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# PROSPECTS OF CHINA'S DIPLOMATIC MEDIATION BETWEEN SAUDI ARABIA AND IRAN

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## **Abstract**

This study explores China's mediation in the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia, examining its transition from the use of soft power to the adoption of a more geopolitical approach. It investigates the historical context of Iran- Saudi relations and the significance of the recent diplomatic agreement brokered by China. The study analyzes China's mediation strategy, its effectiveness, and the implications for regional stability and global diplomatic dynamics. It also delves into the potential success or failure of China's geopolitical shift and the costs associated with this new diplomatic stance. The study employs an analytical descriptive methodology, utilizing secondary sources to critically examine the impact of China on Middle Eastern and international relations.

**Keywords:** China, Iran-Saudi conflict, mediation, geopolitics, regional stability.

## Introduction

The Iran-Saudi Arabia conflict is a complex rivalry deeply rooted in historical, religious, and geopolitical factors. It can be traced back to the establishment of the Iranian republic in 1979, which marked a significant shift in regional power dynamics.<sup>(1)</sup> The Iranian revolution, led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, imposed a Shiite theocracy, challenging the Sunni-dominated status quo in the Middle East.<sup>(2)</sup>

Saudi Arabia, a Sunni monarchy and the custodian of Islam's two holiest sites, perceived the new Shiite establishment in Iran as a direct threat to its religious authority and regional influence. The ideological divide between Sunnism and Shiism further fueled the rivalry, with both countries vying for leadership of the Muslim world.<sup>(3)</sup>

Geopolitically, the conflict has been exacerbated by the struggle for dominance over key strategic areas, such as the Gulf region. The rivalry has also led to military competition, with both countries investing heavily in their defense capabilities and seeking alliances with major global powers.<sup>(4)</sup> The conflict has adversely impacted regional stability, often hindering efforts to resolve other disputes and contributing to sectarian tensions across the Middle East.

China's emerging role as a mediator in the Iran-Saudi Arabia conflict represents a significant shift in its foreign policy and diplomatic approach. Traditionally known for its principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, China has gradually become more proactive in international conflict resolution, particularly in the Middle East.<sup>(5)</sup>

China's mediation efforts are driven by its growing economic and strategic interests in the region. As the world's largest importer of oil, China has a vested interest in ensuring stability in the Middle East to secure its energy supplies.<sup>(6)</sup> Additionally, the region is a crucial part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to enhance connectivity and economic integration across Asia, Africa and Europe.

China's approach to mediation is characterized by its emphasis on dialogue and negotiation, as well as its neutral stance. Unlike Western powers, which often take sides in regional conflicts, China positions itself as an impartial mediator, leveraging its good relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia. This neutrality, combined with its economic presence, gave China a unique advantage in facilitating dialogue between the rival countries.

China's mediation strategy also reflects its broader foreign policy goals of promoting a multipolar world order and reducing the influence of the United States in the Middle East.<sup>(7)</sup> By playing a constructive role in resolving regional conflicts, China aims to enhance its global stature and assert itself as a responsible major power.

In recent years, China's diplomatic efforts have gained more visibility, as evidenced by its role in brokering the landmark agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia to restore diplomatic relations. This success demonstrated China's poten-

tial as a mediator and its growing influence in shaping the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East.

The purpose of this study is to critically examine China's role as a mediator in the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia, with a focus on the shift from the use of soft power to China adopting a more geopolitical approach. The study aims to assess the effectiveness of China's mediation strategy, its impact on regional stability and the implications for global diplomatic dynamics. By analyzing China's approach to conflict resolution and its influence in the Middle East, the study seeks to contribute to the understanding of emerging trends in international diplomacy and the role of rising powers in shaping global politics.

