



32/2023

03/05/2023

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China's consolidation in the Middle East

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Abstract:

The recent agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran to reestablish diplomatic relations has been a game-changing event for security dynamics in the region of the Middle East. The fact this agreement came about under Chinese auspices has shown that the country's diplomatic model for the region may be more effective than that of the US, potentially leading to a shift in great power leadership in this global area. However, there are still important security challenges that need to be addressed with the utmost sensitivity to prevent one of the world's most volatile regions from reverting back to widespread conflict.

Keywords:

Middle East, China, infrastructural connectivity, Pax Sinica

*NOTE: The ideas contained in the **Analysis Papers** are the responsibility of their authors. They do not necessarily reflect the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defence.

La consolidación de China en el Oriente Medio

Resumen:

El reciente acuerdo entre Arabia Saudita e Irán, para el restablecimiento de relaciones diplomáticas, ha sido un acontecimiento que ha cambiado las dinámicas de seguridad en la región del Oriente Medio. El que este acuerdo se haya producido bajo los auspicios de China ha mostrado que su modelo diplomático para la región puede ser más efectivo que el estadounidense, por lo que se podría producir un cambio en el liderazgo de las grandes potencias en esta área global. Sin embargo, todavía existen importantes retos para la seguridad, que deben ser tratados con extrema delicadeza para evitar que una de las regiones más volátiles del planeta retorne a la conflictividad generalizada.

Palabras clave:

Oriente Medio, China, conectividad infraestructural, Pax Sínica

Cómo citar este documento:

CASTRO TORRES, José Ignacio. *China's consolidation in the Middle East*. Documento de Análisis IEEE 32/2023.

https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2023/DIEEEA32_2023_JOSCAS_China_EN_G.pdf y/o [enlace bie³](#) (consultado día/mes/año)

Introduction

Historian Arnold J. Toynbee advocates that civilisations follow on from one another in a cyclical fashion, passing through the stages of birth, extension, disruption and decline, which eventually brings about the emergence of a new civilisation. In his forward-looking view of the phenomenon of globalisation, the historian prophesied that in a unified planet there will be "a future for China in the old world". Another interesting aspect of his work is the study of the meeting points between civilisations, shedding light as they do on history¹. Since the Greater Middle East may be one such area of confluence and shifting power, developments there could be indicative of the extent to which global change is being achieved.

The study region is among the most conflict-ridden and volatile on the planet. The fact that it is home to the world's most important oil and gas basin has led major powers to take a special interest in this part of Asia. What is more, the geographical position of these territories makes the region a crossroads of global communications by both sea and land, with its several obligatory points of passage for maritime traffic such as the Straits of Hormuz, Bab el Mandeb and the Suez Canal.

This global area witnessed the confrontation of great powers during the Cold War, eventually panning out into the supremacy of the United States (US) upon the demise of the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, the area has never known peace, with a multitude of conflicts of all kinds involving global and regional powers having been played out there since the turn of the century. The activity of other non-state actors, including groups and organisations characterised by their religious, ideological and even criminal overtones, has also been observed.

The US's primary interest in the area has waned over time since they have become less dependent on the hydrocarbons it produces. The shift in US priorities towards the Asia-Pacific region has helped Middle Eastern issues to move out of US sights, although this does not mean that the US has reduced its important presence and considerable influence in the regions.

¹ TOYNBEE, Arnold Joseph; SOMERVELL, David Churchill. *Civilization on trial*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1948, p. 159-161.

China, for its part, has become an economic giant, hungry for resources and in need of the means of communication to get to them. The greater Mideast region is of paramount importance to Chinese interests. Consequently, the power vacuum left by the Americans has been filled by China's growing influence. China's actions, though, are being carried out through economic, diplomatic and even informational-cultural instruments of power, with a resounding pragmatism that seeks profit without interfering in the internal affairs of the countries with which it interacts.

