



Role of China's diplomacy in the Middle East and Saudi-Iran peace deal: implications for the region

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Abstract:

The Middle East is one of the critical regions in global politics and diplomacy. The economic development of this region has attracted the attention of superpowers, especially the US, to have its influence in these countries by establishing military and economic connections. The US enjoyed enormous influence in this region with no competition. China is exponentially expanding its economic might and may surpass the US in a few years in terms of the world's biggest economy. China has also stepped into diplomatic fronts and established cordial ties with the Middle Eastern nations, mainly due to its economic projects. Recently, China brokered a peace deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which has led to the restoration of diplomatic relations between both arch-rivals of the Middle East. This has been a significant breakthrough in the politics of the Middle East and significantly boosted China's diplomatic presence in the region. This research examines the Chinese involvement in the Middle East, its economic and diplomatic initiatives, and how China has enabled itself to emerge as a peacemaker in the region. This research also sheds light on the evolving dynamics of Middle East politics and its consequences on the interests of the US.

Keywords: Arab world, Middle East politics, Diplomatic relations, Peace Negotiations, Saudi-Iran rivalry, China's influence in the Middle East, US influence in the Middle East.

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1. Introduction

The region of the Middle East has historically been the centre of some of the world's oldest civilizations and epicentres of three (3) major religions of the world. After its economic prosperity, it has been at the centre stage of global politics, and the USA has been a major ally and stakeholder in this region with no competition. China steadily developed its relations with these nations on economic fronts and recently pulled off an enormously significant diplomatic success in this region by brokering a peace deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This is poised to have a major impact on the geopolitics of the region and will pose a threat to USA's interests in the region.

The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has long been a destabilizing factor in the Middle East, affecting regional politics, security, and energy markets. China, as a rising global power with extensive economic and diplomatic ties to both countries, has increasingly sought to play a mediating role in this contentious relationship. In a recent development in March 2023, both countries agreed to reestablish diplomatic relations. This development was a result of China's mediation, as secret talks were held in Beijing, China, where Chinese leadership played a vital role in bringing about this historic breakthrough in the political dynamics of the Middle East.

The objectives of the study are: (a) to analyze China's diplomatic initiatives in the Middle East, especially in the context of Saudi Arabia and Iran, including its involvement in conflict resolution, peacekeeping, and regional diplomacy; (b) to assess the impact of China's peacemaking efforts on the resolution of regional conflicts, stability, and security in the Middle East; and (c) to evaluate and examine the consequences to USA's strategic interests in the region after China's entry in the region.

This research has been carried out by following qualitative approach especially secondary sources including books, research papers and newspaper articles to comprehensively analyze China's initiatives in the Middle East and its success stories.

2. The historical evolution of Chinese diplomacy

China's foreign policy and diplomatic initiatives have been tremendously evolved and transformed since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. At first, China had a strict ideological foundation based on Communism, and this led to international isolation. Pakistan was their major ally, and it helped China to successfully end its isolation and open itself to the Western world. China has evolved as a major player in the global world due to its economic, military, and cultural growth. Here, we will analyze the major developments in Chinese foreign policy:

2.1. The early years (1950-1978)

Chinese diplomacy in the early years of its inception was completely focused on Marxism and proletarian internationalism (Tang, 2018). Chinese first Premier Zhou Enlai gave the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, which were the foundation of Chinese foreign relations, and its major focus was on non-interference in the affairs of the other states (Breslin, 2017). China's war with Korea marked the first event in which China sought to exercise its influence in the region. This event was also a significant step for China in order to contain the rise of

Western imperialism (Paine, 2017). This also helped China to enter into the struggle with Communist nations to fight against the rising phenomenon of Capitalism.

2.2. Reformation and opening up with the western world (1978-2000):

This era marked the most phenomenal economic development of China. China's primary focus was on economic growth (Yahuda, 2019). China's diplomatic isolation began to subside as it opened its doors to the Western states, especially the USA (Hachigian, 2017). China was more active in regional cooperation and engagement, especially through the regional organizations of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) (Jakobson & Ji, 2017).

2.3. Journey to become an economic giant (2000 till date)

After eradicating poverty on a giant scale, China set out to become an economic giant and compete with the world's largest economies through trade and investment in all major regions of the world (Deng & Tang, 2017). China established its soft power through cultural diplomacy by enhancing its global image and cultural influence through its Confucius Institutes and state funded media outlets (Xie, 2016).

