



RESEARCH PAPER

China's Quiet Diplomacy: Assessing its Role in Saudi-Iran Reconciliation Process

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ABSTRACT

This study conducts a thorough analysis of China's efforts to bring Saudi Arabia and Iran closer together. The objective of the study is to understand the factors that lead China to play its role in reconciliation process. The research utilizes a qualitative methodology by examining official statements, policy papers, research papers, and media narratives to explain China's diplomacy and policies about the relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This study seeks to clarify the factors that have influenced China's participation in the efforts to bring Tehran and Riyadh together, as well as the obstacles faced by it in contributing significantly to these efforts. The results show that in order to protect their respective national interests, Tehran and Riyadh were willing to restart bilateral relations prior to Beijing efforts, and China played minor role in the process of reconciliation. China has consistently taken a cautious approach to the Saudi-Iranian relations, owing its geopolitical and economic interests. China's calculated influence in Middle Eastern diplomacy is a result of the complex dynamics of the area and the dominance of other powerful countries. This analysis contributes to a broader understanding of Saudi-Iran relations, China's foreign policy objectives in the Middle East, and its role in regional dynamics. It also highlights the challenges and limitations faced by China in its efforts to mediate between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Keywords: Chinese Influence, Conflict Resolution, Middle East Politics, Quiet Diplomacy, Reconciliation, Saudi-Iran Relations

Introduction

On March 10, 2023, Iran and Saudi Arabia signed a deal, facilitated by China, to restore diplomatic relations between Riyadh and Tehran and reopen their embassies and missions. The agreement's provisions encompassed the principles of upholding state sovereignty and refraining from interfering in the internal affairs of states. Additionally, the agreement entailed cooperation in various domains, including economy and sports (*Joint Trilateral Statement by the People's Republic of China, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2023*). This agreement gathered global recognition, with media coverage often emphasizing China's instrumental role in facilitating the Middle East deal, solidifying its expanding influence in the region. Several commentators have contended that China effectively utilized its economic influence to intimidate both parties into reaching an agreement, indicating that it possesses the necessary means and influence to guarantee Iran's compliance. Several scholars argued that Iran's economy could potentially collapse if it did not receive support from China. Grant Golub expressed the view that the deal facilitated by China would significantly reduce regional tensions and showcase China's growing global influence. Mubarak (2023) argued that the Saudi government believed China's participation was the most reliable assurance for the durability of the deal. The Saudi side held the belief that Iran would not risk its relationship with China by breaking the pact. Furthermore, they contended that the pact possesses the capacity to transform the

Middle East by integrating the region into China's worldwide aspirations. They hypothesized that this significant development will establish the basis for a new geopolitical landscape in the Middle East (Weihang, 2023).

The contention would assert that while China briefly facilitated negotiations between the two parties, the primary catalysts for the deal were the apprehensions and aims of the Iranian and Saudi Arabian governments. The decision to negotiate the accord was primarily influenced by the Iranian leadership's understanding of the shifting power dynamics in the Middle East. It posits that there were three primary factors contributing to this phenomenon. First and foremost, Saudi Arabia is experiencing growing economic integration with the global community, whereas Iran, in contrast, is facing isolation. Furthermore, China's burgeoning diplomatic ties with Saudi Arabia, and additionally, the demonstrations in Iran that ensued after the death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022 while under the custody of the nation's morality police, coupled with accusations of Saudi Arabia's role in instigating the riots (Uygur, 2022). Iran's leaders perceived the 2023 deal as a means to prevent any conflict with Saudi Arabia. In contrast, the Saudi leadership made the decision to reduce the intensity of its strained relations with Iran in order to enhance its regional and global influence. This decision was driven by the economic growth initiative called Vision 2030 (Yenigun, 2023).

