International Journal Of History And Political Sciences

VOLUME Vol.06 Issue05 2026
PAGE NO. 67-71
DOI 10.37547/ijhps/Volume06Issue05-12

Humanitarian intervention vs. Non-interference: china's response to nato's kosovo operation in 1998s.

Khodjaeva Mubinakhon R.

Master's Student, Faculty of International Relations University of World Economy and Diplomacy, Uzbekistan

Received: 29 March 2026; **Accepted:** 25 April 2026; **Published:** 21 May 2026

Abstract: The work seeks to examine China's response to NATO's humanitarian intervention in Kosovo in 1998 and 1999, through the lens of the non-interference principle and the emerging doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). This situation presents dual reactions from the great powers, while NATO justified Operation Allied Force on humanitarian factor, China and Russia firmly opposed the intervention as a violation of the sovereignty and a critical bypass of the United Nations Security Council. According on recent peer-reviewed scholars, this paper argues that China's opposition to the Kosovo intervention was not merely a diplomatic position, yet reflected a deeply rooted foreign policy worldview that prioritizes state sovereignty, multilateralism and non-interference over any unilateral humanitarian action. This work further contends that China's stance on Kosovo established a pattern that continues to define Beijing's approach to international crises today as: Libya, Syria crisis and Ukraine. By analyzing the Kosovo case in the broader context to China's evolving policy of non-intervention, this work contributes to the current scholarly debates about the legality of humanitarian intervention and state sovereignty in international law.

Keywords: Kosovo, NATO, sovereignty, humanitarian intervention, China, Responsibility to Protect, UN Security Council, R2P.

Introduction: The case with Kosovo war in 1998 holds significant influence in post-Cold War international Relation, due-to fact that NATO had implemented the first military operation "Operation Allied Force" over the existence of 50 year. The airstrikes were conducted against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, without United Nations Security Council authorization, considered as one of the mass violations of human rights and regional conflict in the history. However, this intervention led to the development of the Responsibility to Protect (P2R) doctrine, changing the sovereignty from right requiring states to protect their citizens from the severe atrocities (Singh, 2024)

This paper will focus on revealing the situation in Kosovo with reliable secondary sources and humanitarian intervention of NATO with primary source from website of NATO using the articles of official entities perspective that were experienced to take part in that war. Most scholars used to consider the NATO's intervention to Kosovo as an illegal action, threat to sovereignty of state, in this paper I will contribute to some facts and arguments, that analyze the consequences of NATO's humanitarian intervention.

This intervention was framed as a "moral obligation" from side of Western states, yet not all states had the same view, the most principled critics were the People's Republic of China, Russia, Brazil, India, South Africa (Ristic & Satjukow, 2022). Especially, for Beijing, NATO's unilateral action, without the procedure of UN Security Council in Kosovo was not only a violation of international law, but a significant concern for the entire principle of sovereign equality among countries in international arena (Seppanen and Smith, 2025). The position of China was deeply connected with its principles of foreign policy, Seppanen and Smith (2025) argue that Beijing prioritizes non-intervention doctrine, where the sovereignty and territory of state can not be violated by unilateral operations.

This work will analyze China's response to NATO's humanitarian intervention in Kosovo through the principle of non-interference, arguing that China's

position reflected not only a diplomatic condition, but a vividly rooted worldview about the sovereignty, the role of UNSC in authorization the procedures and the limits of external intervention. Examining such position is therefore crucial, for understanding the broader context of norms that regulate contemporary international order.

Background: The Kosovo Crisis 1998 – 1999 and Allied Operation Force.

The ethnic movement of Albanians and Serbs to the Kosovo resulted to the crisis in 1998. The leader of Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Slobodan Milosevic had raised the oppressive tension toward the Albanians (Signh,2025). Slobodan Milosevic ignored couple of notifications raised by UN Security Council, demanding to stop the violation and ethnic cleansing. One of the world military organization a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which was the first to decide conducting the military campaign to stop the conflict in Kosovo (Latawski. &Smith., 2003). As the commander Wesley (1998) was sure that their (NATO) campaign has a precise objective - prevent the civil casualties in Kosovo through military force use. NATO had condemned the Milosevic's action and asked him to stop the violation, this crisis was seen as a threat to the fundamental principles of NATO and the Washington Treaty based on principle of safeguard freedom, rule of law, individual liberty, democracy, that were highly maintained and recognized by 19 members of NATO (Wesley, 1998).