China's approach has had a positive impact on a large number of the regional conflicts, leading to agreements that could put an end to many of the clashes that have become almost endemic there. The recent deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran could be the tipping point to exponentially increase this trend.

However, there are still issues of concern, such as the relations of the countries in the region with Israel, Iran's nuclear programme and doubts about the fragility of the agreements reached, which could catapult the region back to the volatility and conflict that is usual there.

An Asian geopolitical approach to the Middle East

The model applied by the US to extend its influence as a global power can be defined as "one country, two systems", through the establishment of democracy at home and hegemony abroad. China has a different vision of its relationship model, which could be defined as the inverse of the US one, in which the Chinese are hegemonic within their borders and permissive of others outside them².

The traditional Confucian-Mencian paradigm is inspired by what could be called "Tian-xia" (everything under heaven), wherein China considered itself the centre of the world, surrounded by a glacis whose purpose was to defend its influence and should be respected by the peoples outside it. It seems that this concept has nowadays been extended and surpassed, given that these peoples are not confined to their immediate geographical area. China's "infrastructural connectivity" is thereby proffered to its close associates as an approach of assistance and extension of its power, in exchange for long-

² MINGFU, Liu; RHODE, Grant. The China Dream: Great Power Thinking & Strategic Posture in the Post-American Era. *Naval War College Review*, 2016, vol. 69, issue. 2, p. 146.

term control of certain facilities. China's global concept is also based on a new conception of sovereignty and borders that makes Eurasian trade projects dependent on regional cooperation, explaining how the Belt and Road Initiative can be developed without predetermined territorial or political boundaries³. This is especially relevant if we consider that much of the Middle East has borders drawn with pencil lines, sometimes with no logical distribution of geographical space.

The current global paradigm shift has emerged from the evolution of the previous traditional model, with Chinese influence now extending out from its ancestral space of relations. Lui Mingfu bases his *Chinese dream* on an approach that could well fit with George Modelski's theory of hegemonic stability, according to which a change of leadership occurs approximately every 120 years⁴.

This approach, which does not seek to interfere with the mode of governance, customs or internal affairs, seems to fit well with the idiosyncrasies of the states of the Greater Middle East. Many of these countries' leaders consequently feel more comfortable with the Chinese great power, which seeks to do business without demanding change or asking for certain behaviours.

In the security field this translates into the rise of a new type of design. Until now, a Western concept based on classical notions has prevailed in the region, wherein the defeat of a potential adversary was pursued while making exclusive military alliances, primarily seeking bilateral relations. Against this paradigm an orientation has emerged towards creating "shared perceptions of security" through promoting formats for peacebuilding through development. In this context, it is understandable how initiatives are appearing in the region to promote dialogue between former rivals and to establish multilateral agreements. To this end, Chinese diplomacy has sought to avoid issues of conflict between the different actors, while promoting multipolar alternatives to the old US solutions for the region⁵.

³ NARINS, Thomas P.; AGNEW, John. Missing from the map: Chinese exceptionalism, sovereignty regimes and the Belt and Road Initiative. *Geopolitics*, 2020, vol. 25, no. 4, pp. 810-813.

⁴ SARI, Ni Komang; Cempaka Yulia; WICAKSANA, I. Gede Wahyu. *United States in Asia: Transition in the International System and Restraining China Influence*. 2022, pg. 530.

⁵ AHMED MOONAKAL, Nadeem. "The Impact and Implications of China's Growing Influence in the Middle East". *The Diplomat*, July 09, 2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/07/the-impact-and-implications-of-chinas-growing-influence-in-the-middle-east/> (accessed 17/04/2022)

However, the path that the Chinese have embarked on is not without risks and pitfalls given that their policy of shared alliances and mutual benefits runs through a string of seaports, crossing points and unusually volatile territories. Now that the tough management of these interconnected areas is going to fall on the shoulders of the Chinese giant, it may well be very difficult to maintain a balanced policy in such an unstable area where constant and extraordinarily fast change is the norm. Coupled with other global rivals taking on a destabilising role, China's challenge ahead if it wants to establish itself as a hegemonic power could be huge.

