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Abstract

Saudi Arabia is considered the head of the Muslim Ummah due to its affiliations with the two most holy places of the Muslim world. The country in the Middle East is also widely popular due to its oil reserves and its active role in world politics. Recently, the state developed some diplomatic tensions with another Muslim state i.e. Islamic Republic of Iran. Several states have played a crucial role in normalizing the relations and conflict resolution including Pakistan, Iraq, China, etc. This paper highlights the role of China in normalizing the turmoil using soft power and providing a good office. China besides establishing regional stability and focusing on its Foreign Policy and its economic interests with the major oil exporters. Also, the global projects of China, including BRI, and CPEC could be influenced by the global tensions it is therefore crucial for China to maintain its own national interests.

Keywords: China, Saudi-Iran Conflict, Soft Powers, BRI, Good Office, Foreign Policy

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Abstract

Saudi Arabia is considered the head of the Muslim Ummah due to its affiliations with the two most holy places of the Muslim world. The country in the Middle East is also widely popular due to its oil reserves and its active role in world politics. Recently, the state developed some diplomatic tensions with another Muslim state i.e. Islamic Republic of Iran. Several states have played a crucial role in normalizing the relations and conflict resolution including Pakistan, Iraq, China, etc. This paper highlights the role of China in normalizing the turmoil using soft power and providing a good office. China besides establishing regional stability and focusing on its Foreign Policy and its economic interests with the major oil exporters. Also, the global projects of China, including BRI, and CPEC could be influenced by the global tensions it is therefore crucial for China to maintain its own national interests.

Keywords: [China](#), [Saudi-Iran Conflict](#), [Soft Powers](#), [BRI](#), [Good Office](#), [Foreign Policy](#)

Introduction

Iran- Saudi Tensions Background

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia accused the Islamic Republic of Iran of inciting anti-royal protests in Bahrain, and as a result, the regime dispatched over 1,000 troops to suppress the unrest. Saudi Arabia supported rebel factions in the Syrian civil conflict that commenced in 2011, while Iran supported

President Bashar al-Assad. Saudi Arabia supported the internationally recognized government and assaulted Houthi rebel positions when Yemen's civil war erupted in 2015. Tensions were further exacerbated by a stampede that occurred in Mecca during the annual Hajj pilgrimage in 2015. Nimr al-Nimr, a prominent Shia leader and vocal opponent of the Saudi regime, was assassinated by Saudi Arabia four months after the Mecca stampede. The



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Saudi embassy in Tehran was stormed by protesters, and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, issued a threat of "divine vengeance" for Nimr's murder. In 2016, Riyadh severed its relationship with Tehran. In 2020, the American drone strike in Baghdad resulted in the death of Iranian military commander Qassem Soleimani, which was celebrated by the official Saudi media (Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies, [2020](#)). On March 10, 2023, the highest-ranking Iranian and Saudi security officials (2020) convened in Beijing to commence a new chapter in bilateral relations in the wake of intensified tensions. The Persian Gulf neighbors have reached an agreement to reestablish complete diplomatic relations and revive a security cooperation pact that was signed in 2001 (Jash, [2023](#)).

Role of Pakistan in Normalizing Tensions

Pakistan, the only nuclear country in the Muslim world, and its influence on the global Kashmir issue holds a significant role in international politics. Currently, the country's poor economic conditions coupled with the political unrest and unimpressive democratic structure, Pakistan possesses a poor international reputation. Also, some of the country's internal affairs which include religious intolerance, defamation concerns, historical support for the 1979 Afghan Jihad War, etc., further ignite widespread criticism. In these crises, Pakistan is striving to improve its global popularity through its hard and soft power approaches, improve its global image, build stronger relationships (with neighboring countries, Islamic countries, and international organizations), and increase its influence in the international community (Abbasi & Akhtar, [2023](#)). Pakistan has also played a significant responsibility in normalizing Saudi-Iran tensions by:

- Attempting to mediate between the two nations, with former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif calling it a "sacred mission" in 2016
- In 2019, Pakistan's PM visited both Iran and Saudi Arabia to serve as a mediator.
- In May 2021, Pakistan's foreign minister visited Iraq to facilitate reconciliation between the two nations.
- Welcoming the China-brokered agreement to restore diplomatic relations between Iran and

Saudi Arabia as a positive step toward regional peace and stability.

