



## Introduction

The figure of the "special envoy" holds a significant place in contemporary international diplomacy, although its concrete importance depends on the context and the degree of political backing it receives<sup>1</sup>.

Unlike resident ambassadors, who represent a state or an organization on a permanent basis, special envoys are designated for ad hoc missions, limited in time and objectives. This allows for agile responses to international crises, armed conflicts, peace negotiations, or transnational problems (e.g., climate change, migration, cybersecurity).

They often possess a high political profile. These roles typically fall to personalities with international prestige, such as former heads of state, highly experienced career diplomats, or renowned academic and political figures. This personal legitimacy facilitates tasks of mediation, trust-building, and rapprochement between parties who might otherwise reject direct official contact.

Furthermore, they represent a significant complement to classical diplomacy. They do not supplant ordinary diplomatic channels (embassies, foreign ministries, UN delegations) but serve as an additional instrument for applying pressure, engaging in dialogue, or exploring potential agreements. They frequently operate in parallel to formal negotiations to "lay the groundwork" or act as a channel for discreet diplomacy, often referred to as "track one-and-a-half diplomacy".

The United Nations frequently relies on Special Envoys of the Secretary-General in conflicts such as those in Syria, Yemen, Libya, or Sudan, with a mandate to mediate and report on progress. The EU, the AU, and other organizations also appoint envoys for cross-cutting issues (e.g., human rights, maritime security, climate change).

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<sup>1</sup> Bátor, P., & Vashchenko, K. "The Role of Special Envoys in Strengthening Mediation and Diplomatic Efforts". *Security and Peace*, 2019; Berman, M., & Johnson, K. (Eds.). "Unofficial Diplomats". Columbia University Press, 1977; Kleine-Ahlbrandt, S. "The Power of Special Envoys". *Foreign Affairs*, 2017; Satow, E. "Satow's Diplomatic Practice" (7<sup>a</sup> ed.). Oxford University Press, 2011.

In a preliminary assessment, their efficacy often depends on the conflicting actors accepting them as valid interlocutors. They can be weakened if they lack genuine political backing from relevant powers or if their reports and recommendations are not translated into action. At times, they are used more as a political or public relations gesture than as an instrument with real transformative power.

In conclusion, special envoys function as instruments of flexible diplomacy, highly valuable for opening communication channels, facilitating mediation, and demonstrating political commitment. However, their tangible impact is frequently subject to questioning.

### **Reflections of Modern Diplomacy**

The figure of the special envoy has become increasingly prevalent in modern diplomacy, though some countries and organizations employ it more systematically and frequently than others.

For instance, the United Nations is the actor that most frequently relies on them. The Secretary-General appoints special envoys or special representatives for specific crises, such as Syria, Libya, Yemen, Afghanistan, Ukraine, and the Sahel. These envoys are typically highly experienced diplomats who, in practice, embody UN policy in conflicts where no consensus exists in the Security Council<sup>2</sup>.

The United States also utilizes special envoys as a flexible instrument of thematic or regional foreign policy<sup>3</sup>. Some relatively recent examples include the Special Envoy for Climate Change (John Kerry), for Iran, for the Horn of Africa, for North Korea, for combating antisemitism, for the Middle East (Steve Witkoff), and for the conflict in Ukraine (Keith Kellogg). For Washington, this allows the projection of a particular political priority without opening new embassies or altering traditional diplomatic structures.

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<sup>2</sup> United Nations (UN). Its official website—particularly the "Mediation" and "Peacekeeping Operations" sections—contains numerous documents, mandates, and reports that serve as excellent primary sources.

<sup>3</sup> State.gov: The U.S. Department of State website provides information on its "Special Envoys" and "Special Representatives," often with highly specific mandates (such as for Climate Change, LGBTQ+ Human Rights, etc.).

The European Union maintains a network of Special Representatives (EUSR) with both geographic mandates (South Caucasus, Sahel, Kosovo, etc.) and thematic ones (human rights, freedom of religion). These envoys are crucial for ensuring visibility and continuity in EU foreign policy, which is inherently complex due to the need to build consensus among 27 member states<sup>4</sup>.

Russia, perhaps in a less institutionalized manner than the EU or UN, also appoints presidential or Foreign Ministry envoys to strategic regions, such as Syria, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Africa. In Russia's case, these appointments are often linked to security and military projection.