The "Allied Operation Force" was the first military power launched in 1999, under NATO' regulation, and aimed to confront the policy of Slobodan Milosevic (Roberts, 2002). Then general commander of Allied Operation Wesley K. Clark (1999), declared that during the 2 months of the operation, the campaign had significant impact on the crisis and every night the number of aircraft force was doubling. As Wesley (1999) stated: "Our aims are both strategic and tactical" in his official article. The main strategic aim of the air campaign was preventing the violation in Kosovo by President Slobodan Milosevic that violated the international norms (Wesley, 1999). "We are weakening his (Slobodan Milosevic) hold on power base that allow him to conduct conflict of ethnic cleansing" said the commander Wesley (1999). In order to limit the power of Slobodan, the campaign was not applying the air force, but NATO decided to cut down every source of communications, networks, that serve as secret delivery of information or control of his security and army force in Kosovo (Wesley, 1999). This was a controlled media, an instrument for spread of propaganda, misconception of truth, where he (Slobodan) strives to persuade people about correctness of his actions, concealing the international condemnation to avoid the UN punishment (Wesley, 1998). Overall, the bombing campaign was finished in 78 days without any loss of crew member, over aircraft flew with more than 30.000 sorties (Naumann, 2002).

More than 250.000 of Albanian Kosovars refugees, who was forced to leave their homes due-to crisis (Latawski. &Smith. 2003). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was involved in active participation to sustain the refugees with every need (Solana, 1999). NATO itself had built the camps at Brazda for refugees in 48 hours, humanitarian aid for refugees was delivered supplies like: 129.000 food, 20.000 bottles for baby, 35.000 soap, 14.000 troops to after thousands of refugees who had to leave their homes (Solana, 1999).

The quantitative data on Allied force operation in Kosovo reveals that in during a period of 2 month, NATO has destroyed 600 heavy equipment, 100 aircrafts; NATO had challenged the Serbs force by closing the access to 4 major roads to Kosovo, almost 40% of army fuel stock has been destroyed (Wesley, 1999). More than 2000 people were killed during ethnic cleansings of Slobodan Milosevic, before start of air campaign (NATO, 1999). Due - to mass destruction a quarter million of Kosovar Albanians became refugees. NATO provided over 4666 tons of food and water, 4325 tons of other goods, 2624 tons of tents and nearly 1600 tons of medical supplies to Kosovo (NATO, 1999).

The Allied Force Operation was able to reach a peace and stop the conflict, the leader of Federal Republic of Yugoslavia; Slobodan Milosevic was forced to sign agreement on removing his troops and policy of ethnic cleansing from territory of Kosovo. The Allied operation was concluded with Military Technical Agreement signed between NATO and Kosovo Army by representatives NATO General Sir Jackson and Colonel General Svetozar Marjanovic (NATO, 1999). The absence of authorization by UN Security Council resulted in mass criticisms of NATO humanitarian intervention to Kosovo, renaming it to unlawful intervention. However, from NATO's official documents, which state Javier Solana the NATO Secretary - General had informed about the campaign to the United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, who proposed to act under all principles of UN Security Council resolutions. (NATO, 1999). The commander of Allied Operation Wesley K. Clark approved the operation, considering this conflict as challenge to NATO's principle of freedom, democracy and rule of law (Roberts, 2006). General Wesley K. Clark stated in his document that "It wasn't campaign against Serbian residents, but specialized in the repression forces, allied, pilots and targets

diligently approached to prevent collateral damage, especially loss of population life." (Roberts, 2006).

The quantitative data provides evidence that the Allied Operation by NATO had significant contribution and consequences for the conflict in Kosovo. First, it strengthens the recognition, that one cannot violate the human rights, their religion, ethnicity and race. Second, formation of new doctrine of humanitarian intervention - Responsibility to Protect, it was recognized in World Summit 2005, by members of United Nation (Henkin, 1999). Thirdly, it showed the importance of collective support, as far after NATO's campaign, the international community was actively engaged in providing financial aid for restoration of all damage, that Kosovo faced during the crisis. For instance, the IMF, EU and G7 were ready for a help and offered financial aid for Kosovo (Solana, 1999). The Washington Summit established the regional cooperation between Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) on promotion of Partnership for Peace (PfP) to offer sustainable assistance; the World Bank and International Monetary Fund were recognized in a list of PfP by providing financial support in reconstruction process of Kosovo (NATO, 1999). However, not all state members shared the same vision regarding NATO's operation.

In September 1998, NATO was accused in conducting an illegal intervention in pretext of humanitarian intervention. The Resolution and debates in 1998 ended supporting the humanitarian intervention, 12 out of 15 Council members were for the side of NATO and eventually NATO's humanitarian intervention was officially adopted renamed into official doctrine of UN - Responsibility to Protect. Alongside with other 3 dimensions of The Responsibility: 1. Responsibility to react is implementation if military force in case of scale or unstoppable emergency; 2. Responsibility to rebuild - preventing situation which promoted the condition of intervention; 3. Responsibility to prevent, which means preventing human-made problems, by international organizations (Lucinescu, 2024) (Roberts, 2006) (Garwood-Gowers, 2024).