- Having a history of supporting efforts to reconcile gaps between countries in the region and playing a constructive role in the Middle East

Role of Iraq in Normalizing Tensions

Iraq has hosted many rounds of discussions between Saudi Arabia and Iran, fostering engagement and agreements aimed at reducing tensions. Iraq has maintained positive relations with both countries, allowing it to serve as a neutral mediator and bridge the gap between them. Iraq's stability and security are inextricably linked to the stability of the region, making it an important role in promoting peace and resolving crises. Iraq's ex-PM, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, started the dialogue amongst the two states in 2021. Iraq is considered the one who holds expertise in resolving Shia-Sunni disputes and balancing relations, which had been useful in resolving sectarian tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Iraq's Foreign Minister, Fuad Hussein, has made significant diplomatic efforts to bring the two countries together, including shuttle diplomacy and meetings with regional leaders. Iraq has held conferences and seminars, including the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership aims to foster regional collaboration and conflict resolution. Iraq is also an active member of regional and Islamic cooperation such as the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), both of which have played important roles in encouraging dialogue and conflict resolution. Iraq also holds economic and trade relations with both Saudi Arabia and Iran, which have served to enhance commerce and economic cooperation, as well as the reduction of tensions and promote peace and tolerance.

Role of USA in Normalizing Tensions

The United States, considered as the Global power due to its strong influence on international politics and world trade, etc. played a supportive role in mediating Saudi-Iran tensions. Primarily maintaining a prudent approach but eventually providing tacit backing for the China-brokered talks. The US encouraged diplomacy and shared

interests, such as regional stability and counter-terrorism efforts, motivated its support. By promoting a balance of power in the region, the US indirectly contributed to the normalization of the successful ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran, potentially leading to increased trade and investment and reduced influence of extremist groups. One important aspect to be noted is that the increasing collaboration amongst the powers including China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Russia, all authoritarian regimes, undermines the values and interests of the USA (Dobbins, et al., [2011](#)).

Successful Efforts by China Through Soft Power

China is a vast, populous, and ancient civilization turned modern nation, blending tradition and innovation. It boasts the world's second-largest economy, a diverse landscape, and a rich cultural heritage, with a communist government and a growing global influence. In global politics, soft power is the capacity to influence further states through persuasion and attraction, rather than force or coercion. It involves winning hearts and minds by showcasing a country's culture, values, and policies, thereby shaping the preferences and actions of other nations without resorting to force or coercion. Soft power is considered to be a courteous and effective technique Along with securing the diplomatic targets and enhancement of international cooperation (Kiyani, Karim, & Qaiser, [2017](#)). The soft powers of China include the country's gentle and peaceful initiatives that arise beyond its borders, shaping international affairs and actions through traditional, economic, and political attractions, rather than armed groups or enforcement. China's movements affect global politics and economics. China has grown in importance in international politics in recent years. China is the world's second-largest economy after the US, and its economic influence is global. Many countries trade with it, and its infrastructure, technology, and industry investments affect global markets. Additionally, it is a permanent member of the UN Security Council (Dharmani,[2021](#)) and has become more involved in international organizations like the BRICS and SCO. At the 17th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2007, President Hu Jintao unveiled China's soft power policy, emphasizing the role of Chinese

