

Focus

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**China's Increasing Influence in the
Middle East and the Future of the Belt and
Road Initiative (BRI)**

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Abstract

China's influence in the Middle East has been increasing due to its large market and potential role as a responsible world power. Recently, it has also brokered a historic deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The development indicates the opening of various opportunities for China as well as neighbouring regional countries such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan. The years-long rivalry between the Gulf rivals remained the biggest hurdle in the extension of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its flagship project CPEC in the region. After the successful détente in the Middle East, the regional dynamics have changed. The research attempts to find out the impact of the Saudi-Iran deal on the CPEC. In this context, the paper also attempts to analyse the hurdles for Iran to extend the BRI projects. Moreover, it also highlights the potential gains for Saudi Arabia from CPEC. Meanwhile, the study finds that a successful partnership in the realm of the BRI will bring many opportunities for China vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Keywords: *China, BRI, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Middle East, CPEC*

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China's Relations with the Middle East

Before Deng Xiaoping opened the Chinese market, China and the Middle Eastern countries were having little or no relations. Only two countries of the Middle East, Syria and Egypt, were having diplomatic engagements with PRC. Its relations with the Middle East enhanced after the 1970s and in the 1980s when key oil supplier countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar announced their recognition.¹ Since then, China's relations with the Middle Eastern countries have peaked.

After the Gulf War in 1991, China yearned for new partners in the Middle East to assure an uninterrupted oil supply.² Due to this, China and the Middle Eastern countries built strong partnerships with each other. Later, when President Xi announced its global connectivity project the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, cooperation between the Middle East and China witnessed a new era. As the continuous development of the BRI projects requires an uninterrupted oil supply, therefore, the ties between them were strengthened. Saudi Arabia has become the largest oil supplier to China in the last few years.³ Similarly, the trade cooperation between China and Middle Eastern countries is also marked as historic since the start of the 21st century. The trade volume surged continuously from \$180 billion in 2019 to \$259 billion in 2021.⁴ Riyadh has also signed a *Vision and Action on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road* in 2015 and a *Comprehensive Strategic Partnership* in 2016⁵ to enhance military and security ties with China. With Tehran, it had signed a *Strategic Partnership Deal* for 25 years, worth \$400 billion. This cooperation has enhanced the ties between China and its middle Eastern Partners.

China's Growing Influence

Although China has historic ties with the Middle Eastern nations, its influence in the Middle East increased since the inception of the BRI in 2013. Its origin dates back to the development of good ties with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries in 1981 when the organization came into being. Since then, China remained a huge market for oil coming from Saudi Arabia and Iran. The Kingdom's oil supply to the PRC reached from \$2.29 billion in 2001 to \$38.3 billion in 2021.⁶ Similarly, despite Western sanctions on Iran, China managed to become Iran's largest trade partner. Tehran remained the third-largest exporter of oil to Beijing with a range of 1.2 million barrels per day on a 25 per cent discounted price.⁷ As a potential buyer from the oil exporting countries, China raised its importance in the region. In addition to it, Beijing also strengthened its economic ties with these countries. In 2016, President Xi signed the Comprehensive Strategic Plan with Saudi King Salman to jointly promote the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR). China signed a 25-year \$400 billion worth 'strategic partnership' with Iran in 2021.

Recently, China projected its posture as a responsible global power by mediating between Iran and Saudi Arabia to end the years-long rivalry. The KSA and Iran were facing a long ideological rivalry. But the recent cutoff in the relations came in 2016 when both of the countries called off their diplomatic missions from each other's country after the Kingdom hanged a prominent Shia cleric Nimr-al-Nimr in Riyadh.⁸ In March earlier this year, the representatives of both countries met in China along

with Chinese top diplomat Wang Yi and announced the reengagement between them.⁹

The re-normalization of ties between them was direly important for China vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia and Iran. The Middle East was under severe conflict for long. Both Yemen and Syria were facing armed conflict. The rapprochement deescalated tensions in the region. The talks of the ceasefire in Yemen are there and Syrian President Bashar-al-Assad received a 'warm reception' back into Arab league.¹⁰ The rapprochement has also opened up opportunities for China and the BRI. The restoration of relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran increased the possibilities of inclusion of Saudi Arabia into CPEC. In addition to it, it will also increase chances of materializing the China Central Asia West Asia Economic Corridor (CCAWEAC). This all became possible due to China's economic leverage over the Middle Eastern countries which enabled it to bring this thaw. Moreover, this also shows China's increased interests and influence in the region and beyond.