The research analysis started from Kosovo conflict, and how the NATO reacted to this war compared to UN. In order to analyze the consequences of NATO's Allied Force Operation, the data was collected from official site of NATO, where the articles published by General commander, Secretary-Generals and other official entities, that were participated in operation process. As discussed above Commander Wesley (1999) declares the concrete reasons, objectives of operation and recognition of Washington Treaty in 1949 on common freedom, democracy and rule of law to only said, but protected. The success of Allied Force Operation was not welcomed by all international community; it led to mass disputes due-to absence of UN authorization to intervene. However, the deeper research of primary source in NATO officials who verified that General - Secretary, Javier Solana had informed the UN Security Council, but the reply was not supportive.

China's Position on NATO's Intervention in Kosovo.

China's reaction to NATO's military campaign was immediate and rooted in its foreign policy principles. During the emergency meeting held on 24th of March 1999, at United Nations Security Council, China expressed disagreement and opposed the legality of using force, considering the act as of global power politics of the "strong bullying the weak" and interference in the state's internal policy under any form or in any circumstances (UNSC, 1999). This was a statement was delivered by the representatives of China, on the day NATO launched its operation, highlighting the main objection, which was not solely linked to the specific force use, but to the whole logic of under this principle (P2R). Another point was raised during the meeting, the role of UN Security Council's authorization, as China and Russia vetoes prevented adoption of UNSC resolution, authorizing use of military against Yugoslavia, but ignorance of NATO led to massive disagreements (Pace International Law Review, 1999). Thus, China considered this action as a disrespect of the core international law principles and to the authority of the United Nations. China considers the UNSC as the solely international legitimate body authorized to impose sanction, and any kind of operations, the absence of UN's procedures constitutes to security dilemma and inadmissible precedent (Seppanen & Smith, 2025).

During the entire period of the crisis, China maintained a position leading to a peaceful, diplomatic results over military intervention. Furthermore, Russia with countries of Global South, Beijing strategically leveraged the UN to uphold the principle of state sovereignty and to challenge NATO's political objectives in Kosovo (Ristic & Satjukow, 2024). Ultimately. When the Security Council voted on Resolution 1244, intended to conclude the conflict, stabilize security force and international civilian in Kosovo, China chose to abstain. This decision was followed with concerns regarding the resolution's failure to effectively address the damage caused by NATO's airstrikes and its insufficient limitations on the application of Chapter VII of the UN Charter (UNSC, 1999).

China's Evolving Doctrine of Non-Interference.

Besides China's diplomatic reaction on Kosovo case, the position of China can reflect a principled framework

founded in the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, which Beijing has defended since the 1950s (Garwood-Gowers, 2024). These principles include: mutual respect for sovereignty, non-interference, equality non-aggression, and peaceful coexistence - directly oppose NATO's humanitarian intervention. Thus, the Kosovo crisis became a turning point in China's evolving policy of Western-led interventionism, one that still shapes Beijing's approach to international conflicts in contemporary world order (Seppanen & Smith, 2025).

However, China's stance did not change after Kosovo conflict, China continues to develop and illustrate distinctive doctrine of non-intervention, by questioning who is interfering, in what context and for what purpose – the implication of this framework further done in Syria, Ukraine and Libya. The position of Beijing is developed by both principle of non-interference and by own internal policy concerns, especially separatist movements in Xinjiang, Tibe and Taiwan, which makes Kosovo much as a matter of domestic policy security as international relations order (Priupolina, 2025).

On the one hand NATO's humanitarian intervention led to postwar criticism and misconception. On the other hand, NATO could minimize the violation, provide both financial and military aid, sustained the thousands of refugees with all necessities, moreover it showed the importance of common intervention and engagements of international community not only in the common interest, but in common recognition of the principles. However, from previous mentioned data on Kosovo war and NATO Allied Operation, there is noticeable difference in number of positive and negative consequences, resulting in dual conclusion as far not all state members of UN recognized the importance of air campaign of NATO. But, the position of China, that this paper seeks to analyze, can be vividly understood through the lens of its strongly upholding foreign policy principles.

Conclusion

To sum up, this research was focused on understanding the NATO's humanitarian intervention and its consequences, alongside China's reaction on R2P, which was neither reactive nor accidental. The response can illustrate deeply rooted worldview, where state sovereignty, United Nations principles and non-interference are considered as a non-negotiable primacy in international world order. By blocking Security Council authorization, opposing Operation Allied Force and Resolution 1244, China clearly showed, that it would not recognize international relations policy, where a powerful state could bypass multilateral institutions under the justification of humanitarian aid. The Kosovo conflict considers to be a defining moment in China's relations to humanitarian intervention and R2P, which offers an alternative perspective of global politics order, shaped on the multilateral institutions and upholding state's sovereignty, rather than the right to intervene.

