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Constructing China's National Identity from a Constructivist Perspective: The International Organization for Mediation as a Case Study

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Abstract: The establishment of the International Organization for Mediation provides a new option for resolving international disputes and offers a valuable lens through which to examine the construction of China's national identity. Existing scholarship has focused primarily on the organization's legal functions, devoting insufficient attention to how institutional creation is translated into identity practice. Drawing on constructivism, particularly Wendt's theory of identity and Acharya's concept of norm localization, this article examines how China seeks to construct a threefold identity as a "peacebuilder," a "development partner," and an "advocate of a fair international order" through peaceful discourse, the institutionalization of mediation rules, and interaction with countries of the Global South. The analysis suggests that the International Organization for Mediation represents an attempt by China to translate the Chinese concept of hehe (harmony and inclusiveness) into the provision of international institutions. Identity construction, however, is not a unilateral act of self-proclamation. Its effectiveness ultimately depends on member participation, practical experience with cases, and recognition of the organization's professionalism, neutrality, and credibility.

Keywords: Constructivism; National identity; International Organization for Mediation; Norm localization; Global South

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1. Introduction

Realism, liberalism, and constructivism are widely regarded as the three major paradigms in international relations. The publication of Wendt's *Social Theory of International Politics* in 1999 marked the emergence of constructivism as a relatively mature school of international relations theory. By moving beyond the materialist emphasis of traditional approaches, Wendt's structural constructivism provides a framework for understanding interstate interaction through social relations and shared ideas [1]. Amitav Acharya, meanwhile, emphasizes the agency of the non-Western world in the diffusion of norms and the evolution of international

order, thereby offering a valuable perspective on the participation of Global South countries in international affairs [2].

Against the backdrop of profound global changes unseen in a century, localized conflicts have become more frequent, tensions in regional hotspots remain acute, and the Global South has continued to rise. These developments have prompted growing debate over the representativeness and effectiveness of the existing international order. As a major power moving closer to the center of the global stage, China has continued to explore its international role and has actively participated in the mediation and conciliation of international disputes. In 2022, China and a group of like-minded countries initiated the establishment of the International Organization for Mediation. On May 30, 2025, the Convention on the Establishment of the International Organization for Mediation was signed in Hong Kong. It entered into force on August 29 of the same year, and the organization officially commenced operations on October 20 [3]. The mechanism has thus moved from institutional proposal to initial operation. Its effect on identity construction, however, remains to be assessed through membership expansion, case practice, and third-party evaluation.

2. Introduction to constructivist theory and definition of concepts

Wendt moved beyond the materialist position of traditional international relations theory by emphasizing that the significance of material capabilities must be understood through shared ideas. For example, although both the United Kingdom and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea possess nuclear weapons, the United Kingdom does not pose the same kind of threat to the United States as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea does. The difference arises because the United Kingdom and the United States are socially constructed as "friends," whereas the United States and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea are constructed as "enemies" [4].

Ideas may be divided into three types of belief [5]. The first consists of worldviews, which are rooted in cultural symbols and profoundly influence patterns of thought and socialization. Because worldviews are intertwined with self-identity, they can evoke deep emotions and enduring commitments. They operate at the most fundamental level of human action and therefore exert the broadest influence on behavior. The second type consists of principled beliefs, including values and normative concepts that provide standards for distinguishing right from wrong. Principled beliefs guide behavior more specifically than worldviews do. The third type consists of causal beliefs, or understandings of cause-and-effect relationships, which help actors identify the means by which goals may be achieved. Causal beliefs can shape an actor's initial interpretation of a particular event; principled beliefs constrain and inform decision-making; and worldviews shape broader understandings of the world, the overall situation, and the meaning of "development." Moving from causal beliefs to worldviews entails a deepening level of abstraction, with the latter generally more deeply rooted and resistant to change. The three types of belief rarely operate in isolation; rather, their effects are intertwined [6]. Their influence on state behavior is similar to their influence on individual behavior, but they operate in three principal ways: as road maps, as focal points, and as ideas embedded in institutions [5].