China-Iran BRI Cooperation

Iran has had historical relations with China since the days of the Chinese and Persian empires. Its cooperation with China in the BRI traces back to the old Silk Route times. In the past, Persia always played a crucial role as a gateway to Europe. Chinese traders used to sell silk in the European market through the ancient silk road route interconnecting Asia and Europe.¹¹ In 2016, Tehran accepted to join the Chinese BRI revitalizing the historic trade route. The BRI has six corridors, out of which two can play a crucial part in Iran by building connectivity. These include the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the China-Central

Asia-West-Asia Economic Zone (CCAWAEC). Its key partners in enhancing cooperation in these corridors will certainly increase the revival of the historic importance of the silk route through connectivity and interdependence.

Recent developments of the Saudi-Iran Rapprochement and China-Central Asia Summit are reviving the concept of CCAWAEC. The corridor which includes China, Iran, Turkey, and the five Central Asian republics, as partners to bring connectivity and enhanced trade through historic trade routes is aimed to build connectivity and meet China's energy needs. Although Saudi Arabia has been part of the BRI in the Middle East for some time now, China's fears were its animosity against Iran. Cooperation with any of the two rivals may irk the other. Therefore, it mediated between Saudi Arabia and Iran to end the years-long rivalry.¹² Additionally, this agreement between them will build a conducive environment for the completion of this economic corridor. Following the rapprochement, the China-Central Asia summit also stressed boosting the implementation of CCAWAEC. At the Dawn of Central Asia Summit, Chinese President Xi Jinping stressed the vigorous cooperation and hailed its connectivity and energy projects with Central Asian countries.¹³ Therefore, the changing dynamics in the Middle East and the growing Chinese influence in the region can open new ways for achieving the objectives of the BRI.

Iran in CPEC

Iran is also strategically important for both Pakistan and China as its geographical proximity locates it both in the Caspian Sea as well as the Indian Ocean. Due to this, it grabs significant importance in China's "String of Pearls" Strategy. In 2019, Iran

expressed its will to join the multi-billion dollar project CPEC.¹⁴ Later, Iran and China also signed a \$400 billion deal in 2021. Apart from economic ambitions, Iran is also strategically very important for China. The Iran-China deal reduced the Indian ambitions of blocking Chinese growing influence at the key waterways. Moreover, Iran and China also share their policy as a 'bulwark'¹⁵ against American hegemony in the region.

After the recent détente signed between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which is itself a clear proclamation of China's expanding influence in the region, the prospects for Iran to join CPEC have increased. Its inclusion will enhance the energy supply to China to meet its economic goals. Tehran has also categorized Chabahar as a 'sister port'¹⁶ to Gwadar which can act as a transit facility. So, both China and Iran can benefit from Gwadar in their trade supply both through land and sea lanes. Iran's joining CPEC also enhances Pakistan's economic interests. Earlier, Islamabad was giving no room to Iran for its participation in this flagship project due to external pressure and American sanctions.¹⁷ But recent developments portray a different picture. Pakistan has started engaging Iran as it also inaugurated a border market with Iran at the Mand-Pishin border.¹⁸ Therefore, due to the latest developments in regional politics such as the Saudi-Iran deal and indications of changing world order Islamabad can expand cooperation with Tehran under CPEC.

CPEC can also be expanded in its scope from connectivity projects to the diplomatic arena. It can bridge the gaps between nations through connectivity and cooperation. Iran is having difficult relations with Afghanistan due to ideological differences and their historic support for the Northern Alliance in 1996.