Literature Review

According to Siddique (2023) China's role in mediating the Saudi-Iran peace talks is its first venture into Middle East diplomacy, potentially strengthening regional cohesion. The consequences of the deal on Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria have yet to be determined. China's involvement in mediating the reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia enhances regional cohesion. Safronova (2023) concluded that the diplomatic strategy employed by China in the Middle East played a crucial role in facilitating the 2023 peace agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia. This agreement has resulted in a significant shift in the balance of power in the area, with a decrease in the influence of the United States and an increase in Chinese influence. However, Husain and Sahide (2023) stated that China's diplomatic approach in the Middle East centers around the principle of non-interference in domestic matters and the promotion of human rights. The report fails to discuss the ramifications of the Saudi-Iran peace accord. China advocates for non-intervention in domestic political affairs and human rights considerations. China's foreign policy in the Middle East is primarily centered on the engagement of soft power and the projection of its sovereignty.

Israsena-Pichitkanjanakul (2022) says that China's diplomatic strategy in the Middle East focus on its economic interests with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) governments. The prospective peace agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran has the potential to significantly influence the stability of the region and the strategic alliances of China. L. A. Ali et al. (2023) said that The China-Iran Comprehensive Strategic Partnership has the potential to create a new regional security complex. The collaboration has the potential to weaken the established regional order led by the United States. Wen and Chen (2022) finds out that China's economic diplomacy in the Middle East prioritizes collaboration in energy, infrastructure, banking, and technology sectors. The objective is to strengthen regional stability and global economic governance, which might potentially impact peace initiatives between Saudi Arabia and Iran. China's economic diplomacy in the Middle East has advanced to a new phase in the current era. However Malla (2022) stated that China's interactions with Iran and Saudi Arabia are shaped by evolving geopolitical factors.

Analysis and Discussion

The Tense Relations Since 1979

The animosity between Iran and Saudi Arabia originated from the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, and since then, there have been alternating periods of cooperation and competition between Tehran and Riyadh, characterized by mutual apprehension and intimidation. In recent times, Riyadh has transitioned from a cautious participant to a more assertive one. This became apparent following the 'Arab Spring' demonstrations in 2011 and as global anxieties around Iran's nuclear program escalated throughout the 2010s. Consequently, Iranian views of Saudi Arabia have been altered. Previously, Iranian policymakers viewed Saudi Arabia as a dependent player relying on the United States. However, they now perceive Saudi Arabia as a more independent and powerful entity (Ali, Ullah, et al., 2022).

Ruhollah Khomeini, the individual who established the Islamic Republic with a firm opposition to monarchy and colonialism, introduced Islamic perspectives into the conflict. Iran's Islamic leadership perceives itself as the guiding force of the Muslim world and views Saudi Arabia as a Western-aligned monarchy that poses a danger to Islamic sacredness. Saudi Arabia considers itself the focal point of the Islamic world and views Shia Iran, along with its regional allies, as a challenge to its religious and diplomatic standing (Sadeghi & Ahmadian, 2011).

The Iran-Saudi Arabia relations deteriorated during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s due to Saudi Arabia's backing of Iraq. During Mohammad Khatami's presidency in Iran from 1997 to 2005, his government made efforts to strengthen relationships with neighboring countries. In April 2001, Iran and Saudi Arabia signed a security agreement with the aim of promoting peace in the region. In 2005, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a conservative, was elected as Iran's president and was later invited to Riyadh. King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud (2005–2015) welcomed him, demonstrating the Saudi leadership's intention to establish friendlier relations. In December 2007, Ahmadinejad visited Qatar to participate in a summit organized by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Ahmadinejad proclaimed during his introductory address to the gathering in Doha, "We advocate for a state of tranquility and protection devoid of any external interference." We suggest the creation of economic and security agreements and organizations among the seven states. However, there was no significant progress in ties during his leadership (Pradhan, 2011).

