

## **China Emerging as a Peace Mediator: Interests and Objectives**

Usman Ali\*

### **Introduction**

In 2016, Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) called off their diplomatic staff from each other's countries after the kingdom hanged a prominent Shia Cleric Nimr-al-Nimr in Riyadh. Since then, the two countries have faced an intensive rivalry, including proxy fighting against each other in Yemen.

All this changed recently, when China brokered a détente between them.<sup>1</sup> Although the melting of ice between ideological rivals has its own significance, the world is witnessing China as an emerging peacemaker in the region. Beijing's spring diplomacy alleviates its stature among the world powers. After the détente in the Middle East, China aims to instigate peace talks in the Russo-Ukraine conflict. China has proposed a 12-point peace plan to speed up negotiations to conclude another landmark truce to settle the war.

The latest geopolitical shift in the Middle East marks its short history since 2021<sup>2</sup> when Iran and Saudi Arabia gave a final go-ahead to hold talks. Earlier, in 2017, the Saudi crown prince and de facto ruler Muhammad Bin Salman rejected any prospect of re-establishment of ties with Iran. Over time, however, his posture

changed and the two capitals agreed to conduct back-channel diplomacy through Iraqi and Omani mediators. Chinese President Xi Jinping visited the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in December 2022 on a historic visit to China's top source country of its oil imports. His visit was full of anticipation of great ties with the Kingdom. In his meeting with President Xi, Muhammad Bin Salman asked China for mediation with Iran.<sup>3</sup> Later, Iranian President Ibrahim Raisi accepted the Saudi proposal to resume ties on his visit to China in February 2022.

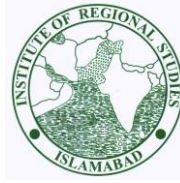
The diplomatic re-engagement between the Middle Eastern foes has certainly opened up new opportunities for China. Over the past few years, China has found its active role in global politics and conflicts beyond Chinese borders. The spotlight aims to find Beijing's objectives behind its role as an active peacemaker in the world.

### **Economic Interests**

Historically, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has maintained a passive role in conflict resolution. China's role as a mediator between the conflicting parties shows not only a departure from its previous position but also indicates China's realization as a responsible global power. Since the day President Xi has taken office,

---

\* Usman Ali is an intern associated with the China Program at Institute of Regional Studies, Islamabad.



Beijing has maximised its economic gains. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has expanded across the world, reviving the ancient Silk Route. Since the very early days of its inception, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are listed among the BRI countries. Beijing has already managed in 2010 to replace the United States in the region. Also, a Report by the Shanghai-based Green Finance and Development Centre<sup>4</sup> claimed that Saudi Arabia received the largest share of the BRI in the year 2022. On the other, China and Iran signed a 25-year \$400 billion Strategic and Economic Partnership<sup>5</sup> in 2021.

Similarly, China is heavily dependent on crude oil from GCC countries. Among them, Saudi Arabia remained a leading oil exporting country to China in the year 2022 with a supply of 1.75 million bpd.<sup>6</sup> All of the infrastructure projects within and beyond China require a continuous oil supply. By reducing tensions between Gulf countries, Beijing can receive an unobstructed oil supply from the Persian Gulf by maximising the potential of Gwadar port in Pakistan. With such huge economic interests in the Middle East, China got involved between the conflicting parties to bring peace, paving a better future for its projects like the BRI.

## Indivisible Security

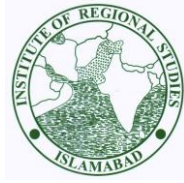
China presented its Global Security Initiative (GSI) Concept Paper in February 2023.<sup>7</sup> The framework idealizes the indivisible security concept which aims to familiarize the international community

with their security rights and obligations. China's role in the peace-making between Iran and the KSA is an extended application of indivisible security which curtails the security concerns of one state from another. Saudi Arabia's security concerns from Iran can't jeopardize the security of Iran and vice versa. So, as a responsible global power seeking peace, China brokered the deal to attain pragmatism in the GSI and end the security dilemma between the regional rivals. Although the West has shown scepticism about the GSI in terms of the Russo-Ukraine conflict and the historic Chinese claims in the region, the initiative proposes peaceful cooperation between the rivals, reducing threats from each other.

## Pax-Sinica

Beijing's proactive diplomacy in the Middle East heralds Pax-Sinica or Chinese Peace in the international system. Throughout history, Augustus' Pax-Romana (Roman Peace) remained a period of Rome's expansion, winning the loyalty of soldiers and utilizing imperial resources for infrastructure projects. Meanwhile, Pax-Americana in the post-WW II is a liberal world order governed by liberal institutions, preponderant of American unipolarity. Unlike these, Pax Sinica will be a period of Chinese modernization and its rise as a global power. China, being a responsible actor under Xi's presidency, sprouted in the global order to provide its peace aimed at a shared future and win-win cooperation.