Afghanistan is a country now governed by the Taliban under an interim setup. Recently, Pakistan and China announced to engage Afghanistan in CPEC when their Foreign Ministers met for a trilateral security dialogue along with Afghan Foreign Minister in Islamabad.¹⁹ Its inclusion in CPEC creates a potential of Afghanistan becoming a trade hub. The Deputy Spokesperson of the Interim Foreign Ministry Hafiz Zia Ahmad also affirmed that with joining CPEC, Afghanistan will become a "centre of trade."²⁰ The possible connectivity in the region will certainly create an interdependence between Iran and Afghanistan. CPEC, therefore, can also bridge the gap between Iran and Afghanistan by building an interdependence between them.

The BRI and Iran's Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

China seeks to expand BRI by extending its comprehensive strategic partnership (CSP) with Iran to meet its interests. The deal aims to strengthen cooperation between China and Iran in infrastructure, connectivity, and energy supply. China is the biggest importer of Iranian energy. In return for the discounted oil supply from Iran, Beijing will provide investment in infrastructure and connectivity projects in Iran. For instance, China intends to invest \$4.2 billion in Tehran-Qom-Isfahan high-speed railway project.²¹ Similarly, Iran's isolation period and strict American sanctions have made many foreign investors leave the country. The CSP will also target its huge consumer market as it will intrigue Chinese investors in Iranian markets, therefore, increasing interdependence between them through maximized economic activity.

Iran's inclusion in the BRI through CPEC and CCAWAEC will also give a boost to this dormant 25-year Iran-China Strategic Partnership deal. Even after two years since its signing, the deal needs practical steps to materialize implementation. Last year, on the eve of Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian's visit to China, he indicated that the partnership was entering its implementation phase.²² Therefore, CPEC can increase the potential of the deal by enhancing investment opportunities in the areas of economic, military, and security cooperation.

Obstacles to the Extension of CPEC to Iran

China's growing influence in the Middle East and the recent rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran have opened up new ways for the extension of CPEC. In the first stage, China proposed to include Afghanistan in CPEC. As Iran has already shown a willingness to join CPEC in 2019, it can become part of it now. Iran's inclusion in CPEC is not so easy for Pakistan and even for China as well. Earlier, Iran had signed an agreement with the West called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) under the P5+1 arrangement. But the deal was ended by American President Donald Trump in 2018.²³ On the part of China, it was keenly following the Iran civil nuclear deal which was earlier signed due to Beijing's great interests.

Due to its nuclear programme which according to it is for civilian use; Tehran is under a severe sanction regime. The toughest sanctions on Iran started since 2018 when the American President Donald Trump sanctioned Iran's economy with more than 960 sanctions. The sanctions also affected the Iranian economy pushing it into a two-year recession.²⁴ Similarly, the sanctions also

prohibit global and regional countries to bring investment to Iran. Although China is already buying Iranian oil, its potential for maximising this trade and engagement with Iran and bringing more infrastructural investment in the country requires lifting of these sanctions. Similarly, Iran's withdrawal from the deal gave a sceptical impression. The signatory countries might worry that Iran took American exit as a green signal to restart stockpiling of nuclear material. The deal was still functional and no other signatory had backed out.²⁵ Iran's return to the JCPOA will wipe out the trust shaking impression which has been given to all other signatories of JCPOA including China. Therefore, until the conclusion of JCPOA and the uplift of the sanctions on Iran, Beijing and Pakistan are wary of Iran's inclusion in the BRI.

Lastly, Iran's scope in joining CPEC in the near future is also limited due to the non-state actors. Recently, days after the opening of the Mand-Pishin border market between Iran and Pakistan, the militants attacked Pakistan's security forces near the Pak-Iran border.²⁶ Such kinds of incidents reduce the mutual trust between them building an obstacle in front of Tehran's inception in CPEC.

The BRI and Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has not had very good diplomatic relations with the PRC in the initial phase. The Kingdom had diplomatically engaged Taiwan and staunchly supported the rights of the Muslims in China. Later, the ties improved after the reforms period and indirect trade between them started in the 1980s.²⁷ Saudi Arabia and China started direct bilateral trade even after the 1990s, but the relations maximized to the strength that China is

the biggest importer of Saudi Oil and a leading importer of non-oil products. Over the period, the relations between Saudi Arabia and China improved with Kingdom's inception in BRI. Both also announced the establishment of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2016 to expand the scope of the BRI.²⁸