Iran's regional influence grew significantly after the ousting of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in the 2003 American-led invasion, leading to heightened tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Saudi Arabian government became increasingly concerned about the Iranian nuclear program in the 2000s, which further strained their relationship. This relationship worsened even further during the presidency of Hassan Rouhani, who succeeded Ahmadinejad from 2013 to 2021. The two countries supported conflicting factions in the civil conflicts that erupted in Syria and Yemen in 2012 and 2014, respectively. The deaths of 464 Iranian pilgrims in a stampede at the Hajj in Mecca in September 2015 led to a crisis in relations in 2016. In January 2016, the Saudi government carried out the execution of Nimr Al-Nimr, a Shiite preacher from Saudi Arabia (Mason, 2021). This action led to Tehran breaking diplomatic ties with Riyadh and resulted in Iranian demonstrators forcefully entering Saudi diplomatic buildings in Tehran and Mashhad. All the Arab Gulf governments, except for Oman, subsequently severed diplomatic relations with Iran. In the same year, the Iranian leadership openly accused the Saudis of "murdering" the individuals who lost their lives in the stampede (Ali, Azhar, et al., 2022).

In April 2017, President Rouhani expressed Iran's willingness to establish positive relations with Saudi Arabia (*Rouhani: Ready to restore ties with Saudi Arabia*, 2017). However, the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who is widely considered the

most influential figure in the kingdom, initially rejected the idea of talks with Iran, citing Iran's desire to dominate the Islamic world as the reason. In October of the same year, Saudi Arabia backed the United States' decision to withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), an agreement aimed at addressing global concerns regarding Iran's nuclear program (Djuyandi et al., 2021).

Détente in Bilateral Relations

The period of mid-2017 can be described as the nadir in the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia in recent years. The competition between the two countries had far-reaching consequences throughout the broader Middle East, particularly in the crises in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. As a result, regional initiatives were undertaken to facilitate negotiations between the two leaderships with the goal of resolving the conflict. Iran and Saudi Arabia attended a summit organized by the Iraqi government on 20 April 2019, with the aim of alleviating regional tensions. The summit convened prominent lawmakers from the six neighboring countries of Iraq, namely Syria, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Jordan, and Kuwait. However, on May 8, Iran declared its intention to recommence the process of enriching uranium, thereby contravening the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), unless the United States lifted its sanctions on Iran. Subsequently, on June 12, the Houthi militia in Yemen carried out a missile strike on a Saudi airport (Xinchun & Shaoxian, 2023).

In the subsequent month, the Foreign Minister of Iran, Mohammad Javad Zarif, expressed Iran's readiness to engage in one-on-one discussions with Riyadh. However, despite this development, the conflict persisted, with a major incident being a drone strike on Saudi oil facilities in September 2019, which was attributed to the Houthis. Both Riyadh and Washington attributed the assault to Iran. However, contrary to Saudi expectations, President Trump declined to attack Iran and instead advised Riyadh to find its own solution to the conflict. After a visit to Riyadh in September 2019, the Iraqi Prime Minister, Adil Abdul-Mahdi, stated that Saudi Arabia aimed to reduce tensions with Iran and had rejected the military option. By October, discussions were taking place, with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman reportedly seeking mediation from Iraq and Pakistan et. al. (2017); Liaqat et al., 2023). The Crown Prince denied requesting intervention, suggesting that "Baghdad and Islamabad had offered to mediate the talks."

Regardless, it appears that the Saudi leadership realized it could no longer depend on military assistance from the United States as it had in the past. Instead, it should strive for more autonomy, bolstering its influence by forging diverse connections and increasing relationships with nations on both regional and global scales. Saudi Arabia presented a number of prerequisites for the talks, which included a requirement for Iran to decrease its involvement in Yemen and Syria, as well as its backing of armed factions like the Houthis (N. Ali et al., 2023). During the Munich Security Conference in February 2020, the Saudi Foreign Minister emphasized that Iran needed to alter its conduct in order for discussions to occur. In essence, a thaw in Saudi-Iranian relations had already commenced by early 2020. The changes in the strategic dynamics and power distribution between the two nations had a greater impact than any direct involvement of China in attaining the 2023 agreement.

The Growing Influence of Saudi Arabia in the Region

This section explores Riyadh's tactics to enhance its regional and global influence, as well as Iran's evolving perspectives on Saudi Arabia's growing dominance.