Constructivism distinguishes between a state's corporate identity, rooted primarily in its internal structures, and its social identity, constituted through interaction with other actors. National identity, in other words, concerns "who the actor is" and is jointly constituted by internal structures—such as forms of political organization and domestic political culture—and external structures, including shared ideas generated

through international interaction [7]. Identity cannot be established through unilateral declaration alone; it also requires responses from others and international recognition generated through diplomatic discourse, treaty-making, and institutional practice [8]. International organizations therefore not only constrain behavior but may also constitute social environments in which states undergo socialization, learn norms, and revise their role conceptions [9].

Accordingly, this article conceptualizes state identity construction within the International Organization for Mediation as a process comprising three interconnected stages. First, China advances an identity claim through discourses on the peaceful settlement of disputes and harmonious coexistence. Second, that claim is institutionalized through conventions, organizational structures, and mediation procedures. Third, other countries respond by joining, using, and evaluating the mechanism, thereby accepting, modifying, or rejecting the claim. Only when sustained interaction generates external recognition can an identity claim develop into a relatively stable relational identity.

3. Introduction to and positioning of the International Organization for Mediation

In recent years, profound changes unseen in a century have accelerated, while the international environment has been marked by both turbulence and transformation. Hegemonism, unilateralism, and protectionism remain prevalent, and building a new type of international relations based on mutual respect, fairness and justice, and win-win cooperation remains a long-term undertaking. At the same time, the advance of multipolarity and economic globalization has deepened economic, commercial, and people-to-people ties among countries, while also generating more frequent conflicts and disputes. The international community therefore has an increasingly urgent need to resolve disputes in a timely and effective manner and to preserve stable, long-term cooperative relationships.

Against this background, calls to improve international dispute-settlement mechanisms have intensified, while interest in and demand for mediation have continued to grow. As the world's first intergovernmental legal organization devoted specifically to resolving international disputes through mediation, the International Organization for Mediation provides a complementary option alongside litigation and arbitration. It also represents an institutional effort by Global South countries to participate in the provision of public goods for the international rule of law [10].

The International Organization for Mediation was jointly initiated by 19 countries, including China. Its institutional framework is grounded, among other sources, in the principles of the Charter of the United Nations concerning the peaceful settlement of international disputes [11]. Under the Convention on the Establishment of the International Organization for Mediation, and with the consent of the parties concerned, its services may cover disputes between states; commercial or investment disputes between a state or international organization and a national of another state; and international commercial disputes between private entities [3]. Compared with adjudicatory proceedings, mediation places greater emphasis on party autonomy, procedural flexibility, and the preservation of relationships. Its actual efficiency and fairness, however, depend on the nature of the dispute, the willingness of the parties, and the professionalism and credibility of the mediator [12].

The International Organization for Mediation does not simply reproduce the adjudicatory logic of determining winners and losers. Instead, it emphasizes the search, through consultation, for solutions

acceptable to all parties. This approach has a degree of affinity with the traditional Chinese principle that "harmony is precious," although that cultural connection does not imply that mediation is uniquely Eastern. More precisely, the organization reflects China's localized interpretation and institutional expression of the established norm of peaceful dispute settlement.

4. Constructing China's national identity through the International Organization for Mediation: A constructivist analysis

The establishment of the International Organization for Mediation does more than create an additional forum for resolving international disputes. It also provides an important platform through which China can communicate to the world "who it is" and "what kind of country it seeks to become." Constructivist international relations theory offers a particularly appropriate framework for explaining this deeper significance and for considering how China may use the platform effectively.

First, constructivism provides a strong theoretical foundation for the construction of China's national identity. China's international image cannot be established through unilateral self-description; it must gain recognition and acceptance through interaction with other countries and through shared practical experience. The International Organization for Mediation provides an institutional setting for such interaction. Wendt's theory emphasizes the importance of the "distribution of ideas": the meaning attached to an event or capability depends on ideas shared within the international community. The same degree of military power, for example, may be viewed as protection when possessed by a friend but as a threat when possessed by an adversary. China's promotion of the International Organization for Mediation is therefore intended to encourage alternatives to the adversarial approaches that often characterize international dispute settlement.