China's "long march" in the Middle East

As the new century unfolds, China is emerging as the actor with the greatest aptitude for global hegemony. 2013 could be marked as a turning point in the country's rise, when it achieved the highest global GDP and President Xi Jinping announced the Belt and Road Initiative. China's booming economy needed resources of all kinds, including energy, to meet the strong demand for its burgeoning production and consumption. This meant it had to broaden its former close relationship preference, seeking expansion into new places where it could implement its projects in three clearly marked areas: political, commercial (including energy) and security. China's expansion has so far taken place in a seemingly gentle manner, although many Western thinkers rather describe it as patient, intimating that in due course China will change this approach⁶.

Recent developments have set a clear trend towards confirming China's entrenchment as a power that has come to the Middle East to stay. Notable in this regard is the shift in the orientation of the main regional actors and the policies of global powers in the region.

Joe Biden's election victory has imbued the US with a changed attitude towards its traditional Saudi partner based on idealistic positions questioning Saudi legitimacy and accusing it of foreign interventionism and lack of respect for human rights. As a result, America's first intention was to isolate the Saudis internationally, while seeking a return

⁶ To explore in more detail the developments that have led China to take on a leading role in the Middle East region, we suggest reading the following article, to which this paper links: SANCHEZ TAPIA, Felipe. *The dragon and the crescent: an approach to China's presence in the Middle East*. IEEE Analysis Document no. 16/2019. http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2020/DIEEEA34_2020JOSCAS_Nagorno.pdf (accessed 18/04/2023)

to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). This document, which President Biden was well aware of, having agreed to it during his tenure as vice president, limited and delayed Iran's nuclear programme.

Saudi rejection of US foreign policy was made clear when President Biden made a conciliatory visit in the summer of 2022 under the guise of assisting the regime in protecting itself from threats from Yemen by the Houthis. The coldness with which the US president was received contrasted starkly with the warm welcome extended to Chinese leader Xi Jinping when he visited Saudi Arabia at the end of the year⁷.

Another new deal of the century

10 March 2023 will go down in history as the day Saudi Arabia and Iran agreed to re-establish diplomatic relations. The pre-agreement context must be examined to illustrate the shift that is taking place in the dynamics of the area and its overall impact. Since the tension in 2017 following the severing of diplomatic relations with Qatar by several Arab countries, led by Saudi Arabia, the situation has evolved with unusual speed. These severed relations were re-established in 2021, opening up a space for cooperation between the Gulf monarchies, the major beneficiary of which would be China in a further step towards the establishment of a region-wide business market. 2021 was also a special year in China-Iran relations, due to the signing of a comprehensive cooperation agreement⁸. On this ascending ladder, the next Chinese rung depended on breaking the Iranian-Saudi ice.

It is interesting to see who the final negotiators on each side who brought all the diplomatic efforts to fruition were. On the Iranian side was the Secretary of the National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani. He has held important positions in both the navy of the regular forces, or *Artesh*, and in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard, or *Pashdaran*. His chameleon-

⁷ For a more in-depth study of the development of events during the year 2022, we suggest reading the document CASTRO TORRES, José Ignacio. *Saudi Arabia between Rimland and the confluence of the great powers*. IEEE Analysis Document no. 05/2023. http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2020/DIEEEA34_2020JOSCAS_Nagorno.pdf (accessed 19/04/2023)

⁸ FULTON, Jonathan. China between Iran and the Gulf monarchies. *Middle East Policy*, 2021, vol. 28, issue 3-4, p. 203-216. For a more detailed study of the return of diplomatic relations between Qatar and Saudi Arabia we suggest reading: CASTRO TORRES, José Ignacio. *From Soft Power to Subtle Power: The Case of Qatar*. IEEE Analysis Paper 83/2022. https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2022/DIEEEA83_2022_JOSCAS_Catar.pdf

like position has aided his unbroken presence in office since 2013, spanning different legislatures across the Iranian political spectrum. Moreover, his Arab origin gives him a certain insight into the potential way of thinking of the Saudis⁹.