The Military Capabilities of Saudi Arabia

The conclusion of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), also known as the "Iran nuclear deal," in July 2015 caused Saudi Arabia to reassess its views on the threat

posed by Iran. Saudi officials perceived the arrangement as having the capacity to bolster Iran's economy and empower it to produce nuclear weapons. Consequently, Riyadh deemed it a "defective agreement" (Zorri, 2023). In reaction, Saudi Arabia escalated its military advancement. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Saudi Arabia was ranked as the 16th largest arms importer in the world between 2000 and 2010. However, in the subsequent decade, it climbed to the second position, with imports worth USD 30 billion from 2011 to 2022. Saudi Arabia's air force has historically had an advantage over its Iranian counterpart, but recent acquisitions of British 'Storm Shadow' and American 'SLAMER' cruise missiles have significantly bolstered its capabilities (Mandle & Pearson, 2023).

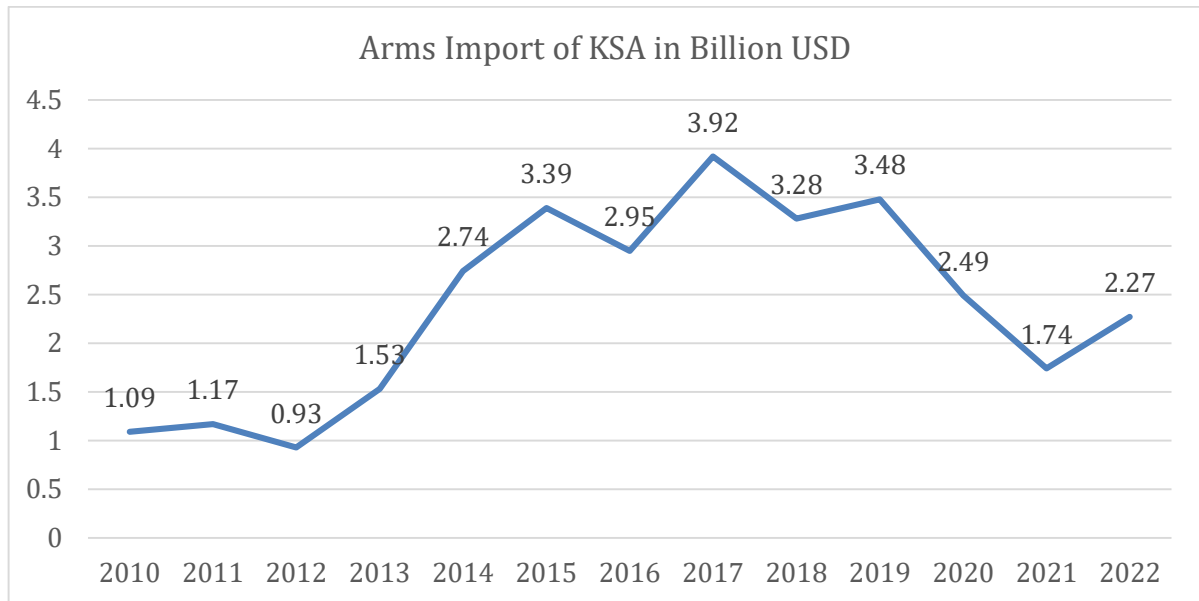


Figure: 1 Saudi Arabia's Arms Import from 2010-2022, Source: portal.sipri.org/publications/pages/transfer/splash

While most of these weapon imports came from Western countries, Riyadh also purchased missiles from China, including the 3,000 KM range Dong Feng-3 in 2014 and, since 2018, other Dong Feng- class missiles, DF-21 ballistic missiles, and Wing Loong II drones.³³ In December 2021, reports emerged that China was helping Saudi Arabia to construct its own ballistic missiles and United States officials were quoted as being concerned about the transfer of "sensitive ballistic missile technology" to Saudi Arabia.³⁴ In an interview with the CNBC channel, the Saudi Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Adel Al-Jubeir, was asked to confirm the reports but merely responded, "We have major defense programs, and we will do everything necessary to protect its security and its people" but without denying the matter. Furthermore, the Wall Street Journal reported that, with China's help, Saudi Arabia had built a facility to process yellowcake uranium ore, a precursor for nuclear weapons (Pirsalami & Shirzadi, 2023). In addition, Riyadh has made deals with China to produce unmanned aerial systems in Saudi Arabia. These advances in Saudi Arabia's long-range strike capabilities clearly have implications for Iran.