China brings to this initiative the traditional principle that "harmony is precious," which emphasizes the pursuit of mutually acceptable solutions through friendly consultation. The story of "Six-Foot Alley," in which neighbors involved in a boundary dispute each yielded three feet and ultimately restored harmonious relations, illustrates this principle. The International Organization for Mediation translates the values of mutual accommodation, consultation, and mutually beneficial outcomes into institutional rules and working methods, including an emphasis on preventive mediation. If a growing number of countries accept and become accustomed to this more conciliatory, relationship-oriented approach to conflict resolution, their perceptions of China as a leading advocate of that approach may also change. They may become more inclined to regard China as a force for peace and cooperation rather than as an assertive challenger. As Wendt suggests, when states develop a relationship of trust resembling friendship, war itself may become unthinkable [13].

Constructivism also holds that state identity is produced through the interaction of internal and external factors. Internal factors include domestic cultural traditions and values, whereas external factors include the perceptions and interactions of the international community. The International Organization for Mediation is well positioned to engage both dimensions. Domestically, it draws on China's longstanding cultural tradition of hehe, including traditions of community mediation in which respected local figures facilitate reconciliation. This connection may reinforce China's cultural confidence and its self-understanding as a "civilizational state." Internationally, China has sought to mediate disputes and promote peace. Its role in facilitating the historic reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran in 2023 provides an important example.

Through sustained economic cooperation, China had developed trust with both countries; drawing on this credibility, it facilitated the Beijing Agreement and the restoration of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which was followed by a broader trend toward reconciliation in the Middle East [10]. The International Organization for Mediation includes countries from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, with which China can cooperate in the organization's development and operation. The accumulation of successful mediation cases may gradually influence, and potentially reshape, causal and principled beliefs—and even broader worldviews—within the international community. Such practice may in turn strengthen China's identity as an advocate of world peace and a builder of a new type of international relations.

Acharya's concept of "norm localization" is also highly instructive. Local actors, he argues, do not simply reproduce external rules; rather, they select, reconstruct, and graft norms by integrating them with existing beliefs and practices [14]. The International Organization for Mediation can be understood as an expression of this process. It does not reject the existing framework of international law, but incorporates consultation, the preservation of relationships, and shared development into its institutional narrative [15]. The mechanism also reflects norm subsidiarity: through collective action, Global South countries seek to develop rules and institutional arrangements that respond to their own needs and circumstances. It is therefore more accurate to view the organization not as an attempt to replace a Western model with an Eastern one, but as an effort to add more diverse sources and procedural options to the international dispute-settlement system.

Second, constructivism identifies a practical pathway through which China may shape its national identity via the International Organization for Mediation. Wendt's theory suggests that ideas and identities are formed and transformed through repeated practice. The organization must therefore provide consistently high-quality and distinctive mediation services, using successful cases to demonstrate that an approach centered on harmony is both viable and effective. This requires efficient, fair, and broadly recognized operational procedures.

A comprehensive repository of mediation cases is also essential, particularly cases involving the successful resolution of disputes between countries with different cultural backgrounds. China's role in facilitating the restoration of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran provides one such example. A well-developed body of cases could have a demonstration effect by showing the international community the distinctive value and effectiveness of mediation informed by Eastern traditions. At the same time, the International Organization for Mediation should not operate in isolation. It should seek alignment with the regulatory frameworks of regional organizations such as ASEAN and the African Union. Embedding mediation within broader regional security and cooperation networks could help this approach to peaceful dispute settlement develop into an increasingly accepted practice at both regional and global levels.

Effective narrative construction is equally important. Constructivism emphasizes that language and narratives can shape perceptions of reality. China should therefore develop and communicate persuasive narratives concerning the International Organization for Mediation. Traditional accounts such as the story of "Six-Foot Alley" can be connected to the organization's contemporary practice of peaceful dispute settlement. An exhibition at its Hong Kong headquarters on China's longstanding pursuit of harmony could further support an image of China as a "bearer of a civilization of peace." Such narratives should, however, be grounded in the demonstrated effectiveness of mediation and supported by credible data.

