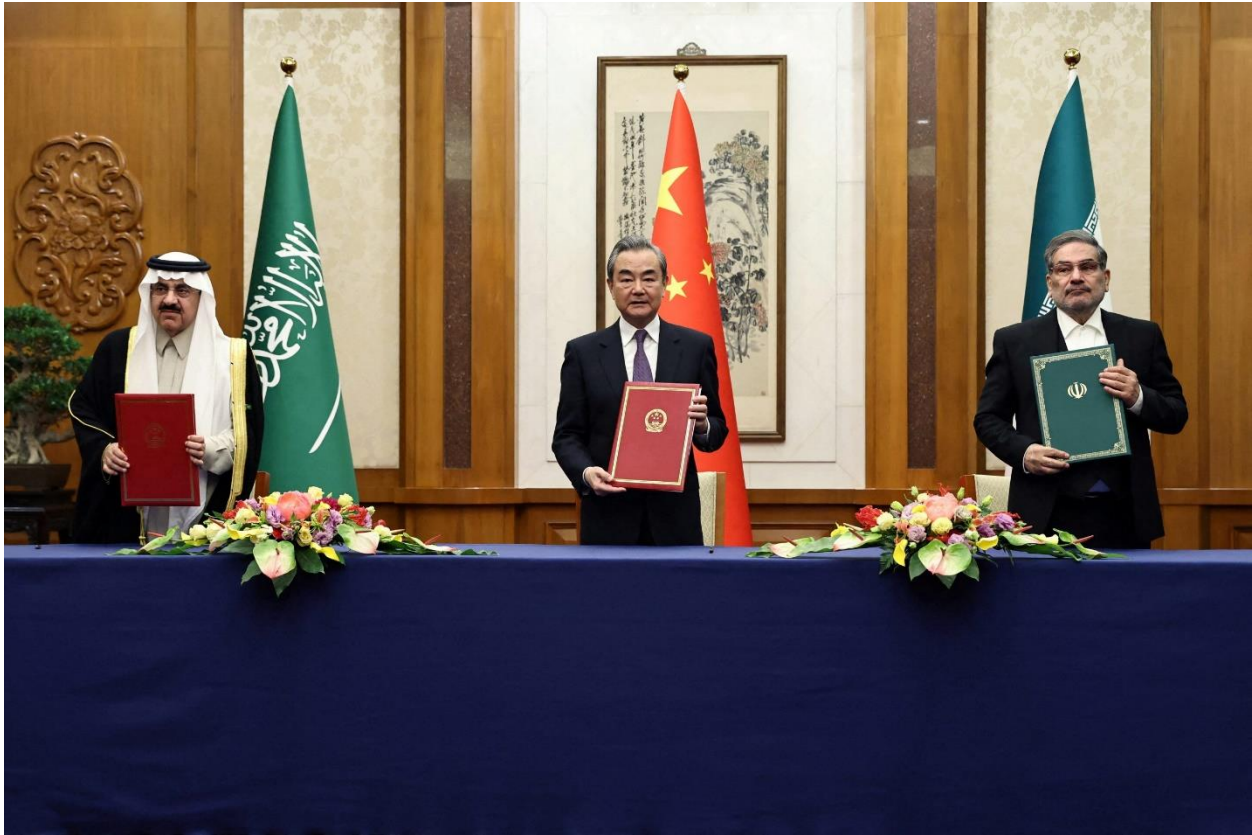


## Chinese Footprint in the Middle East: Motivations and Strategic Priorities

Nur Ahmed



China's recent success in facilitating talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran, along with ongoing negotiations and proposed summits, signals the country's interest in promoting stability in the Middle East. This marks the first high-profile instance of China mediating conflict resolution between major regional rivals on a global scale. And the focus has been on such a region that has been marred by decades of conflicts often exacerbated by external intervention. The talks demonstrate that Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf Cooperation Council countries see China as capable of playing a constructive role in resolving regional disputes, given their growing interest in China's role in the region. While China's recent activities in the Middle East have gained greater visibility, it is important to consider them in the context of China's longstanding diplomatic relationship-building in the region. What is unique is China's willingness to publicize its efforts and potentially challenge the United States sphere of allied partners.