China intensified its efforts to enhance its global image and cultural influence through the Confucius Institutes and state-sponsored media outlets such as Xinhua and CGTN (Xie, 2016). The promotion of Chinese language, culture, and media aimed to bolster China's global appeal. China launched its signature project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), in 2013. This is a major project related to global infrastructure and the expansion of China's economic and political influence in Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa through a variety of trade routes and infrastructural investments.

2.4. Assertive diplomacy

China has taken an assertive approach to foreign relations and diplomacy. Its diplomats are vocal and assertive in promoting a country's stance on the global fronts. China's economic development has been a major factor in its rise on the diplomatic stage. Its economic initiatives and institutions, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), are major institutions in competition with Western financial bodies (Shih, 2020). China has confidently risen in the global power structure and challenged Western dominance (Shirk, 2017). China is now a major player in international organizations and in shaping global governance.

3. China's role in the Middle East

The evolution of Chinese foreign policy from 1950 to the present reflects changing priorities, global ambitions, and shifting power dynamics. China's foreign policy choices have far-reaching implications for the world, and understanding this evolution is essential for addressing contemporary challenges and opportunities in international relations. As China continues to rise as a global power, it is likely that its foreign policy will remain a focal point of global attention. China has been significantly improving its diplomatic and economic ties with the Middle Eastern nations, which will bring a major change to the global order (Blanchard, 2016). China has assertively made its diplomatic entry into the region. Firstly, China established its

ties on the economic front in terms of energy partnerships and slightly moved on to become a diplomatic actor by mediating and peacemaking efforts in the region (Chen, 2018).

China's emergence as a peacemaker depicts a new phenomenon in Chinese foreign policy as it's now proactively engaged in diplomatic initiatives in the region. This phenomenon marks a shift from the Chinese foreign policy principle of "non-interference" in the internal affairs of states (Li & Zhao, 2015). China's expanding initiatives in the Middle East are economically more sustainable and paved the way for its diplomatic success. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was one of China's key global economic initiatives, and China made huge investments in infrastructural projects around the world, especially in the Middle East. This project has been phenomenal in strengthening China's influence in the region (Blumenthal & Kirchberger, 2020).

3.1. Conflict resolution in the Middle East

The region of the Middle East has been a conflict zone for centuries. It is the epicentre of major religions of the world; therefore, various religious and ethnic clashes are present in this region. Contemporary conflicts in the region are particularly Israeli Palestinian issues, Syrian civil war and sectarian issues between Saudi Arabia and Iran (Zartman, 2019). China's involvement in the Middle East has provided a new domain to conflict resolution theorists as its economic initiatives and diplomatic outreach are clearly different from the Western powers active in the region, particularly the USA (Zhao, 2019).

3.2. China as a peacemaker in the Middle East

China's principle of non-interference has been diminishing as it emerges as a peacemaker in terms of negotiating and mediating in the Middle East (Li & Zhao, 2015). It has actively engaged itself in the negotiations in the regional conflicts especially in Syria and due to its viable approach and neutrality, it has earned success. This role is challenging USA's historical role as primary mediator in the Middle Eastern conflicts (Ehteshami, 2020).

3.3. Implications for American interests

China's emerging influence in the Middle East is posing a direct challenge to the USA's longstanding interests in the region. The Middle Eastern nations are gradually becoming less reliant on the USA's military, economic and diplomatic support. China's presence in the region has enormous potential to weaken American dominance in the region (Sutter, 2020). China's emergence as a major player in the Middle East may foster regional shifts in power and influence. As China seeks to safeguard its interests, it may align itself with the Middle Eastern countries in ways that challenge the American regional objectives (Ratner, 2021). This could lead to friction and competing interests that could further destabilize the Middle Eastern region and affect the Arab countries.

4. Saudi-Iran deal: China's diplomatic triumph

The Saudi-Iran deal in 2023 is a historic breakthrough in the geopolitics of Middle East as it may end years of hostility and rivalry between the two countries. This deal has significant outcomes and far-reaching consequences for peace in the region.