The Emerging Economic Influence of Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has had a longstanding goal of expanding its economy outside the energy sector. In April 2016, the government presented a growth plan called 'Vision 2030' to actively pursue these aspirations. The objective of the program is to aid in achieving a twofold increase in the country's gross domestic product (GDP) from its 2016 level. Vision 2030 aimed to increase the proportion of non-oil exports in the non-oil GDP from 16% to 50% and elevate the country's economy from the nineteenth to the top 15 globally. The plan

projected the creation of six million jobs for Saudi nationals and a private sector investment of \$4 trillion in the non-oil economy, resulting in a 60% growth in Saudi household revenue. Initially, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman anticipated that China would play a significant role in this plan (Alemahu, 2023). As of 2021, China has become Saudi Arabia's largest trading partner, with an annual two-way trade value of \$87.3 billion, and Saudi Arabia has become China's primary supplier of crude oil. Additionally, China has made substantial investments in Saudi Arabia, totaling \$37 billion between 2013 and 2022, according to one estimate. In contrast, China's economic ties with Iran are relatively weak (Nawaz et al., 2023).

In 2022, Iran ranked as the seventh largest oil supplier to China and the fiftieth greatest trade partner. Some experts have referred to this as a "asymmetrical or one-way strategic partnership" (Heibach, 2024). Jonathan Fulton has asserted that China's economic cooperation with Middle Eastern countries demonstrates its clear preference for working with nations that offer the greatest opportunities for trade, investment, and connectivity. Consequently, the GCC countries are more attractive destinations than Iran. This is mostly due to the impact of international sanctions on companies' inclination to invest in Iran (Fulton, 2022).

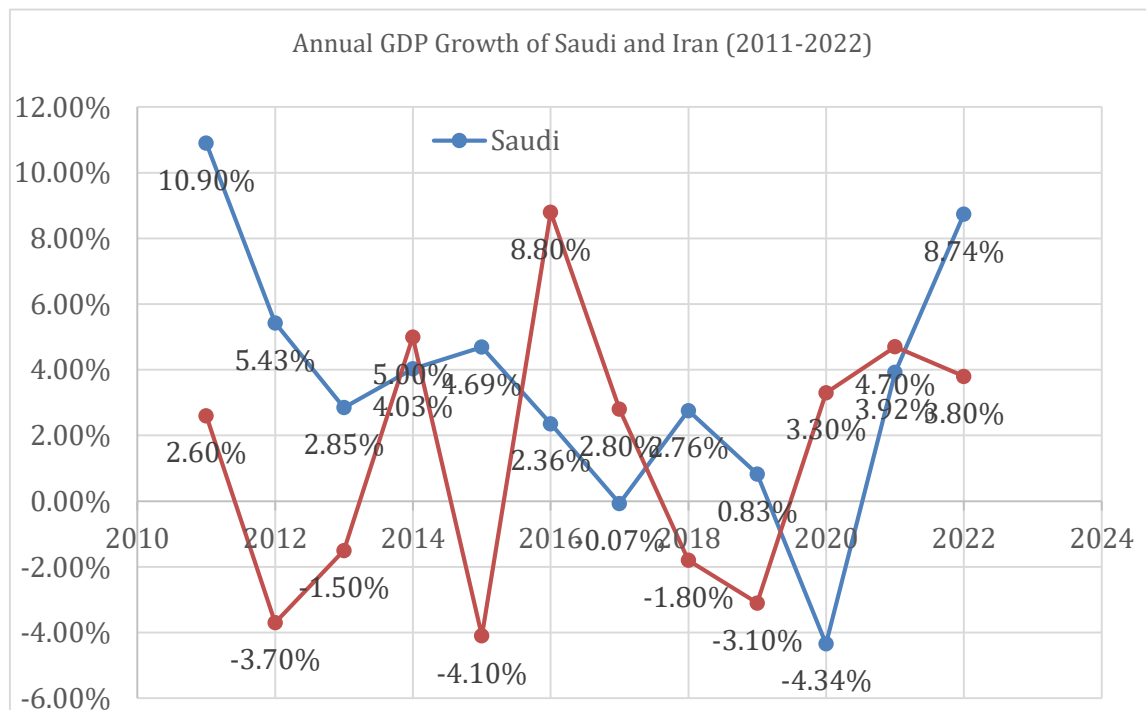


Figure: 2 Comparison of GDP Growth between Iran and Saudi Arabia, Source: <https://www.worldbank.org/> World Bank GDP Indicators

