

China's uneasy mediation in a fractured neighbourhood

■ EARTH NEWS POLITICAL DESK

The spectacle of a rising global power struggling to pacify conflict in its own backyard is neither new nor entirely unexpected. Yet, China's recent attempts to mediate between Afghanistan and Pakistan have brought into sharp relief the limits of its diplomatic leverage. Despite its economic weight, strategic partnerships, and geographic proximity, Beijing has found itself unable to meaningfully shape — let alone resolve — a conflict that continues to simmer with dangerous unpredictability.

At first glance, China appears uniquely positioned to play peacemaker. It is a close economic partner of Pakistan, deeply invested in infrastructure and connectivity projects, and maintains working ties with the Taliban-led government in Afghanistan. Stability between the two neighbors is not merely desirable for Beijing; it is essential. Its investments, personnel, and long-term regional ambitions are directly exposed to the fallout of persistent violence. Yet, the unfolding crisis suggests that influence built on trade and strategic alignment does not easily translate into conflict resolution on the ground.

The latest round of hostilities between Afghanistan and Pakistan, which began in October last year, marked a troubling escalation in an already volatile relationship. Cross-border strikes by both sides shattered any illusion of restraint. Though a ceasefire was briefly brokered with the help of Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Türkiye, it proved fragile. The underlying tensions — centered largely on Pakistan's allegations that militant groups operate freely from Afghan territory — remained unresolved, ensuring that the conflict would reignite.

For China, the renewed violence was more than a regional concern; it was a direct challenge to its strategic calculus. Beijing moved swiftly, at least diplomatically. Calls for restraint were issued, urging both sides to resolve disputes through dialogue. Behind the scenes, Chinese officials engaged in what they described as "shuttle mediation," with Special Envoy Yu Xiaoyong traveling between Islamabad and Kabul in early March.

The optics of these efforts were carefully managed. Meetings were held with senior officials on both sides. Statements emphasized mutual appreciation for China's role and a shared willingness to pursue political solutions. Simultaneously, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi conducted separate phone calls with his counterparts in both countries, reinforcing Beijing's message of de-escalation.

Even Chinese President Xi Jinping, through diplomatic channels, signaled his expectation that hostilities should cease. The message, conveyed to Pakistan's leadership, underscored the seriousness with which Beijing views the conflict. It was a reminder that China's interests are not abstract; they are tied to concrete investments, security concerns, and a broader vision of regional stability.

Yet, beyond the carefully worded statements and diplomatic choreography, the reality has been far less encouraging.

Pakistan's response to China's mediation has been, at best, cautious and, at worst, dismissive. Publicly, Islamabad has maintained that it values its partnership with Beijing and remains in close communication. Privately — and sometimes indirectly through official statements — it has signaled a lack of appetite for negotiations with the Taliban unless its core security concerns are addressed.

These concerns are not trivial. Pakistan has long accused the Taliban government of harboring or failing to act against militant groups that

conduct attacks across the border. The Taliban, in turn, deny these allegations, creating a stalemate that diplomacy alone has struggled to break. For Pakistan's security establishment, the issue is existential; it is not one that can be easily compromised in the name of regional harmony.

This divergence of priorities lies at the heart of China's predicament. Beijing's approach is rooted in stability and economic continuity. It seeks de-escalation, dialogue, and predictability — conditions necessary for safeguarding its investments and expanding its regional footprint. Pakistan, however, is driven by immediate security imperatives, while the Taliban leadership is guided by its own

cumulate rapidly, the space for effective mediation narrows considerably.

The brief ceasefire observed during Eid al-Fitr — facilitated not by China but by Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Türkiye — offered a fleeting glimpse of what de-escalation might look like. However, its temporary nature underscored the deeper problem: external mediation can pause conflict, but it cannot resolve the structural issues that sustain it.

For China, this raises uncomfortable questions about the nature and extent of its regional influence. Beijing has often projected itself as a responsible global power, capable of offering alternative models of diplomacy distinct from Western interventionism. Its emphasis on non-

be achieved through negotiation at this stage. If the perceived threat from militant groups is as severe as it claims, then military action — rather than dialogue — becomes the preferred course. In such a scenario, external mediation, regardless of its source, is unlikely to gain traction.

For Afghanistan's Taliban government, the calculus is equally complex. International recognition remains limited, and engagement with external powers is often shaped by the need to balance legitimacy with ideological consistency. Accepting mediation that appears to align too closely with one side's demands could carry domestic and political risks.

