines and other economic aid as a lever. These diplomatic efforts have provided China with a valuable political resource: access to the parties to the conflict. On the other hand, as evidenced by China's mediation diplomacy on the Rohingya issue, China's mediation diplomacy does not always lead to international recognition due to differences in philosophy and values with developed Western countries.

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¹ The definition of mediation diplomacy used in this paper is a modified version of Jacob Bercovitch's definition. According to Jacob Bercovitch, international mediation means "a process of conflict management, related to but distinct from the parties' own negotiations, where those in conflict seek the assistance of, or accept an offer of help from, an outsider (who may be an individual, an organization, a group, or a state) to change their perceptions or behavior, and to do so without resorting to physical force or invoking the authority of law." (Jacob Bercovitch, *Theory and Practice of International Mediation*, London: Routledge, 2011, p.23).

² Milena Dieckhoff, "International Mediation: A Specific Diplomatic Tool for Emerging Countries?", *European Review of International Studies*, Vol. 1, Issue 2, Summer 2014, pp. 107+.

³ Helena Legarda, "China as a Conflict Mediator: Maintaining Stability along the Belt and Road", <https://merics.org/en/short-analysis/china-conflict-mediator>

⁴ Nihon Myanma kyoukai kaicho Watanabe Hideo (Watanabe Hideo, Japan Myanmar Association Chairman) "Shinnen no goaisatsu" (New Year's greetings), http://japanmyanmar.or.jp/shr/pdf/shinnen_2021.pdf

⁵ The Northern Alliance is a military alliance established in November 2016 consisting of four ethnic rebel groups in Myanmar (the Arakan Army [AA], the Kachin Independence Army [KIA], the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army [MNDAA], and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army [TNLA]).

⁶ "Zhongguo Yazhou shiwu teshi: Wang '21 shiji Binlong heping dahui' chengwei Miandian heping jincheng xinqidian" (China's Special Envoy for Asian Affairs: Hope the 21st Century Panglong Peace Conference Will Become a New Starting Point for the Peace Process in Myanmar), <http://news.cri.cn/2017-05-24/72a631fe-1986-3d73-d6cd-80ccf9bdeb2e.html>

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- ⁷ "Miandian di 3 jie 21 shiji Binlong huiyi kaimu" (Myanmar Opens the Third 21st Century Panglong Conference), http://www.xinhuanet.com/photo/2018-07/11/c_1123112410.htm
- ⁸ "Myanmar Govt Wants New Round of Talks with Northern Alliance", January 5, 2021, <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/myanmar-govt-wants-new-round-talks-northern-alliance.html>
- ⁹ "Myanma kokugun toppu, shosu minzoku to no wahei suishin kyocho" (Myanmar's Military Chief Stresses Peace Promotion with Ethnic Minorities), *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, January 1, 2022.
- ¹⁰ "Zhongguo waijiaobu Yazhou shiwu teshi Sun Guoxiang wangwen Miandian" (Sun Guoxiang, Special Envoy of the Chinese Foreign Ministry for Asian Affairs, Visited Myanmar), <http://mm.china-embassy.org/chn/sqxw/t1903405.htm>
- ¹¹ "Zhongguo xiang Miandian Keqinbang panjun tigong yiwan ji yumiao" (China Delivers 10,000 Doses of Vaccine to Rebels in Myanmar's Kachin State), <https://www.rfi.fr/cn/中国/20210726-中国向缅甸克钦邦叛军提供一万剂疫苗>
- ¹² "Miandian 'pingxing zhengfu' xiang jun zhengfu xuanzhan, Zhongguo shoupai teshi fang Mian" (Burma's 'Parallel Government' Declares War on Junta, China Sends First Envoy to Myanmar) <https://www.rfa.org/mandarin/yataibaodao/junshiwaijiao/hx-09082021101045.html>
- ¹³ "Zhongguo teshi fangwen yu dangdi shaoshu minzu wuzhuang tuanti fasheng junshi chongtu de jun zhengfu" (Chinese Envoy Visits Junta in Military Clashes with Local Ethnic Armed Groups) <https://www.asianews.it/news-zh/中国特使访问与当地少数民族武装团体发生军事冲突的军政府-53957.html>
- ¹⁴ "Rohyingya souki kikan he goui, Myanma to Banguradeshu" (Myanmar and Bangladesh Agree to Early Rohingya Return" *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 24 November 24, 2017.
- ¹⁵ "2017 nian 4 yue 26 ri waijiaobu fayaren Geng Shuang zhuchi lixing jizhehui" (Foreign Ministry Spokesman Geng Shuang Hosts Regular Press Conference on April 26, 2017) https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/diaoyudao/chn/xwdt/201704/t20170426_8524194.htm
- ¹⁶ "Wang Yi: Zhongfang tichu fen sanjieduan jiejie miandian Ruokaibang wenti shexiang"(Wang Yi: China proposes a Three-Stage Solution to the Rakhine State Problem in Myanmar) <https://world.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnK5LPv>
- ¹⁷ "Rohyingya kikan, 2 nen yinai, Myanma, Banggura goui" (Rohingya Return, within Two Years, Myanmar-Bangladesh Agreement), *Asahi Shimbun*, January 17, 2018.
- ¹⁸ "China, Myanmar and Bangladesh Reach Positive Consensus on Accelerating the Repatriation of Rohingya Refugees", https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/t1847477.shtml
- ¹⁹ Simon J. A. Mason, "Developing a State's Mediation Profile: Core Dimensions and Key Questions", in Anne Hoper and Lars Kirchhoff eds., *Peace Mediation in Germany's Foreign Policy: Uniting Method, Power and Politics*, Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2011, pp.29-38.