Diplomatic Mission of Saudi Arabia

The implementation of Vision 2030 in 2016 motivated Saudi Arabia to cultivate stronger relationships with neighboring countries as well as nations beyond its immediate vicinity. In order to achieve success, Vision 2030 necessitates both domestic economic stability and robust global growth. As part of Riyadh's endeavors to create optimal conditions for Vision 2030, it has been actively enhancing its relations with China. China recognizes potential advantages in Saudi Arabia. Fulton has observed that Saudi Arabia's strategic position and regional influence, coupled with the prospects of Vision 2030, establish it as a significant ally for China and its 'Belt and Road Initiative'. Duan and Aldamer (2022) contend that economic pragmatism and hedging will continue to shape Saudi Arabia's relationship with China in the foreseeable future.

Regional peace is another crucial pillar for the achievement of Saudi Vision 2030. Since assuming power in 2017, Crown Prince Mohammed has asserted that Saudi Arabia's objectives aim to enhance its alliances with amicable nations globally (Halabi, 2023). The efforts have involved working towards repairing relations with Iran. In a 2019 interview with CBS, the Crown Prince emphasized that a war between Saudi Arabia and Iran would result in the complete collapse of the global economy. Yasmine Farouk (2023) from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, has argued that Saudi Arabia's efforts to de-escalate tensions with Iran are part of a broader foreign policy strategy aimed at supporting Vision 2030. This is because any conflict with Iran could jeopardize the progress of Vision 2030. Additionally, Saudi Arabia aims to resolve regional conflicts in countries such as Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, and promote stability in the region.

Dynamics of Iran's Actions

According to Bahgat and Ehteshami (2021) Iran's strategic thinking has been influenced by the perception of a new threat originating from Saudi Arabia. Divsallar (2023) has proposed that Iranian military planners had largely ignored the threat posed by Saudi Arabia for a considerable period of time. Since 2018, Tehran has been adapting its military capabilities to prepare for a potential conflict with Saudi Arabia, which is considered the most likely adversary. The emergence of Saudi Arabia as a significant power, coupled with its expanding links with China, has heightened the concerns of Iranian leaders regarding potential threats. Riyadh has gained increased regional and international influence due to consistently high oil prices since 2018, with the exception of the 2020 decline caused by the COVID epidemic. Saudi Arabia has shown its expanding capacity to utilize global financial and political networks to counter Iran. Due to Iran's economic weakness, the sanctions' impact, and its limited international alliances, it was unable to retaliate in a similar manner.

Under the presidency of Hassan Rouhani from 2013 to 2021, Iran implemented strategies aimed at mitigating this scenario. On one side, it aimed to strengthen the national governments in allied countries like Iraq and Syria. Furthermore, Iran actively sought to establish cooperation, namely with influential actors like Saudi Arabia, in order to address challenging matters in the area. According to Farzanegan (2023) Iran's resolve to repair ties with Saudi Arabia is responsible for 80% of the improvement in relations between the two countries.

The increasing influence of Saudi Arabia and its growing ties with China have heightened Iranian apprehensions. The cooperation between China and Iran has a long history, spanning several decades. This includes China's supply of weapons during the Iran-Iraq War and its importation of Iranian oil. Iran has regarded China as a significant ally in its efforts to counter the United States' influence in the Middle East and its pressure on Iran. However, by the end of 2022, Iranian officials expressed worries that the strengthening economic ties between Beijing and Riyadh could disrupt this established state of affairs (Caba-Maria, 2023).

