



China's Stances on Political Crises in Other Countries

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China's growing global engagement has altered the government's interpretation of the non-interference principle, which officially is a cornerstone of PRC foreign policy. It has been noticeable especially since the early 2000s in China's reactions to internal political crises in other countries. Although China usually pursues a wait-and-see approach, mainly where it has little economic and political interests, such as recently in Belarus, more and more often China openly involves itself where it has significant interests or its citizens may suffer. This approach creates an opportunity for democratic countries to cooperate with China, albeit to a limited extent.

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China, its authorities have officially recognised the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries as the basis of Chinese diplomacy. This principle also concerns domestic political crises, such as anti-government protests or coups d'état in third countries. Usually, the official Chinese response is limited to calls for dialogue and ceasing violence. The clear exception was the Maoist period when China explicitly violated this principle in its fight against imperialism. In recent years, the principle of non-interference has been reinterpreted, which Chinese experts openly admit. The turning point was 2001 when the so-called "going out" strategy was announced, which assumes China's greater global activity.

Principle of Non-interference and Its Evolution. The principle was adopted at the Bandung conference in 1955 when the Non-Aligned Movement was forming. It implies opposition to all forms of external interference and support for rulers, regardless of the political regime. Interference includes military intervention, threats to use force, striving to overthrow the ruling authorities, supporting anti-government forces, or even publicly assessing the situation in another country. The aim is to ensure reciprocal non-interference by other states in China's internal affairs, mainly its political system, and to force recognition of Taiwan, Tibet, Hong Kong, and disputed islands in the South and East China seas as part of China. The principle is also intended to distinguish China from Western countries and organisations, such as the U.S. or NATO, which, in the

Chinese opinion, intervene in other countries to change the regime. Another goal of the principle is to express solidarity with and speak for the countries of the Global South.

Changes in the interpretation of the principle of non-interference have been noticeable in China's reaction to political crises in non-democratic countries or those with unstable democracies. Usually, China adopts a wait-and-see approach that assumes more or less open support for the current rulers and/or avoiding taking a clear stance on protests, for example. Increasingly, however, China is usually visibly involved through contacts with the opposition and initiating mediation. These two types of responses can overlap, and China may change its approach depending on the development of the situation even within the same crisis.

The factors that determine the choice of response are the degree of China's economic and political involvement, the size of the Chinese diaspora, the possibility of the crisis spreading into a region important to the PRC, the role of other countries, mainly the U.S. and Russia, and China's international image.

Wait and See. This reaction is used towards countries with which China does not have very significant economic, political, or security interests (or they are not in serious danger) or a large diaspora. The wait-and-see approach also might be used when a conflict may threaten the domestic situation in the PRC. For example, China applied this approach during the protests in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011.

The main reason was the fear of Chinese society being inspired by anti-government protests during the Arab Spring. The reaction of the Chinese authorities was therefore cautious, with reports about the protests sparse in Chinese media, and even censored.

In this approach, China also weighs the influence of important partners, especially Russia. China applied this stance during the unrest in Ukraine in 2014 and is now applying it to [Belarus](#). The PRC considers both countries to be within the Russian “sphere of influence”. [China, despite the asymmetry in its favour in the “alliance” with Russia](#), does not want to undermine relations with it by engaging in some form of protests or mediation, taking into account the usefulness of cooperation with the Russian authorities against the U.S. and counting on reciprocity in case of a domestic crisis in China. Moreover, bearing in mind the support of Western countries for the democratic aspirations of the protesters, China sees a convergence of interests with Russia—both countries are against promoting Western democracy and emphasise the effectiveness of their authoritarian regimes. The PRC is therefore eager to suggest inspiration and interference by external forces—supposedly the U.S. or the EU—in the anti-government demonstrations. In practice, China is not unequivocally on either side. The statements of Chinese representatives are unclear, and China is not proposing any specific initiatives or peace plans.

[Venezuela](#) is an example of a shift in response within the same crisis. The behind-the-scenes contacts between the Chinese authorities and Juan Guaidó, who declared himself the country’s interim president in January 2019, were aimed at securing oil supplies and paying off debts (China is the country’s largest lender) in case of the fall of President Nicolas Maduro. As Guaidó weakened and Maduro strengthened, China opted for the wait-and-see approach.

Limited Engagement. China uses the second approach towards countries where it has significant interests—mainly economic and security ones that might be seriously harmed—and/or a large diaspora, or when it wants to gain experience, for example, in UN peacekeeping operations. China usually criticizes the initiators of coups d’état (most recently in the case of the August coup d’état in [Mali](#)) and then becomes involved with both sides of the dispute, mainly through contacts initiating mediation and seeking support from other states. Sometimes, China appoints a special envoy and proposes peace plans.

Libya in 2011 was a special case, one in which China became significantly involved. This was related to its oil, gas, and military contracts, as well as to the around 36,000 Chinese citizens living in Libya. China has joined the UN sanctions and, by abstaining from voting on a resolution establishing a no-fly zone, indirectly enabled NATO to intervene and overthrow Muammar Gaddafi. This approach met with a wave of internal criticism in China. The authorities were

accused of working hand in hand with the West and precipitating economic losses for China. The Libyan experience was followed in Syria, with a twist. In 2012, China contacted the main opposition at the time and offered mediation. It also presented a very general peace plan. At the same time, by vetoing UN resolutions, China strengthened its cooperation with Russia.

Another example is Sudan, which is important to China for its investments in the oil sector. In the case of the Darfur crisis, China in 2006 changed its original approach—unconditional support for President Omar al-Bashir—to pressure him to accept a peacekeeping force. The change was also a reaction to international criticism ahead of the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. Then, in South Sudan, striving for independence, even before the establishment of the new state China opened a consulate in Juba in 2008, and before the referendum (in which it was an observer), the PRC established cooperation with the informal authorities. During the civil war in [South Sudan](#) in 2013, China initiated mediation. In 2015, amidst the military coup in Sudan, the PRC eventually withdrew its support for the ruling party and supported the transition to a [civilian government](#).

An example from its neighbourhood is China’s engagement in Myanmar, an important economic partner and source of instability in the region because of ethnic clashes and masses of refugees. Since 2013, through a special envoy, China has mediated the peace process between the country’s authorities and armed ethnic groups.

Conclusions. The changes within China’s long-standing principle of non-interference in the context of political crises in other countries have been cautious. The PRC tries not to get directly involved in the process of political transition. While defending China’s interests, the government is unwilling to protect undemocratic regimes at all costs because in the long run they are not a guarantee of the stability where China has significant interests.

China’s increasing global engagement may result in a further reinterpretation of the non-interference principle towards greater involvement, for example in the domestic crises in countries participating in the Belt and Road Initiative. A limitation might be the rising global backlash against Chinese foreign policy actions under Xi Jinping’s rule.

The PRC’s increasing eagerness to engage creates an opportunity for democratic countries or blocs like the EU to cooperate with China in third countries, such as some African states. There is the possibility of limited support for China in stabilisation processes; however, cooperation with the PRC is unlikely in countries recognised by the authorities in Beijing as within Russia’s exclusive area of interest, especially in the face of growing tensions in U.S.-China relations.