Caught between these competing priorities, China finds itself navigating

However, the effectiveness of such efforts will ultimately be judged not by intent but by results. In this case, the results have been limited at best. The continuation of hostilities, the persistence of mistrust, and the apparent indifference of key actors to Beijing's initiatives all point to a gap between ambition and capability.

This does not mean that China's role is irrelevant or that its efforts are without value. Diplomacy is often incremental, and even unsuccessful initiatives can lay the groundwork for future engagement. Yet, it does suggest that expectations must be tempered. Influence, particularly in conflict situations, is contingent on a complex interplay of factors that extend beyond economic ties and



China's attempt to play peacemaker between Afghanistan and Pakistan reveals an uncomfortable truth: economic influence does not automatically translate into diplomatic control. Despite high-level outreach, shuttle diplomacy, and repeated calls for restraint, Beijing has been unable to slow — let alone stop — a conflict driven by deep-rooted mistrust and hard security concerns. Pakistan's insistence on eliminating militant threats, coupled with the Taliban's denials, has created a deadlock that external mediation struggles to penetrate. For China, the stakes are immediate and tangible — from the safety of its personnel to the future of its regional ambitions. Yet, its limited success exposes the constraints of a strategy built largely on economic leverage. In a region shaped by suspicion and shifting alliances, Beijing is discovering that influence must be negotiated, not assumed.



internal calculations and ideological framework.

In such a context, China's calls for restraint risk sounding detached from the realities faced by the parties involved. Diplomacy, no matter how persistent, cannot substitute for alignment of interests. And in the Afghanistan-Pakistan equation, that alignment remains elusive.

The limitations of China's influence become even more apparent when viewed against the backdrop of continued violence. Despite mediation efforts, cross-border attacks have persisted. Allegations and counter-allegations have further deepened mistrust. A particularly contentious episode involved claims by the Taliban that Pakistani forces had targeted a civilian rehabilitation center in Kabul, resulting in significant casualties. Pakistan firmly denied these accusations, insisting that its operations were directed solely at militant infrastructure.

Such incidents do more than inflame tensions; they erode whatever fragile trust exists between the two sides. In an environment where narratives are contested and grievances ac-

interference and economic engagement has found resonance in many parts of the world. Yet, the Afghanistan-Pakistan crisis exposes the limits of this model when confronted with entrenched security dilemmas.

One possible explanation for Pakistan's reluctance to fully embrace Chinese mediation lies in its broader strategic calculations. While China remains a crucial partner, Islamabad has also sought to recalibrate its relationship with the United States in recent years. This evolving dynamic may provide Pakistan with greater diplomatic flexibility, reducing its dependence on any single external actor.

If this is indeed the case, it complicates China's position further. Influence, after all, is not static; it must be continuously negotiated and reinforced. The presence of alternative partnerships can dilute the leverage that any one country holds, particularly in matters as sensitive as national security.

Another possibility is more straightforward: Pakistan may simply believe that its objectives cannot

a diplomatic landscape that resists easy solutions. Its investments in the region, particularly in Pakistan, have been framed as part of a broader vision of connectivity and development. However, infrastructure projects and economic partnerships cannot insulate against the destabilizing effects of conflict.

Indeed, the emphasis placed by Chinese officials on the safety of their personnel and projects reveals a more immediate concern. As violence persists, the risks to Chinese interests grow, potentially undermining years of strategic planning. Stability is not merely an abstract goal; it is a prerequisite for the success of China's regional ambitions.

The current impasse also carries implications beyond Afghanistan and Pakistan. It speaks to the broader challenge of translating economic influence into political and security outcomes. China's rise has been accompanied by expectations — both domestically and internationally — that it will play a more active role in global governance. Mediation efforts such as these are part of that evolving role.

strategic partnerships.

As the situation stands, China's mediation has reached a plateau. It continues to call for dialogue, to engage with both sides, and to emphasize the importance of stability. But without a shift in the underlying dynamics of the conflict, these efforts are unlikely to yield a decisive breakthrough.

The Afghanistan-Pakistan crisis thus serves as a sobering reminder of the limits of power. For all its economic might and diplomatic outreach, China cannot compel outcomes where interests diverge so sharply. Its experience in this instance underscores a fundamental truth of international relations: influence is not merely a function of strength, but of alignment.

Until such alignment emerges — whether through exhaustion, negotiation, or external pressure — the prospects for lasting peace remain uncertain. And for China, the challenge will be to reconcile its ambitions with the realities of a region where control is elusive and stability remains a distant goal.