Other actors, such as the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, commonly appoint special envoys on security, climate, or crisis regions (Sahel, Afghanistan, the Balkans). Likewise, the African Union, OSCE, and Arab League frequently use this figure in regional conflicts.

China has increasingly relied on special envoys in recent years, particularly as a means of projecting great-power diplomacy. Examples include envoys for Central Asian affairs, the Horn of Africa, or the Middle East. For Beijing, this enables engagement in conflicts without directly committing its resident diplomatic corps while seeking alignment with the United Nations<sup>5</sup>.

In a preliminary assessment, the UN and the EU are the institutions that most extensively utilize special envoys. Among states, the United States employs them most systematically, followed by China, Russia, and European powers such as France and the United Kingdom. In many cases, appointing an envoy serves as a political signal of interest, allowing for flexible management of situations without committing to more direct interventions, such as, in extreme cases, the deployment of troops.

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<sup>4</sup> Bergmann, J., & Müller, H. *Failing Forward in European Union Foreign Policy: The Role of Special Representatives*. Journal of Common Market Studies, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Duchâtel, M., et al. (2019). *The Role of Special Envoys in Chinese Diplomacy*. SIPRI Policy Paper; Fung, C. J. *China and Intervention at the UN Security Council: Reconciling Status*. Oxford University Press, 2019.

## China's "Special Envoys"

China's approach to special envoys exhibits a similar range of diversity as seen in other countries. Beijing deploys them in thematic, territorial, structural, or purely ceremonial capacities<sup>6</sup>.

Thematically, Liu Zhenmin, China's Special Envoy for Climate Change (since January 2024), replaced Xie Zhenhua. Liu is expected to strengthen China's international dialogue and cooperation on climate issues. Xie, appointed in 2021, represented China in numerous international climate negotiations, including collaborations with other countries, such as the United States.

However, it is in territorial crises that China's special envoys assume their most prominent roles. Zhai Jun, for example, has served as Special Envoy for the Middle East since 2019, engaging in negotiations and diplomatic visits concerning Palestine and other regional states. His predecessor, Gong Xiaoshen (appointed 2014), represented China on Palestinian-Israeli matters and conducted visits to Palestine to engage with local authorities<sup>7</sup>.

Yang Houlan served as China's Special Envoy for Korean Peninsula Affairs from December 2009 to 2011, establishing a specific modus operandi in managing the complex North-South Korean relationship as part of China's strategy to contain tensions on the peninsula. Subsequent envoys included Wu Dawei (appointed February 2010), Kong Xuanyou (August 2017), and Liu Xiaoming (April 12, 2021).

Xie Xiaoyan was appointed Special Envoy for Syria in March 2016, participating in international conferences, such as Brussels, to communicate China's position and provide diplomatic and political support regarding the Syrian crisis.

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<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (外交部): Its official website (in English: [www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/)) serves as the primary source. The "Special Envoy" section contains press releases, biographies, and official statements.

<sup>7</sup> Shi, M. *China's Special Envoy Diplomacy: The Case of the Middle East*. Journal of Contemporary China, 2016; Chen, Z., & Yang, J. *China's Special Envoys in the Middle East: A New Model of Mediation?*. The China Quarterly, 2021.

Li Hui was appointed Special Representative of the Chinese Government for Eurasian Affairs in August 2019 and, specifically for the Ukraine crisis, designated as special envoy on April 26, 2023, following a phone conversation between Xi Jinping and Volodymyr Zelensky, to promote a political solution.

Lu Shaye was appointed in February 2025 as China's Special Representative for European Affairs, coordinating China's policy toward Europe, dialogue with the EU, and bilateral European relations under the guidance of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

China has also appointed special envoys for Africa, though not necessarily with a continental mandate. For instance, Xue Bing was appointed Special Envoy for Horn of Africa Affairs by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in February 2022 and actively participated in peace and development conferences in the region, such as the one held in Kampala, Uganda, in July 2025.

Notably, Guang Cong was appointed UN Secretary-General Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa on July 17, 2025. This position focuses on countries including Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan, and Eritrea. Guang Cong brings over 23 years of UN peacekeeping experience, much of it in the Horn of Africa, and previously served as Deputy Special Representative (Political) in the UN Mission in South Sudan.

Finally, a ceremonial example is Wang Dongming, who serves as Special Envoy of President Xi Jinping to specific events (e.g., the inauguration of the President of Venezuela), performing high-level diplomatic functions and representing the president personally at certain international events.