The Saudi side was represented by Musaad bin Mohammed al-Aiban, a Harvard graduate and national security advisor, one of the most senior ministers of state, who also maintained cordial relations with the Americans during President Trump's term¹⁰.

The fact that it was the top security representatives of the two countries that brought the agreement to fruition requires interpretation. The main message between the two, and to the world, may well be that both Iranians and Saudis want to try to base their relations, to be pursued in other areas at a later stage, on the absence of conflict. Also noteworthy was the presence of Mr. Wang Yi, Director of the Office of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, and China's highest diplomat. The message sent by the Chinese by his presence may be indicative of the importance they attach to reaching an agreement.

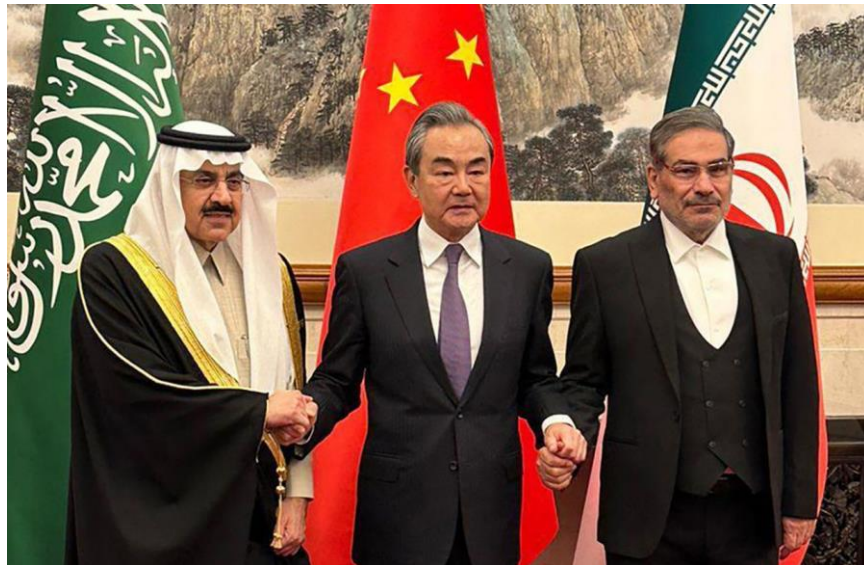


Image 1: Iranian and Saudi representatives agree to restore diplomatic relations under Chinese mediation. Source: VV.AA. "Saudi Arabia, Iran Restore Relations in Deal Brokered by China". The Wall Street Journal, March 10, 2023. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-arabia-iran-restore-relations-in-deal-brokered-by-china-406393a1> (accessed 20/04/2023).

⁹ BRODSKY, Jason M. "The race to replace Ali Shamkhani, Iran's most palatable interlocutor with the West". Middle East Institute, March 6, 2023. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/race-replace-ali-shamkhani-irans-most-palatable-interlocutor-west> (accessed 19/04/2023)

¹⁰ SCHECK, Justin; HOPE, Bradley. "How Saudi Prince MBS Played Trump and Got the Keys to the Kingdom". Daily Beast, Aug. 31, 2020. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-saudi-prince-mbs-played-trump-and-got-the-keys-to-the-kingdom> (accessed 19/04/2023)

The increased perception of security led to first contacts between Syria and Saudi Arabia in mid-April 2023 for the future restoration of diplomatic relations, which could potentially lead to stabilisation of the Al Assad regime and Syria's return to the Arab League¹¹. For the Chinese, who have good relations with Iraq, stability in the Levant could open up the overland communication routes of their Belt and Road Initiative to Syrian ports in the Mediterranean.