4.1. Background of the conflict

To understand the background of this deal, the issues and conflicts between both countries need to be discussed:

4.1.1. Arab Spring

The Arab Spring was one of the most significant political developments in the Middle East. In 2011, protests and uprisings took place in most Middle Eastern states in order to overthrow dictatorial regimes. In this conflict, dictatorial regimes in various countries, including Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, etc., were overthrown, and democratic governments were installed. Saudi Arabia criticized and accused Iran of sponsoring some of these protests, particularly in Bahrain. Saudi Arabia also decided to engage in the war and sent its troops to Bahrain to quash these protests and help the incumbent regime, which faced counter-criticism from Iran as well.

4.1.2. Syrian War

The Syrian civil war, which started in 2011, became a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Due to belonging to two opposing religious sects, Saudi Arabia started backing and supporting the Sunni rebel forces against the regime of President Bashar Al Assad, who was a Shia and supported by Iran due to Iran being a Shia state. This war also got the involvement of other international actors like the USA, Russia, Turkey and Israel.

4.1.3. Saudi Yemen War

This war began in 2015 and proved to be another proxy war between both states. Saudi Arabia led a military coalition of Arab states to intervene in Yemen and restoration of the government of Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, who was overthrown by the Houthi rebel forces. These rebel forces were ideologically aligned and supported by the Iranian government. This war displaced millions of Yemeni populations.

4.1.4. Iranian Nuclear Deal

Iran signed a famous nuclear deal with six countries, including the US, Russia, France, China and Germany, in order to limit its nuclear program. This deal was aimed at lifting sanctions on Iran and normalizing its relations with the West. This deal was performed without taking Saudi Arabia into consideration, which was the region's most significant player; therefore, this deal disappointed Saudi Arabia as it feared that Iran's regional influence would increase and the US would also normalize its relations with Iran.

4.1.5. Execution of Nimr Al Nimr

A famous Shia cleric, Nimr Al Nimr, was executed by the Saudi government in 2016 as he was a vocal critic of the Saudi government. This execution sparked public outrage among the Shia population around the whole world. Angry protesters also stormed and set fire to the Saudi embassy in Tehran. Both nations cut off their diplomatic ties, and in response, many other Saudi allies in the region also severed their relations with Iran.

4.2. China's role in the Saudi-Iran deal and the outcome

China, as a major oil importer and trading partner of both countries, has a great interest in maintaining peace and stability in this region. Any conflict may also disturb Chinese economic interests, especially the Belt and Road Initiative. China's mediation efforts between both countries started in late 2022 when the Chinese President visited Saudi Arabia and convinced the Saudi leadership to mediate. Afterwards, it convinced the Iranians to resume dialogue with the Saudis. Iran accepted the Chinese offer of mediation, and its President also visited China in 2023 after two decades. During this visit, the Iranian President, while meeting with his Chinese counterpart, agreed to actively participate in the negotiations with Saudi Arabia, having China as a mediator. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi hosted the secret talks of Iranian and Saudi National Security Advisors Ali Shamkhani and Musad Bin Muhammad Al Aiban, and the deal was announced in March 2023.

In this historical development, both countries agreed to respect each other's sovereignty and committed to adopting a non-interference policy. It was also agreed that cooperation on regional issues should be peaceful. However, this deal needs continuous support and engagement from China as confidence-building measures are still inevitable. Israel and hardliners in both countries may make efforts to sabotage this deal. Therefore, it is still critical. The deal between Iran and Saudi Arabia is a major development, even in terms of the USA's interests in the region. The USA has been involved in the region for 70 years, and Saudi Arabia is its major ally, including its military partner. This alliance is also a major reason for the Saudi conflict, as the USA's influence has not allowed Saudi Arabia to normalize its relations with the Iranians. However, this development is seen as a betrayal of the US by Saudi Arabia (Brown, 2023). The US foreign policy experts need to redefine and review its foreign policy in the Middle East after this development.

The US has been advocating and supporting the normalization of relations between Israel and other Middle Eastern countries. Many countries, including UAE and Bahrain, recognized Israel, which was one of the major diplomatic developments. A major effort was being made to agree for Saudi Arabia to recognize Israel, and this deal would dent this effort. Iran has been a major adversary of Israel, and therefore, it would not be easy for Saudi Arabia to recognize the state of Israel. Another major outcome has been seen in the recent Hamas-Israel conflict, when Iran traditionally sided with Hamas and constantly threatened Israel with war. However, Saudi Arabia has also sided with Hamas and sent a bold message to the US and Israel to stop this war. This attitude of Saudi Arabia is also due to this deal and its relations with Iran.