Saudi Arabia's key strategic geography provides it with a significant stake in the Chinese BRI. It is the only country that has its coastal opening to both the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf which provides it access to the key economic gateways Strait of Hormuz and Bab el Mandeab. In addition to it, Saudi defacto ruler Muhamad Bin Salman's Vision 2030 also builds robust ties with China. The objectives of Vision 2030 such as building connectivity and creating jobs, resemble what China had proposed while launching the BRI. Earlier in 2017, MBS also stressed that the objectives of Vision 2030 are in line with Chinese BRI²⁹. Under Vision 2030, both Saudi Arabia and China have cooperated in the field of digitization bringing "Smart" Digitization in all aspects. Therefore, it has created more opportunities for both to cooperate in the region.

Saudi Arabia's tilt towards China at least for the sake of the successful Vision 2030, can also increase after the recent rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The end of rivalry can bring opportunities for Saudi Arabia to enhance its cooperation in BRI through CPEC and other corridors along with other partners such as Iran, Pakistan, and CARs. For instance, Saudi Arabia 2019 announced an investment worth US\$ 84 billion to build a refinery near Gwadar Port.³⁰ But due to the fears of the daunting impacts of rivalry on the country, the development stalled. However, the changing dynamics will remove such

obstacles bringing more options for cooperation between the regional countries. Similarly, the rapprochement also gives an impetus to reducing US influence in the Middle East and ending the Kingdom's term as a junior partner in the region. Therefore, it will increase and enhance options for Saudi Arabia in BRI.

Middle Eastern region is significant due to its oil exports. The US always remained a security guarantor in the Middle East, particularly for Saudi Arabia against Iran. It has military bases in the region (such as in Bahrain), particularly at the mouth of key transit points from where billions of barrels of oil transit every day. But China's growing influence in the region has been impacting American interests. It is not only enabling foes to sit together but also creating interdependence between the states. The successful Saudi Vision 2030 and Chinese BRI, generating interdependence among the regional countries can reduce the American requirement to become a security guarantor in the region to ensure unharmed transportation in sea lanes of communication.

Conclusion

China's influence in the Middle East has been growing since the early days of the BRI. It lured Saudi Arabia and Iran into the multi-billion connectivity project. Due to this, Beijing could convince both rivals to reach on a certain agreement. After the rapprochement, the dynamics of the Middle East have changed and Beijing's influence in the region has increased. China's biggest fear to extend the BRI to the Middle East was the animosity between Iran and Saudi Arabia. After the deal, Saudi Arabia can be a successful part of BRI through investing in CPEC. While China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor (CCAWAEA) can

become a reality with Iran being part of it. In addition to it, the BRI can also bridge the gap between Iran and Afghanistan after both are connected through land generating an interdependence between them.

Meanwhile, despite the rapprochement between Riyadh and Tehran, the extension of the BRI to Iran faces some hurdles. Iran is under sanctions again since 2018 which has become a big hurdle to foreign investment. Similarly, the stalemate on Iran Civil Nuclear Deal, which is apparently the only reason behind the tough sanctions regime against it, is also hindering further Chinese investment in Iran. There are also signs of China's worries as Iran restarted uranium enrichment just after the US withdrawal from JCPOA. Therefore, Iran's behaviour regarding JCPOA and its approach to return to the deal is equally important for China as well as for other regional countries.

The active part of Saudi Arabia and Iran in Chinese BRI also fulfils the objectives of all the parties. With the successful inception of the BRI by Saudi Arabia and Iran, it will be a positive sum for all countries in it. Similarly, the successful implementation of the BRI projects will also create interdependence between these countries. China being the largest market of oil coming from these countries can fulfil its energy needs without any obstruction. While on the other hand, Iran can have the biggest trade and diplomatic partner particularly when it is under severe American sanctions. So is the case with Saudi Arabia. After the quick depletion of its oil reserves and its requirement to shift its economy, Kingdom launched its vision for 2030. The objectives of the BRI and Saudi Vision 2030 were in line with each other. A comprehensive partnership between Saudi Arabia and China can bring huge

benefits to both. Therefore, a successful partnership in the realm of the BRI will bring many opportunities for China vis-à-vis its regional partners.

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