Pax-Sinica will be comprised of three main attributes: Firstly, it proposes a



multipolar world order, where major powers can co-exist together for lasting peace. The surging peace efforts between Iran and Saudi Arabia give an impetus to the Chinese role as a responsible actor to promote peaceful co-existence between regional and major powers. Secondly, Chinese peace ensures that it does not share the old path of colonial plunder, where Imperialists looted the resources of their colonies. Instead, Beijing aims to bring investments into countries like Pakistan to end economic vulnerability and expand its infrastructure blueprints to Eurasia connecting them for better transportation. And last but not least, it provides an end to the cold war mentality in which the small and middle powers are forced to pick between the two superpowers and bring proxy wars against each other. In the recent global civilization initiative (GCI), China proposed a people-to-people connection between the civilizations, promoting diversity between them. After Huntington's 'clash of civilizations' thesis, Beijing proposed a peace-seeking prelude Pax-Sinica in which civilizations will co-exist "valuing the inheritance and innovations of civilizations."<sup>8</sup>

## **Reducing US Influence in the East**

Historically, the US stood against the 'One China Policy' about Taiwan. In 1955, the US Congress adopted the 'Formosa Resolution' to authorize then-US President Eisenhower to defend Taiwan. China always considers it against its sovereignty and intervention in its internal matters. Even

though the US is following a One China Policy since 1971, in September 2022 the visit of the US Speaker of the House of Representatives to Taiwan brought a tense environment in the region. China conducted joint military exercises and ended almost 8 official military dialogues with the United States. Similarly, the recent meeting of Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-Wen with the US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy while she was in Washington for a democracy summit in which China was excluded, brought tensions in the region. China moved its warships to the Taiwan Strait and conducted military drills.<sup>9</sup>

China's increasing political clout with the Middle Eastern countries is a response to the US meddling in Taiwan. Beijing seems reluctant to entertain the US while it has been increasing its influence on the self-governed Island. For instance, US defence contractors are planning to visit Taiwan in the near future for arms sales. China always felt compromised if the US would maximize its position in the East. The ever-lasting peace in the Middle East will further reduce American sway in the East as the peace deal is a setback to American diplomacy presenting China as an alternative to the US in the region.

## **Conclusion**

After several rounds of talks, China proposed a peace plan in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia and Iran decided to end their rivalry, beginning with the appointment of their ambassadors to each other's capitals. Chinese mediation has proved its stature as

a responsible global power. Its spring diplomacy has brought an end to a major geo-political rift which has culminated in reducing the US influence in the region. This is due to China's provision of alternate opportunities to regional countries and its ambitions to rise as a global power. Beijing's recent global initiatives (the GDI, GSI, and GCI) for the public good and its economic interests have enhanced its influence

among regional and global powers, letting it mediate between them over historic conflicts. In addition to it, China seeks to minimise US influence in the East as it threatens Chinese regional hegemony and its aims to rise to a global power stature. Lastly, this is the dawn of Pax-Sinica full of Chinese modernization added with a shared future and win-win cooperation.

### Notes and References

- <sup>1</sup> Saeid Golkar and Kasra Aarabi, "The Real Motivation Behind Iran's Deal with Saudi Arabia," *Foreign Policy*, 6 April 2023, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/04/06/iran-saudi-arabia-deal-agreement-china-meeting-beijing/>.
- <sup>2</sup> Mehran Haghiriyan, "New Horizons for Regional Economic Diplomacy in the Persian Gulf," (Bourse and Bazaar Foundation, 2022), available at <https://www.bourseandbazaar.com/research-1/2022/03/09/new-horizons-for-regional-economic-diplomacy-in-the-persian-gulf>.
- <sup>3</sup> Saeed Azimi, "The Story Behind China's Role in the Iran-Saudi Deal," (Stimson Center, 2023), available at <https://www.stimson.org/2023/the-story-behind-chinas-role-in-the-iran-saudi-deal/>.
- <sup>4</sup> Ashraq Alswat, "Saudi Arabia Receives Largest Share of China's Bri Investments," Ashraq Alswat, 26 July 2022, available at <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/3780171/saudi-arabia-receives-largest-share-chinas-bri-investments>
- <sup>5</sup> Ariel Cohen, "China-Iran \$400 Billion Accord: A Power Shift Threatens Western Energy," *Forbes*, 5 April 2021, available at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/arielcohen/2021/04/05/china-iran-400-billion-accord-a-power-shift-threatens-western-energy/?sh=260ed91b9e00>.
- <sup>6</sup> Nurettin Akcay, "Beyond Oil: A New Phase in China-Middle East Engagement," *The Diplomat*, 25 January 2023, available at <https://thediplomat.com/2023/01/beyond-oil-a-new-phase-in-china-middle-east-engagement/>.
- <sup>7</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC, *The Global Security Initiative Concept Paper* (Beijing 2023), available at [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjbxw/202302/t20230221\\_11028348.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/202302/t20230221_11028348.html).
- <sup>8</sup> The State Council Information Office, *Global Civilization Initiative Injects Fresh Energy into Human Development* (Beijing 2023), available at [http://english.scio.gov.cn/topnews/2023-03/19/content\\_85177312.htm](http://english.scio.gov.cn/topnews/2023-03/19/content_85177312.htm).
- <sup>9</sup> Sophie Jeong Wayne Chang, Heather Chen, Brad Lendon and Eric Cheung, "China Military Rehearses 'Encircling' Taiwan after Us Speaker Visi," *CNN*, 7 April 2023, available at <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/04/07/china/china-taiwan-military-exercises-hnk-intl-ml/index.html>.