China's Role in the Saudi- Iran Reconciliation

In March 2021, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi conducted a diplomatic visit to six countries in the Middle East. While on his trip, Wang disclosed China's comprehensive strategy for the region, encompassing principles of mutual respect, fairness, non-proliferation, collective security, and development cooperation. However, a more detailed examination of Wang's plan indicates that China's remarks primarily focused on addressing the situations in Syria, Yemen, and Libya, combating terrorism, and establishing the Middle East as a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (NWFZ). The effort did not address the issue of reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia. However, on 9 April 2021, direct discussions between the two countries commenced in Baghdad, with mediation from Mustafa al Kadhimi, the Iraqi Prime Minister. According to subsequent reports, the discussions

primarily revolved around Yemen and Lebanon, two countries where the two leaderships backed conflicting factions. The initial round of talks addressed the Houthi attacks, which were deemed favorable by the officials. They stated that the Iranian side had made a commitment to utilize Tehran's influence in order to halt Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia. Riyadh has additionally committed to providing assistance to the nuclear negotiations. Mohammed bin Salman stated in an interview that negotiations are taking place over important matters with Iran, including their nuclear program, their backing of unlawful militias in the region, and their ballistic missiles (Xinchun & Shaoxian, 2023).

Following Ebrahim Raisi's assumption of the presidency of Iran in August 2021, officials from both sides confirmed their readiness to recommence conversations (England, 2021). In September 2021, the two parties convened for the fourth round of negotiations in Baghdad. On 21 April 2022, a fifth round of discussions took place, which Saeed Khatibzadeh, the former spokesman for the Iranian Foreign Ministry, described as "progressive and positive". On the same day, the Iraqi Foreign Minister announced that Iran and Saudi Arabia had reached a 10-point memorandum of understanding and had also discussed the continuation of the ceasefire in Yemen. Meanwhile, secret talks between the Saudi authorities and the Houthi rebels were being facilitated by the government of Oman. It seems that by mid-2022, the Saudis were trying to disengage from the conflict in Yemen, which would help improve relations with Iran.

Nevertheless, the direct negotiations between the two parties were suspended due to the occurrence of anti-government demonstrations in multiple Iranian towns in September 2022. Iranian officials promptly attributed the protests to the influence of foreign powers. The protests in Iran were a complex and varied form of warfare against the country. Afary and Anderson (2023) claimed that foreign countries employed various means, including social media, media influence, terrorist activities, and foreign interference, with the goal of changing Iran's political system. In November 2022, Iraq's newly appointed prime minister, Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani, visited Tehran and inquired about the continuation of talks. Iranian officials declined due to their belief that Saudi Arabia had been providing support to the protests in Iran through different means, particularly through Saudi-funded media outlets located in London, notably the TV channel Iran International (Walsh, 2023). This issue of meddling in each other's internal affairs became a significant aspect of the subsequent negotiations between the two governments. The Iranian leadership issued a call for Saudi Arabia to cease its financial support of news networks that offer a platform to its adversaries.

The potential consequences of strengthening China-Saudi relations on the distribution of power in the Gulf region were emphasized during the China-GCC summit, which took place in Riyadh on December 9, 2022. The final communiqué emphasized the significance of preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction in the GCC region and maintaining the peaceful nature of the Iranian nuclear program to safeguard regional and international security and stability. It also reiterated the demand for Iran to fully collaborate with the International Atomic Energy Agency. Subsequently, China intervened in the territorial dispute between Iran and the United Arab Emirates (Analytica, 2023). In the final declaration of the summit, the leaders expressed their support for peaceful efforts, including the United Arab Emirates' initiative to resolve the issue of the three islands through bilateral negotiations based on international law and in accordance with international legitimacy. This statement, according to McFaul and Milani (2023) caused anger and shock among Iranian officials due to Beijing's strengthened relationship with Arab states. Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman, Nasser Kanani, referred to the statement on the disputed islands as a repetition of a failed policy of Iranophobia. Considering all the aforementioned information, it appears that Iran's growing security concerns towards Saudi Arabia and its increasing sense of isolation prompted the regime to reorient its relations with Riyadh. China's most significant involvement in the Middle East was not a neutral mediation between the two

parties, but rather an intervention in favor of the Arab side, ostensibly against to Iran's interests (Shamim et al., 2023; Taheri, 2023).