References

1. Wesley K. C. (1999). NATO's role in Kosovo. Effectiveness and Determination. NATO.int. https://www.nato.int/kosovo/articles/a990602a.htm.
2. Javier S. (1999). NATO's role in Kosovo. Article by the Secretary-General
3. on the Humanitarian Situation. NATO int. https://www.nato.int/kosovo/articles/a990521c.htm. (15 July, 1999) NATO & Kosovo: historical overview. NATO int. https://www.nato.int/kosovo/history.htm.
4. N. J. Wheeler, Reflections on the Legality and Legitimacy of NATO's Intervention in Kosovo, The International Journal of Human Rights, 4, 2000, 144-163
5. Adam Roberts (1999) NATO's 'Humanitarian War' over Kosovo, Survival, 41:3, 102-123, DOI: 10.1080/00396339912331342943.
6. Naumann, K. (2002). NATO, kosovo, and military intervention. Global Governance,8(1), 1317.https://library3.webster.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarl y-journals/nato-kosovo-military-intervention/docview/213727893/se-2
7. Henkin, L. (1999). Kosovo and the law of "humanitarian intervention". The American Journal of International Law, 93(4), 824-828. https://library3.webster.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarl y-journals/kosovo-law-humanitatian-intervention/docview/201067543/se-2,
8. Latawski, P., & Smith, M. (2003). The Kosovo crisis and the evolution of post-Cold War European security. (Manchester University Press, Ed.) Review of The Kosovo crisis and the evolution of post-Cold War European security.
9. Swain, R. M. (2002). War over kosovo: Politics and strategy in a global age. The Journal of Military History, 66(2), 638-639. https://library3.webster.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarl y-journals/war-over-kosovo-politics-strategy-global-age/docview/195625585/se-2.
10. Lucinescu, A., PhD. (2015). Humanitarian Intervention and The Balkan States: Shared

Understanding and Relevant Peculiarities. Bucharest: "Carol I" 10. National Defense University. https://library3.webster.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/confere nce-papers-proceedings/humanitarian-intervention-balkan-states- shared/docview/1693216420/se-2.

11. Markovic, Z. (2002). Kosovo: War and revenge. The Journal of Military History, 66(4), 1272-1273. https://library3.webster.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly journals/kosovo-war-revenge/docview/195624498/se-2.

12. Meilinger, P. S. (2002). NATO's air war for kosovo: A strategic and operational assessment / the conflict over kosovo: Why Milosevic decided to settle when he did. The Journal of Military History, 66(2), 639-640. https://library3.webster.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarl y-journals/natos-air-war-kosovo-strategic-operational/docview/195619220/se-2.

13. Garwood-Gowers, A. (2024). NATO in Kosovo and the logic of successful security practices. International Affairs, 100(2), 631–650. https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiae009

14. Chinese Mission to the United Nations. (2024, April 22). Remarks by China's Permanent Representative to the UN Ambassador Fu Cong at the UN Security Council briefing on UNMIK. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/zwbd/202405/t20240530_11366138.html

15. Ristic, K., & Satjukow, E. (2022). The 1999 NATO intervention from a comparative perspective. Comparative Southeast European Studies, 70(1), 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1515/soeu-2022-0001

16. Seppänen, S., & Smith, E. (2025). The new Chinese doctrine of non-intervention. International and Comparative Law Quarterly, 74(2), 377–408. https://doi.org/10.1017/S002058932510081X

17. Singh, J. (2024). Reconceptualizing sovereignty: The emergence of the responsibility to protect (R2P) in international law. SSRN. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4987560

18. The Diplomatic Insight. (2023, May 8). China remembers 1999 Belgrade embassy bombings. https://thediplomaticinsight.com/china-remembers-1999-belgrade-embassy-bombings

19. United Nations Security Council. (1999a, March 24). NATO action against Serbian military targets prompts divergent views as Security Council holds urgent meeting on situation in Kosovo (Press Release SC/6657). https://press.un.org/en/1999/19990324.sc6657.html

20. United Nations Security Council. (1999b, June 10). Security Council, welcoming Yugoslavia's acceptance of peace principles, authorizes civil, security presence in Kosovo (Press Release SC/6686). https://press.un.org/en/1999/19990610.sc6686.html

21. Völkerrechtsblog. (2022, April 1). Sovereignty and non-intervention. https://voelkerrechtsblog.org/sovereignty-and-non-intervention/

22. Yuliantoro, N. R. (2025). China's role in international conflict mediation and its implications for international relations. Nation State: Journal of International Studies, 8(1), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.24076/nsjis.v8i1.2051