China has emerged as a major player in international diplomacy by using its soft power in the Middle East, particularly in the case of brokering a peace negotiation between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The regional power dynamics experienced a significant shift as the region was completely influenced by American policies and influence. China's entry into Middle Eastern politics as a peacemaker shall pave the way for more conflict resolution initiatives, and it shall tend to diminish the long-term American role and decrease its relevance in this region, which is decades long.

4.3. Findings

The following are the major findings of this research study:

4.3.1. China's mediation efforts

One key finding of research on this topic is that China's mediation efforts in Middle Eastern conflicts have been largely pragmatic and non-confrontational. This policy has allowed China to achieve success in this front as both the countries of Saudi Arabia and Iran felt comfortable and never got a feeling of undermining from China.

4.3.2. Economic engagement and energy security

Research has shown that China's economic engagement in the Middle East, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has significantly expanded its influence in the region. Chinese investments in infrastructure, energy projects, and trade agreements have enhanced economic ties with Middle Eastern nations (Blumenthal & Kirchberger, 2020). China's pursuit of energy security through partnerships with Middle Eastern oil-producing countries has also solidified its presence in the energy sector, potentially reducing the leverage the US has historically held in this domain (Blanchard, 2016).

4.3.3. Shifts in regional alliances

One critical finding is that as China deepens its economic and political ties with Middle Eastern nations, some countries in the region have started or already diversified their international partnerships especially Saudi Arabia and Iran. They may seek to balance their relationships with both the United States and China to ensure their security and economic interests (Sutter, 2020). This shift in regional alliances could weaken traditional American allies in the Middle East and reduce their dependence on US support.

4.3.4. Impact on the US influence in the Middle East

Research findings suggest that China's growing presence in the Middle East, especially after success in brokering peace talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran, has strong potential to challenge American influence in the region. Middle Eastern countries, drawn by economic opportunities and diplomatic engagement with China, may be less inclined to align with US policies and preferences (Ratner, 2021). The result shall be a reduction in the US leverage over regional dynamics and a need for American policymakers to adapt to this changing landscape. The talks for the recognition of Israel by Saudi Arabia shall also be stopped, and it may remain a very difficult thing as Iran and Saudi Arabia come closer.

4.3.5. Failure of US diplomacy in resolving regional conflict

It has been witnessed that the region's yearslong conflicts, including the Palestine crisis and Saudi-Iran tensions, could not be diffused despite the US's strong presence in the region. The major finding is that the US has completely failed to mediate or emerge as a peacemaker on these issues as it has always sided and taken sides. Being a neutral and unbiased actor, China has been successful in gaining the trust of both parties and becoming a more credible mediator than the US.

4.3.6. Saudi Iran deal: success story of China's diplomacy

China achieved a breakthrough in their increasing diplomatic influence in the Middle East when it brokered peace talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which resulted in both countries reestablishing their diplomatic ties. This diplomatic success has stunned major stakeholders in the region, especially the US, as China emerged as a credible peacemaker among these countries.

4.3.7. Pakistan's role in fostering China's diplomatic realm in the Middle East

Pakistan has exemplary relations with the Middle Eastern nations due to religious affiliation. Being China's closest friend, Pakistan can also play an influential role in order to sustain and strengthen China's diplomatic presence in the Middle East.

4.3.8. Diminishing US influence

China's influence in the Middle East, especially the recent diplomatic initiatives, is denting the interests of the US in the region, which, if continued in future, will ultimately diminish its influence in the region as well.

5. Conclusion

China has achieved extensive success on economic and diplomatic fronts in the Middle East, which is major because of its economic projects. China's diplomatic success will prove to be a game-changer in the dynamics of global power and regional power structures. China's success in the case of the Iran deal presents a great opportunity for China's involvement as a mediator and peacemaker for other regional conflicts, especially the Palestine issue, which is withstanding, especially due to the USA's unwavering support for Israel. If a neutral mediator like China is involved in this peacemaking process, it is anticipated that this issue could be resolved. China's increasing influence shall force the US foreign policy pundits to address these contemporary changes in the regional dynamics and amend their policies in accordance with these. The dependency of the Middle Eastern states, especially Saudi Arabia, on the US for security shall diminish with the passage of time. Pakistan can also benefit from China's growing influence in the Middle East. The ongoing crisis in Palestine and Gaza gives a unique opportunity to China to mediate and make significant breakthroughs in the region, as it has cordial ties with both Israel and Palestine.

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