It is also important to examine potential shortcomings in existing international judicial and arbitral systems, including high costs, procedural complexity, and the limited capacity of developing countries to

participate effectively, and to substantiate such assessments with reliable data and cases. Inviting Global South countries to participate actively in the development of the International Organization for Mediation could enhance their agency in the design of international dispute-settlement mechanisms. If the organization successfully handles complex disputes involving the vital interests of developing countries, it will be better positioned to demonstrate its public value, while China may strengthen its identity claim as an advocate of a fair international order.

The role of individuals and professional communities is also important. Overseas Chinese communities and international professionals familiar with different cultural settings can serve as bridges for cross-cultural understanding. The experience of cities such as Wenzhou, which have established overseas mediation liaison offices, may offer useful lessons. Professionals familiar with local social and legal environments could be engaged to assist in mediating cross-border commercial disputes. The International Organization for Mediation should also recruit mediators from diverse regions, legal traditions, and cultural backgrounds, and should build a reputation for neutrality through professional competence, procedural transparency, and effective conflict-of-interest safeguards. A mediator's effectiveness depends not only on formal neutrality but also on the parties' perceptions of the mediator's information, motivations, and credibility.

Finally, constructivism suggests that China should combine the resources of its traditional culture with modern governance practices while emphasizing effectiveness and partnership. In institutional design, the strengths of different legal and cultural traditions can be integrated. The headquarters of the International Organization for Mediation is located in Hong Kong, whose common-law system is familiar to much of the international community and provides a basis for connecting Eastern and Western legal traditions. Within this framework, the organization can explicitly recognize objectives associated with Eastern approaches, including relationship restoration and harmonious, mutually beneficial outcomes.

Capacity building and partnership development are equally important. China could take the lead in designing specialized training programs for partner countries in Africa, Southeast Asia, and other regions, thereby cultivating local mediators who understand and accept the concept of consultative mediation. After returning to practice in their home countries, these mediators could contribute to the wider dissemination of the approach. The International Organization for Mediation should also seek practical coordination with established mechanisms, including those associated with the Convention for the Pacific Settlement of International Disputes and the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Procedural links—such as requiring an attempt at mediation before litigation, or incorporating mediation into ongoing judicial proceedings—could help prevent institutional isolation and marginalization.

It must nevertheless be acknowledged that the International Organization for Mediation remains at an early stage of development. The number of publicly available cases and the body of practice open to evaluation are still limited, while its current membership is drawn primarily from the Global South. At this stage, it is therefore more appropriate to regard the organization as an institutional projection of China's national identity than to assume that the identity it advances has already gained universal international recognition. The ultimate effectiveness of this identity-construction project will depend on whether the organization can attract countries with diverse institutional backgrounds, develop a body of representative cases, and earn recognition from the parties for its professionalism and neutrality.

5. Conclusion

The International Organization for Mediation represents an important initiative through which China, informed by constructivist insights, seeks to shape a threefold international identity as a "peacebuilder," a "development partner," and an "advocate of a fair international order." It is not only a forum for dispute resolution but also a platform through which China can present the governance principle of harmony and inclusiveness by means of sustained collaborative practice, effective narrative communication, and pragmatic institutional innovation. If China can translate elements of traditional Eastern thought into effective responses to contemporary challenges in global governance, and demonstrate the benefits of extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits through successful practice, it may help weaken the expectation that "great powers inevitably seek hegemony." The idea of a "community with a shared future for humanity" could thereby develop from an aspirational vision into a principle more widely recognized and pursued by the international community. This possibility is consistent with Acharya's vision of a global order shaped not by a single hegemonic model, but by mutual learning and the co-evolution of multiple civilizations.

Whether this identity claim gains durable external recognition will depend on sustained, professional mediation practice and on the responses of the parties and the wider international community. If such practice is viewed as credible and effective, China may be able to reduce expectations that "great powers inevitably seek hegemony" and help translate the idea of a "community with a shared future for humanity" from diplomatic discourse into tangible institutional practice. The initiative's ultimate effectiveness will therefore depend on whether the organization can establish a durable mechanism supported by broad participation, credible operation, and effective case management.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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