China has not necessarily been a new player in the region. China has been involved in the Middle East and has attempted to resolve conflicts in the region for a while now. However, what is different is the country's recent inclination to publicize its involvement, which could potentially step into the United States sphere of influence. In the past year, China's role in the Middle East has become more noticeable, especially after President Joe Biden's visit to Saudi Arabia in July 2022. There has been a flurry of diplomatic activity, including Chinese President Xi Jinping visits to Saudi Arabia, meetings with the League of Arab States and the Gulf Cooperation

Council, and Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi's trip to Beijing. In March, China facilitated a trilateral agreement between Saudi Arabia, Iran, and itself to resume diplomatic relations, and it also hosted foreign ministers from Iran and Saudi Arabia for further talks in the first week of April. China is also reportedly planning to hold a GCC-Iran summit later in the year.

China has been working to promote peace and security in the Middle East and resolve regional conflicts for over two decades. As early as 2002, China established a Special Envoy for Middle East issues, primarily tasked with resolving conflicts between Palestine-Israel and Arab-Israel by facilitating communication and bringing interested parties together. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is seen as a significant source of volatility in the Middle Eastern region, and China has been committed to its resolution for many years. In 2016, China established a Special Envoy for Syria to help resolve the Syrian civil war. The decision was motivated by Beijing's desire to prevent the conflict from spreading into a larger regional conflict, prevent the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) in Syria from providing support to Uyghurs in Xinjiang, contribute to humanitarian efforts, and facilitate Chinese businesses to enter in the reconstruction and development initiatives in Syria after the war.

In the Middle East, the conflict among Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the GCC states remains a major source of instability. China's current efforts to mediate between these countries align with its past attempts to promote peace in the region and help resolve the Syrian civil war. The motive behind China's intervention is to reduce regional tensions, ensure continued access to resources and markets, demonstrate responsible leadership, and gain support from regional countries. China is not offering its own solutions but rather bringing conflicting parties to the negotiation table. Due to its expanding regional interests and positive relationships with every country in the Middle East, China is in a unique position to serve as a mediator.

China's engagement in the Middle East extends beyond mediation efforts, with the country using various multilateral mechanisms to conduct diplomatic interactions with the region. Three key cooperation forums are the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), and the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF), which serve as China's primary platforms for political, economic, and security engagements with the region. Over the last 20 years, China has built and developed these forums, and now all Middle Eastern countries except Israel are members of at least one of these forums. The CASCF comprises all members of the Arab League, while the FOCAC includes North African countries in the Middle East. The SCO originally consisted of China, Russia, Central Asian states, India, and Pakistan, but now includes several Middle Eastern states, including Iran, which joined in 2022, and Turkey, which is seeking membership. Moreover, the SCO has dialogue partners in several Middle Eastern countries, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar.

China has developed a network of strategic partnerships with various countries and organizations in the Middle East, in addition to its special envoys and cooperation forums. These partnerships are not alliances but rather an indication that China seeks strong political, economic, and security relations with a particular country or organization. The African Union (2012), the Arab League (2016), and the GCC (2022) are among the regional organizations with that China has established strategic partnerships. With the exception of Israel, China has bilateral strategic

partnerships with all of the major countries in the Middle East. As a significant global power, China has been involved in the Middle East for a long time and maintains constructive relationships with every country in the region.

What has changed recently is China's decision to openly promote its involvement in the Middle East, which was not the case until last year. China was previously cautious about publicizing its activities in the region to avoid being seen as encroaching on the United States sphere of influence. Although China's involvement in the Middle East and Africa is comparable in scale, the latter has received more emphasis in public relations. However, this situation has changed, and China now wants to be regarded as a major player in the Middle East and a facilitator of regional peace. Countries in the Middle East, especially Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the GCC, are supporting China's role in this regard, and given China's deep political ties with the region and positive relationships with all countries, it is likely to expand its role as a mediator and peacemaker. This new trend of publicity is expected to continue.

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