Mediating Role of China's

President Xi attended the GCC summit and subsequently sent a message to the leadership in Tehran. In February 2023, Iran's president, Ebrahim Raisi, visited China. On 6 March, Ali Shamkhani, the Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), traveled to Beijing. After three days of talks with Saudi Arabia's national security adviser Musaid Al Aiban, the three governments released their "Joint Trilateral Statement" on 10 March. Iran and Saudi Arabia have re-established diplomatic relations, more than seven years after they were broken due to the murder of Nimr Al-Nimr and the attacks on Saudi diplomatic facilities in Iran. The deal was concluded and proclaimed in Beijing. However, both the Saudi and Iranian parties made sure to acknowledge Iraq and Oman for holding multiple rounds of discussions that occurred throughout 2021 and 2022 (Shamim et al., 2023).

The aforementioned timeframe illustrates that China's involvement in the agreement was a relatively minor influence when compared to the intentions of policymakers in Tehran and Riyadh. However, for Beijing, the mere fact that the agreement was reached with China's assistance offers a chance to showcase its global leadership. President Xi introduced China's 'Global Security Initiative' (GSI) a year ago. In his speech, Xi emphasized the importance of peacefully resolving differences through dialogue and consultation. He called on countries to adapt to the changing international landscape and address security challenges with a win-win mindset. Ahmed Aboudouh, a Non-resident fellow with the Atlantic Council, believes that China needs to link substantial actions to the GSI in order to give it conceptual meaning and diplomatic significance (Mashwani et al., 2024; Xinchun & Shaoxian, 2023). Although China played a prominent role in facilitating the resumption of diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, it does not have the authority to exert complete control over Iran's decision-making process in achieving the arrangement. The Iranian government is aware that China's relationship with Iran is influenced by its relationship with the United States.

Conclusion

The preceding tale illustrates that the reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia began far before China became involved. Saudi Arabia and Iran were both driven by their own distinct objectives to achieve a *détente*. The motivations had a greater impact than China's subsequent participation. Hence, it can be confidently stated that while China did contribute to the process, the other nations were already engaged in negotiations and had the intention to reach an agreement. China's peacemaking efforts were limited and primarily consisted of providing support from a position of non-involvement. Degang Sun and Yahia Zoubir have referred to this as 'quasi-mediation'. This form of intervention is characterized as 'agenda-revising' rather than agenda-setting. It aims to promote conflict de-escalation rather than conflict resolution, and it adopts a following approach rather than a leading one.

The trilateral agreements with China, Iran, and Saudi Arabia can be regarded as a prime example of China's involvement in the Middle East. China had a role in facilitating and encouraging the countries to reach a settlement, but it can be described as a type of 'quasi-mediation'. Saudi Arabia's primary motivation was to establish stability in the region in order to support its economic, military, and political ascent. The Islamic Republic was compelled to join the deal due to the increase in tension and Iran's view of an escalating threat from Saudi Arabia. Iran has recently adopted a more pragmatic perspective on its position in the region, acknowledging that shifts in the distribution of power in the Middle East have favored Riyadh. The latest demonstrations in Iran intensified this perspective and

resulted in heightened security apprehensions among Iranian officials. As a result, Iran insisted that Saudi Arabia cease its meddling in Iran's internal matters as a prerequisite for reconciliation.

Tehran became increasingly concerned about China's growing relationship with Saudi Arabia, particularly following the China-GCC Summit in December 2022. The primary catalyst for the Islamic Republic's decision to pursue collaboration with the Kingdom was this particular advancement. This method has been widely implemented during the large-scale protests in Iran, during which the Islamic Republic faced challenges to its legitimacy and suffered economic losses. Given the rivalry and aspirations for dominance from both parties in the area, particularly in light of Iran's perception of Saudi Arabia's growing independence, it remains premature to predict the duration of the deal to restore diplomatic relations.

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