culture in the country's "great rejuvenation". China now prioritizes cultural interchange and appeal over military force in global influence. China has been more influential in global governance, particularly in trade, investment, and development. China has increased its military presence and assertiveness in territorial disputes with neighbors, particularly in the Asia-Pacific area. China is involved in diplomacy, notably its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which connects Asia, Europe, and Africa through infrastructure and investment projects. As a major stakeholder in global climate change initiatives, it invests heavily in clean energy, resources, and green technologies. China has improved its relations with third-world countries, particularly in Africa and Latin America, through financial support, aid, and investment. China wants a formal theory and strategy for soft power's worldwide influence. To improve its worldwide image, the state must create policies, overcome obstacles, build tourist infrastructure, manage domestic concerns, involve the diaspora, and use public diplomacy (Eleanor Albert, [2018](#)).

China's soft power role in Sudan-Iran normalization (Plichta, [2023](#)) is complex. Sudan and Iran maintained diplomatic relations since 1970, but they ended in 1985 due to Sudan's backing for Iraq during this war. Sudan's Islamist government under Hassan al-Turabi began repairing ties with Iran in the 1990s. Sudan strained relations with Iran again in 2014, claiming Iran supports rebel groups. Sudan has had diplomatic connections with China since 1959 and China has helped improve its economy. China began investing in oil, infrastructure, and other areas in Sudan in the 1990s. China employed soft power in Sudan to promote economic cooperation, growth, and cultural exchange.

Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir sought normalization with Iran in 2015. China encouraged Sudan-Iran talks through its diplomatic channels, aiding this normalization. China helped Sudan and Iran resume diplomatic relations in 2016. Chinese soft power in Sudan concentrated on: Financial aid cooperation: China invested in Sudan's oil, agriculture, and infrastructure industries, Development cooperation: China offered grants and loans for projects, Cultural exchange: China supported educational and cultural interactions with the nations, This has created a favorable

environment for Sudan-Iran normalization, and China's influence in Sudan and strong diplomatic connections with Iran contribute to promoting discussion and collaboration.

China's soft influence helped normalize Sudan-Iran relations. China fostered discussion and cooperation through economic cooperation, development support, and cultural exchange. China's influence in Sudan and good relations with Iran helped promote regional stability and cooperation. China's "soft" power—the ability to convey its rich culture through cuisine, music, technology, and cinema—is helping it become a worldwide superpower.

China helped Saudi Arabia and Iran reach a deal by sponsoring talks and conferences and creating a network. China was able to mediate regional conflicts by remaining neutral. China has significant economic interests in the region, importing energy from both Iran and Saudi Arabia, and seeks stability to ensure the safe passage of oil and goods. The agreement is seen as a diplomatic achievement for China, impacting its increasing leverage and capability to supervise global affairs.

China has played a significant position in the provision of good offices to conflict states on several occasions including (Robinson, 2012):

1. North Korea-US discussion: China has facilitated negotiations between North Korea and the US, hosting several rounds of talks in Beijing.
2. Iran nuclear agreement: China was a key player in the P5+1 negotiations, helping to broker the 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and world powers.
3. Sudan-South Sudan issue. April, 2023.
4. Myanmar-Bangladesh Rohingya conflict.
5. Afghanistan peace process.
6. Syrian civil war. 2011
7. India-Pakistan dispute: China holds a role in reducing tensions between India and Pakistan, several times for the peaceful resolution of the Kashmir issue.
8. Ethiopia-Eritrea controversy: Support by China.
9. Israel-Palestine Tensions: China has supported international efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including hosting peace talks.

Timeline

Some significant series of events that took place in the conflict resolution between Saudi Arabia and Iran are as follows:

March 10, 2023: Both Saudi Arabia and Iran showed acceptance to restore diplomatic relations as an element of a Chinese-sponsored initiative which was to reduce tensions across the Middle East.

April 6, 2023: In Beijing, China, the foreign delegation from Iran, led by Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud, and Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang convened to deliberate on the specifics of the agreement.