The significance of this study lies in its timely examination of a pivotal development in the Middle East, a region of strategic importance for global security and energy markets. As China continues to assert its presence on the world stage, understanding its role in mediating regional conflicts becomes crucial for policymakers, scholars and international observers. The findings of this study will provide valuable insights into the complexities of China's foreign policy and its potential as a peacemaker, offering a nuanced perspective on the evolving dynamics of power and diplomacy in the 21st century.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Conflict Mediation Theories**

Conflict mediation theories provide a framework for understanding and resolving disputes through the intervention of a neutral third party. These theories encompass a range of approaches and strategies that aim to facilitate communication, negotiation and agreement between conflicting parties. The following lines look at some of the foundational theories in conflict mediation:

■ The Interest-Based Relational (IBR) approach, which focuses on identifying and addressing the underlying interests of the parties rather than their stated positions.<sup>(8)</sup> This approach emphasizes the importance of building relationships and finding mutually beneficial solutions that satisfy the needs of all involved.

■ The Transformative Mediation theory aims to change the way parties perceive and interact with each other. This approach seeks to empower individuals and encourage mutual recognition, leading to a transformation in their relationship and the resolution of the conflict.<sup>(9)</sup>

■ The Narrative Mediation theory emphasizes the role of storytelling in conflicts, suggesting that disputes arise from conflicting narratives.<sup>(10)</sup> Mediators help parties to reframe their stories, understand each other's perspectives, and co-construct a new narrative that acknowledges both sides.<sup>(11)</sup>

■ Integrative Negotiation theory, also known as Win-Win Negotiation, is a strategy that seeks to find solutions that satisfy the interests of all parties. It encourages collaborative problem-solving and creative thinking to achieve outcomes that are beneficial for everyone.<sup>(12)</sup>

In the context of international diplomacy, these theories can be applied to understand how mediators, like China in the Iran-Saudi conflict, navigate complex geopolitical disputes. By employing various mediation strategies, they aim to bridge differences, foster dialogue, and promote peaceful resolutions.

### **Soft Power and Geopolitics in Diplomacy**

Soft power and geopolitics are two critical concepts in the realm of diplomacy that influence how states interact and assert their influence on the global stage. Soft power, a term coined by Joseph Nye, refers to the ability of a country to shape the preferences of others through appeal and attraction, rather than coercion or payment.<sup>(13)</sup> It is derived from a country's culture, political values, and foreign policies, which can engender goodwill and foster international cooperation. In diplomacy, soft power is often wielded through cultural exchange, educational programs and public diplomacy initiatives to build positive perceptions and relationships that facilitate the achievement of foreign policy objectives.<sup>(14)</sup>

Geopolitics, on the other hand, involves the study of how geographical factors, such as location, resources and physical terrain, influence political decisions and power dynamics. In diplomacy, geopolitics plays a crucial role in shaping strategies and actions, as states seek to protect their interests, secure resources, and exert influence in strategically important regions.<sup>(15)</sup> Geopolitical considerations often drive alliances, conflicts and negotiations, as countries navigate the complex interplay of power, security and territorial ambitions.

The interplay between soft power and geopolitics is evident in modern diplomacy, where states employ a combination of cultural influence and strategic positioning to advance their interests. For example, China's BRI showcases its use of soft power through economic development and cultural exchange, while simultaneously pursuing geopolitical objectives by expanding its strategic footprint across Asia, Africa and Europe.

### **Relevance to China's Mediation Strategy**

The concepts of soft power and geopolitics are highly relevant to China's mediation strategy, particularly in its role as a mediator in the Iran-Saudi conflict. China's approach to mediation is deeply rooted in its broader foreign policy objectives, which seek to balance its soft power appeal with its geopolitical ambitions.<sup>(16)</sup>

China's soft power is evident in its diplomatic efforts to present itself as a neutral, benevolent mediator that respects the sovereignty and interests of all parties. By promoting its culture, economic development model and principles of non-interference and peaceful coexistence, China aims to build trust and credibility among Middle Eastern countries. This soft power approach facilitates China's entry into the region's diplomatic landscape, enabling it to act as a mediator in conflicts like the Iran-Saudi dispute.