Another scenario of détente is Yemen, where the Saudi-led coalition is engaged in a conflict against the Houthi movement, with no definitive results achieved as yet by any of the factions involved. Diplomatic contact between the Saudis and Yemeni rebels have achieved a ceasefire and prisoner exchange as a first step of rapprochement¹².

In this conflict the Saudi's are rather in a hornet's nest, not only because of the attrition of their forces engaged in combat, but because of the missile and drone attacks, allegedly provided by Iran, by the Houthis against Saudi territory. For its part, Iran finds itself in a mousetrap, with its support for the Houthis eroding its ailing economy at a time of social unrest. The release of much of the material sustaining the Yemen conflict could be diverted to the conflict in Ukraine, where Iranian weaponry has already made an appearance. De-escalation in the Yemeni scenario would be equally beneficial for China since the waters of the Gulf of Aden are an important trade route to the Suez Canal and to the extractive ports of the African continent.

A further step towards détente may come with the announcement of the restoration of diplomatic relations between Qatar and Bahrain, under the auspices of Saudi Arabia. Disputes between the two actors have been on a path to reconciliation since the summit between China and the Gulf Cooperation Council countries last December¹³. Once again, the shadow of the energy-hungry Asian giant looms large in this possible rapprochement.

¹¹ France24 "Saudi readies Arab talks on Syria as Mideast diplomacy shifts". 13 April 2023. <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230413-saudi-readies-arab-talks-on-syria-as-mideast-diplomacy-shifts> (accessed 22/04/2023)

¹² Gulf News. "Saudi envoy says in Yemen's rebel-held capital to 'stabilise' truce, in first official comment". 11 April, 2023. <https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/saudi/saudi-envoy-says-in-yemens-rebel-held-capital-to-stabilise-truce-in-first-official-comment-1.95056371> (accessed 21/04/2023)

¹³ HUDHAIFA Ebrahim. "Bahrain, Qatar Agree To Resume Diplomatic Relations After 2-year Blockade" The media line, 04/18/2023. <https://themedialine.org/by-region/bahrain-qatar-agree-to-resume-diplomatic-relations-after-2-year-blockade/> (accessed 21/04/2023)

Israel's delicate position

Because nothing is impossible in the Middle East, Israel is concerned about these developments and fears that the rapprochement between Arab and Iranian positions will undermine the steps taken with the Abraham Accords that have brought Israeli and Arab states closer together.

Israeli fears are further heightened by the loss of US presence in the region to China. The diminishing power of its traditional ally leaves Israel with a sense of uncertainty, especially considering that Iran has advocated the demise of the state of Israel since the Ayatollahs' regime was established.

One consequence of the trend of shifts in leadership in the region has been the recent appointment of Saudi Arabia as a "dialogue partner" of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), in the light of Iran gaining full membership of the organisation last autumn¹⁴.

In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the pilgrimage to Mecca of a Hamas delegation led by Hamas leaders Ismail Haniyeh and Khaled Meshaal signals a rapprochement with the Saudis. Let us not forget that in early April Saudi Arabia protested the actions of Israeli security forces when they intervened in the courtyards of al-Aqsa Mosque, arresting a number of Palestinians during Ramadan¹⁵. At the same time, Palestinian National Authority President Mahmoud Abbas visited Jeddah, where he was received by Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS). During the meeting, the Palestinian right to an independent state with East Jerusalem as its capital was expressed¹⁶. Putting this concatenation of events into context shows how Israel could perceive a progressive isolation, increasing its sense of vulnerability.