### **Chinese Particularities**

In Chinese diplomacy, special envoys are a flexible instrument that, rather than merely resolving conflicts, aim to project the image of a responsible power and promoter of peace and development<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> García, C. *La diplomacia de enviados especiales de China: instrumento de una potencia responsable*. Análisis GESI, 2022.

The role of China's Special Envoy exhibits significant particularities compared to their Western diplomatic counterparts. Several key dimensions are worth highlighting:

Firstly, the conceptual and philosophical framework, the so-called "diplomacy with Chinese characteristics"<sup>9</sup>. The actions of China's special envoys cannot be understood outside this framework. At its core, the emphasis on sovereignty and non-interference is paramount. While Western envoys often address issues such as human rights, democracy, or governance—which may be perceived as "interference"—Chinese envoys focus strictly on areas of mutual interest, respect for sovereignty, and the principle of "non-interference in internal affairs."

Furthermore, peace and development represent a primary mandate: their activities are generally centered on these concepts, which China promotes as foundational to international relations. This aligns with initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), now a flagship of China's foreign policy.

Strategically, China often appoints special envoys for highly specific and long-term issues, many of which are central to its national interests. For instance, in Syria and the broader Middle East, China seeks to present itself as an honest and neutral mediator, in contrast to Western powers with historical involvement in the region. In the Horn of Africa, the role is more recent and directly linked to the security of BRI maritime routes and the expansion of Chinese influence in a strategic area. Regarding Eurasia, the envoy for Asia-Europe affairs or China-EU cooperation focuses on economic and political coordination with a key bloc. Thematically, in the case of the Special Envoy for Climate Change, China—the world's largest current emitter—uses this figure for pivotal negotiations, signaling commitment while consistently defending the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities".

The style of Chinese special envoys is distinctive. For example, discretion and low profile: Chinese diplomacy values discretion. Unlike Western envoys, who often hold press conferences and make public statements to signal their actions or exert pressure, Chinese envoys typically operate behind the scenes, prioritizing confidential dialogue.

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<sup>9</sup> Ríos, X. *Política exterior de China. La diplomacia de una potencia emergente*. Bellaterra, 2005; Lanteigne, M. *Chinese Foreign Policy: An Introduction* (4th ed.). Routledge, 2019.

Another key value is the emphasis on dialogue rather than imposition: their language is generally conciliatory and non-confrontational. They seek to build consensus and achieve “win-win” outcomes, a recurrent slogan in official rhetoric.

Strategically, there is a strong link with the BRI: directly or indirectly, much of the work of special envoys is interconnected with promoting or addressing issues related to the Belt and Road Initiative, China's most significant geopolitical project<sup>10</sup>.

In terms of structure and reporting, whereas in the West envoys may report directly to the head of state or government, in China they usually operate under the direct supervision of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, reflecting a more centralized and professionalized structure.

Their competence is ensured by being career diplomats with extensive experience, often having served as ambassadors in the regions to which they are now assigned. This guarantees continuity and deep knowledge, in contrast to the political experience that often characterizes Western envoys.

The fundamental particularity of Chinese special envoys is that they are instruments of an alternative vision of the international order. They are not merely crisis managers but strategic tools to project China's model of global governance: one that prioritizes sovereignty over universal values, economic development over political pressure, and long-term stability over rapid intervention.

They act as “brand ambassadors” of China's Peace and Development Diplomacy, seeking to reposition the country as a stabilizing and neutral power, in contrast to what Beijing portrays as the “chaotic and interventionist” approach of the West.

### **A Preliminary Assessment**

Although special envoys are a widely used diplomatic tool—and increasingly so—their effectiveness is uneven and depends on several factors. An assessment can be made in terms of strengths, achievements, and limitations.

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<sup>10</sup> McConnell, F. *The Geopolitics of Special Envoys: Designing Diplomatic Missions*. Geopolitics, 2018.

From the outset, the very appointment of a special envoy signals that a particular issue or region is a priority for a government or organization. For example, John Kerry (U.S.) and Liu Zhenmin (China), as special envoys for climate change, reinforced the international green agenda. In contrast, Donald Trump did not appoint a special envoy for climate change during his second term and did not intend to do so.

By establishing flexible communication channels, special envoys can open doors where formal diplomacy is blocked. For instance, UN envoys in conflicts such as Syria or Yemen have maintained dialogue channels even when the parties were at war.