Simultaneously, China's mediation strategy is influenced by its geopolitical interests. The Middle East is a vital region for China's energy security and the success of its BRI.<sup>(17)</sup> By mediating conflicts and fostering stability in the region,

China seeks to protect its economic interests and enhance its strategic presence. Moreover, China's mediation efforts align with its broader goal of positioning itself as a major global power capable of shaping international affairs.

## **Historical Context**

### **Overview of Iran-Saudi Relations**

The relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia has been marked by decades of rivalry and tension, shaped by religious, ideological and geopolitical factors. The two countries, representing Sunni and Shiite Islam respectively, have vied for influence and leadership in the Arab and Muslim world, exacerbating sectarian divisions.

The 1979 Iranian revolution, which established a Shiite theocratic regime, was a turning point in Iran-Saudi relations. The new Iranian government's revolutionary ideology and its calls for the overthrow of monarchies in the Gulf region were perceived as direct threats by the Saudi monarchy.<sup>(18)</sup> In response, Saudi Arabia sought to counter Iran's influence by bolstering its own religious and political credentials and forming alliances with other Sunni-majority countries.<sup>(19)</sup>

The rivalry intensified during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s, with Saudi Arabia supporting Iraq as a counterbalance to Iran's expanding influence.<sup>(20)</sup> In the following decades, the conflict assumed an indirect character with the employment of proxies, most notably in Syria, Yemen and Lebanon, where both countries have backed opposing factions.

Despite occasional diplomatic engagements and attempts at dialogue, the relationship remained fraught with mutual suspicion and hostility. Recent developments, such as the 2021 attack on Saudi oil facilities, which Riyadh blamed on Tehran, and the ongoing conflict in Yemen, continue to strain relations, making any prospect of reconciliation challenging.<sup>(21)</sup>

### **Evolution of China's Foreign Policy**

The evolution of China's foreign policy has been marked by significant shifts since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Initially, China's foreign policy was heavily influenced by its ideological alignment with the Soviet Union and its focus on supporting communist movements worldwide. However, the Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s led China to adopt a more independent foreign policy stance.<sup>(22)</sup>

In the 1970s, China's foreign policy underwent a major transformation with the normalization of relations with the United States.<sup>(23)</sup> This shift was driven by strategic considerations to counterbalance the Soviet Union's influence and to pursue economic modernization. China's opening up to the world under Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s and early 1980s marked a further departure from ideological foreign policy toward pragmatism and economic development.<sup>(24)</sup>

Since the 1990s, China's foreign policy has been characterized by its "peaceful rise" or "peaceful development" strategy, which emphasizes non-confrontation,

economic cooperation, and multilateralism.<sup>(25)</sup> China has sought to assure the world of its benign intentions as it grows in power, focusing on building partnerships and integrating itself into the global economy.

In recent years, under President Xi Jinping, China's foreign policy has become more assertive, as demonstrated by its BRI, territorial claims in the South China Sea, and efforts to increase its presence in international institutions. China's growing economic and military capabilities have led to a more confident approach in pursuing its interests and asserting its role as a major global power.

### **Shift From Soft Power to Geopolitics**

The shift from soft power to geopolitics in international relations reflects a change in how countries exert influence and pursue their interests on the global stage. Soft power, a concept popularized by Nye, emphasizes the use of non-coercive means to enact change.<sup>(26)</sup> It is about shaping preferences and building positive perceptions to achieve desired outcomes.

In contrast, geopolitics focuses on the strategic use of geographical factors, such as location, resources and physical terrain, to gain political leverage and secure national interests.<sup>(27)</sup> It involves a more traditional, realist approach to international relations, where power dynamics, territorial control and military capabilities play a central role.