¹⁴ Aljazeera. "Saudi partners with China-led security bloc as ties grow" 29Mar2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/29/saudi-partners-with-china-led-security-bloc-as-ties-grow> (accessed 22/04/2023)

¹⁵ ABUEISH, Tamara. "Saudi Arabia condemns Israeli police attacks on al-Aqsa Mosque during Ramadan". Alarabiya 2023/04/05 <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/saudi-arabia/2023/04/05/Saudi-Arabia-condemns-Israeli-police-attacks-on-al-Aqsa-Mosque-during-Ramadan> (accessed 21/04/2023)

¹⁶ OBEID, Ghinwa. "Saudi Crown Prince, Palestinian President Abbas discuss latest developments" Alarabiya, 2023/04/19 <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/saudi-arabia/2023/04/19/Saudi-Crown-Prince-Palestinian-President-Abbas-discuss-latest-developments> (accessed 21/04/2023)

Israel interprets the possession of nuclear weapons by any actor in the region as an existential risk, its determination to avoid this in the past having been demonstrated with the nuclear programmes in Iraq and Syria. The need to prevent these potential adversaries from acquiring military nuclear capabilities led the Israeli armed forces to carry out operations to destroy the nuclear facilities these states possessed.

The Iranian nuclear programme is currently at a stage where 84% enriched uranium has been produced, constituting an almost military grade enrichment¹⁷. The association between the nuclear programme and the Iranian missile programme may make Israel think it could once again find itself in a situation of extreme vulnerability, to which must be added the sufficiently effective active and passive protection of Iranian facilities.

Conclusions

China's interest in the Middle East has led it to establish itself as an exponentially rising global power in the region. Far from employing military power, the use of other instruments has given its approach to the area, where it is expanding its presence, a subtle air. This new model of Pax Sinica is in line with the Confucian approach of winning without having to fight.

Moreover, China's relationship model for regimes in the region is much more to their liking. Chinese pragmatism creates a situation of mutual understanding, where actions and behaviour are not questioned if lucrative business can be conducted. In this environment, Eastern cultures are much more comfortable than when liberal democracy, market economy and too much concern for human rights prevail.

This type of action has prompted a change that has led to the signing of a multitude of agreements that are chained together, the one involving Saudi Arabia and Iran being considered a turning point in this sequence of events since it highlights the possibility of bringing these two traditional rivals closer together thanks to China's mediation.

Nevertheless, China faces a number of important challenges. The first is to maintain and deepen what it has so far achieved. And beyond these achievements, it must be borne in

¹⁷ MURPHY, Francois. "US, European powers express alarm at Iran enriching uranium to 84%" Reuters, March 8, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-european-powers-express-alarm-iran-enriching-uranium-84-2023-03-08/> (accessed 21/04/2023)

mind that the dynamics of the region have led to the degradation of other relationship scenarios, such as those surrounding the State of Israel, where the evolution of events is being experienced with deep concern. To this effect, the progression of the Israeli-Palestinian and Lebanese conflicts, the presence of pro-Iranian organisations in Syria and Iran's nuclear programme are critical elements that China must manage with external sensitivity.

In contrast to the Chinese approach, the more dive and rule-oriented Pax Americana model appears not to have delivered the desired results. This serves to confirm to the regimes in the region that the liberal reforms that have been carried out over the years might have been the wrong solution, bearing in mind the inherent characteristics of the nature of these countries and their territories.

In addition, the US global priority scenario continues to be the Asia-Pacific region, their change of orientation creating a power vacuum. This vacuum, however, is only expected to be partial, the intention being to leave enough presence to be able to continue to control the main areas of interest. This control may be based on certain anchor points, such as military bases or the delivery of the sophisticated armaments necessary to maintain security in an environment where there is mutual mistrust among all the actors. It would appear, therefore, that major US interventions in the region will be unlikely after the experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, and that the American giant, aware of the limitations of its greatness, will likely limit itself to interventions that somehow balance the powers of the other actors.

What is certain is that China has presented events in the Middle East to the world as a sign of their new global power, with the region's biggest rivals having managed to settle their differences within the walls of the Forbidden City. Linking the Saudi-Iranian agreement with visits to China by other world leaders, it seems that perceptions of the global leadership shift are becoming apparent to all actors in the international system.

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