Many envoys are veteran diplomats or recognized personalities who inspire trust. Their personal prestige facilitates confidence in mediation processes and enables discreet (backchannel) diplomacy, allowing negotiations without excessive public or political pressure—an advantage in sensitive conflicts.

On the other hand, several frequent limitations and failures deserve mention. First, most envoys lack real power. They generally have no decision-making authority or independent resources, merely transmitting positions or exploring scenarios. Without sufficient political backing from major actors, their room for maneuver is minimal.

Furthermore, mandates are often ambiguous. Sometimes their roles are unclear: are they neutral mediators, or spokespersons for their country's policy? Such ambiguity can undermine credibility.

Excessive expectations constitute another constraint, functioning like a Damocles' sword. Envoys are often expected to resolve intractable conflicts, but their actual role is usually limited to facilitating dialogue. For example, the multiple UN envoys to Syria have never achieved a definitive peace agreement.

Finally, political instrumentalization can be counterproductive. Some appointments serve more as diplomatic gestures or propaganda than as effective tools, merely to show that "something is being done."

In short, special envoys are more effective as facilitators or maintainers of dialogue than as crisis resolvers. Ultimately, their utility depends primarily on the real political backing

they receive from major powers, the acceptance by conflict parties, and the clarity of their mandate and access to resources.

When these conditions are met, envoys can have impact—for example, partial peace agreements in Africa with the support of AU and UN envoys, or progress in climate negotiations thanks to envoys from China and the U.S. In conflicts where major actors are unwilling to commit, envoys often function more as observers or rapporteurs than influential mediators.

### **China as a Case Study: Concluding Remarks**

In China's case, the record of its special envoys reflects an expanding diplomacy that seeks to enhance Beijing's visibility as a responsible global actor and mediator, albeit with mixed results.

There are instances in which China's envoys have demonstrated tangible achievements. For example, in climate diplomacy (Xie Zhenhua, later Liu Zhenmin), Xie was highly influential in international climate dialogue, particularly in direct engagement with John Kerry (U.S.). He maintained open channels even during moments of bilateral tension, contributing to targeted agreements on emissions reduction. In this instance, the assessment is clearly positive, as China was able to present itself as a responsible actor on a key global agenda.

In the Middle East (Zhai Jun, and previously Gong Xiaosheng), China has intensified contacts with Palestine, Israel, and Arab countries, offering "mediation" and promoting Xi Jinping's peace initiative. Although the conflict has not been resolved, China has reinforced its image as a trusted partner in the Arab world. The outcome can be considered moderately positive, as it increased China's political and economic influence without achieving tangible results on the ground.

In the Ukraine crisis (Li Hui, Special Envoy for Eurasian Affairs), China has conducted diplomatic tours among Kyiv, Moscow, and European capitals. While no ceasefire has been initiated, his role has allowed China to project the image of a mediator and maintain dialogue with all parties. Here, the impact is limited but useful, more symbolic than effective, while keeping China at the negotiating table.

Other cases with very limited impact include:

- Syria (Xie Xiaoyan, Special Envoy since 2016): Participated in international conferences and expressed support for political solutions, but had no influence on negotiations dominated by Russia, Iran, and the U.S. His role was almost purely symbolic.
- Korean Peninsula (Liu Xiaoming, Special Envoy since 2021): China seeks to act as a mediator in denuclearization, but the lack of dialogue between Washington and Pyongyang leaves little room for action. His diplomatic presence has not produced concrete results.
- Africa (envoys for the Horn of Africa and the continent in general): Beijing has attempted to position itself as a peacemaker in Ethiopia and Sudan, but conflicts remain active, with primary roles played by local actors or the UN. This is more a demonstration of strategic interest than a record of diplomatic achievements.

Overall, China's special envoys demonstrate a number of strengths. They enhance China's visibility as a global power, reinforce its image as a "neutral" actor vis-à-vis the West, and open useful diplomatic channels for economic interests (energy in the Middle East, trade corridors in Africa, regional stability in Asia).

However, the limitations are also evident: they lack coercive or military power (unlike the U.S. or Russia); their role is often symbolic or supportive; and they must establish themselves as neutral mediators before local actors who often perceive them as representatives of Chinese interests.

Thus, today, China's special envoys primarily function as instruments of image projection and soft power rather than as effective conflict resolvers. Their real efficacy in transforming situations on the ground is limited, yet they remain a key component of Beijing's diplomatic strategy.

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