- January 2016: Iranian protesters stormed the Saudi embassy in Tehran after Riyadh ordered the execution of Shiite cleric Nimr al-Nimr, a prominent dissident in the kingdom, leading to a deterioration in relations between the two countries.

Research Methodology

This research article employed qualitative methodology for the collection of secondary data from the already published opinion articles, newsletters, foreign policies of several states, official statements, and dialogues. Therefore, the tool for data collection was document analysis, which involved thematic purposive analysis and interpretation of the content. All documents were first collected and securitized carefully by applying inclusion and exclusion criteria. Those data sets that are not relevant to the said topic or provide old information were excluded from the final data analysis. Rest having the latest and more relevant information are included for final analysis. So, in this regard, objective base sampling is practiced to sort and list all these published documents both online and from the print media.

Analysis

In an effort to facilitate diplomatic contacts between Iran and Saudi Arabia through peaceful discussions, the Chinese government has expressed interest in doing so. The growing

economic and strategic development of China may be the driving force behind the country's interest in the Middle East, which might be linked to this phenomenon. To be more specific, the Middle East makes a big contribution to two of China's primary concerns: the country's economic needs and its energy requirements. The Gulf region is absolutely essential to China's economic interests. China was the most major trading partner in 2021, with a trade volume of around US\$330 billion with Arab countries. This amount made China the most important trading partner. The economic interactions that China has had with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates alone accounted for a total of \$200 billion out of this total. The Gulf region is of geopolitical significance for China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is a global development initiative that is being driven by China through its Belt and Road Initiative. The Belt and Road program comprises a number of key initiatives in the Gulf area, including the Qatar Integrated Rail Project, the King Abdul-Aziz International Airport, the Neom City in Saudi Arabia, and phase 2 of the Dubai Al-Maktoum Airport. These are only some of the activities that are included in this program.

According to the latest surveys and estimates, Iran possesses the capability of gaining nuclear weapons and being the second Islamic Nuclear country after Pakistan in the coming years. This prospect is being hesitated by Western policymakers. However, appreciating Iran's capabilities of acquiring nuclear weapons is beneficial to effectively addressing the issue. While most studies focus on prevention or post-nuclear Iran strategies, a comprehensive policy framework for dealing with Iran during its transition to nuclear capability is lacking. This paper aims to fill this gap by proposing a midterm strategy that neither accepts nor denies the possibility of a nuclear-armed Iran, providing a framework for dealing with Iran before, during, and after it crosses the nuclear threshold.

"China's soft power is established when Chinese writers, such as Mo Yan, who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2012, are honored at international book fairs such as the Frankfurt Book Fair, when Chinese films, such as "The Battle at Red Cliffs," are screened at international film festivals like Cannes, and when Chinese citizens, such as Tu Youyou, receive awards such as the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 2015."

One of the few pieces of good news in a place that is still hurting from their fight. How that turns out and whether it can fix the damage that the competition has done must be seen to be believed. However, some people think that China's growing power in the area helped both countries balance their bets, which changed a political calculation that is now seen as outdated. In the past, Western cities were thought to be the most likely place for revolutionary regional agreements to be made. "China is now the godfather of this agreement, and given how important China is strategically to Iran, that carries a lot of weight," Ali Shihabi, a Saudi expert who knows how the Saudi government thinks, told CNN. As stated, "If Iran were to break this agreement, it would be detrimental to its relations with China, which has invested its entire prestige in the 'tripartite' agreement with Iran."

Despite this, there is still the risk that this might tip the balance in favor of increased Chinese investment in Iran. This is something that should be taken into consideration. This is due to the fact that the prestige that could be achieved by ensuring that the contract is finished has the ability to surpass the potential economic uncertainties or returns that are comparable to those found in other situations. In the history of relations between China and Iran, as well as China and the Middle East, there is still a great deal of doubt on whether or not this will be a passing trend or a new chapter in the history of these relationships. On the other hand, there is a reason to be positive because it is the first time that this has happened.

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