The shift from soft power to geopolitics can be understood in the context of the changing nature of global challenges and the rise of new powers. As countries face more complex and multifaceted security threats, such as cyberwarfare, terrorism and resource competition, there is a growing emphasis on geopolitical strategies to navigate these challenges. Additionally, the rise of countries like China and Russia, which are increasingly assertive in championing their regional and global interests, has led to a renewed focus on geopolitics.<sup>(28)</sup>

This shift has implications for diplomacy, international cooperation and conflict resolution. While soft power remains an important tool for building alliances and fostering goodwill, the resurgence of geopolitics highlights the enduring importance of strategic positioning and power politics in shaping global affairs.

## **China's Mediation Strategy**

### **Diplomatic Approach and Tactics**

China's mediation strategy in international conflicts, such as the Iran-Saudi dispute, is characterized by a distinct diplomatic approach and set of tactics that reflect its broader foreign policy principles and objectives. One of the key elements of China's diplomatic approach is its adherence to the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries.<sup>(29)</sup> This principle allows China to position itself as a neutral mediator, capable of facilitating dialogue between conflicting parties without being perceived as having a vested interest in the outcome. This neutrality is crucial for gaining the trust of both sides in a conflict and for creating an environment conducive to negotiation.

China also employs a low-profile, behind-the-scenes approach to mediation.<sup>(30)</sup> Rather than seeking public attention or taking a leading role in high-profile peace initiatives, China often prefers quiet diplomacy, engaging in discreet discussions and offering its good offices to facilitate talks. This approach helps to avoid exacerbating tensions or provoking resistance from other external actors involved in the conflict.

In terms of tactics, China leverages its economic influence and development assistance in the mediation process. By offering economic incentives, such as investment, aid or trade opportunities, China can encourage conflicting parties to engage in dialogue and seek peaceful resolutions.<sup>(31)</sup> This economic leverage is particularly effective in regions where economic development is a priority, as it provides a tangible incentive for cooperation.

China's mediation strategy also involves a long-term perspective, recognizing that complex conflicts cannot be resolved overnight. Chinese diplomats are known for their patience and persistence, gradually building relationships and trust over time, which is essential for effective mediation.

### **Role of Economic and Political Interests**

The role of economic and political interests is central to China's mediation strategy in international conflicts. These interests not only motivate China's involvement in mediation efforts but also shape the tactics and approaches it employs.

Economically, China has significant interests in the Middle East, particularly in securing energy resources and expanding its BRI. The region is a key supplier of oil and gas to China, and stability is crucial for ensuring uninterrupted energy supplies.<sup>(32)</sup> Through its mediation efforts, China aims to foster a stable environment that safeguards its energy interests and facilitates the implementation of BRI infrastructure and investment projects. By positioning itself as a peace broker, China also seeks to enhance its reputation as a responsible global power, which can attract more economic partnerships and investment opportunities.

Politically, China's mediation efforts are aligned with its broader foreign policy goals of promoting a multipolar world order and reducing the influence of Western powers, particularly the United States, in the Middle East. By successfully mediating conflicts, China can increase its political presence and assert itself as a major player in regional and global affairs. This enhances its diplomatic clout and strengthens its position in international forums.

Furthermore, China's mediation efforts are part of its strategy to project soft power and build strategic partnerships. By contributing to peace and stability in the Middle East, China can cultivate goodwill and strengthen its relationships with regional countries, which are important for both economic and strategic reasons.

### **Comparison With Previous Mediation Efforts**

China's mediation efforts in conflicts can be compared to previous mediation efforts by other actors in several key aspects.



■ **Approach and style:** Unlike Western powers, which often adopt a more direct and high-profile approach to mediation, China's style is characterized by discretion and a low-profile demeanor. Western mediators, such as the United States or the European Union, may employ public diplomacy, make strong statements, or impose conditions for negotiations.<sup>(33)</sup> In contrast, China prefers quiet diplomacy, focusing on behind-the-scenes negotiations and avoiding public ultimatums or pressure.

■ **Principles:** China's mediation efforts are guided by its principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries. This principle stands in contrast to some Western-led mediation efforts, which may be perceived as having a hidden agenda or attempting to impose external values or solutions on the conflicting parties. China's approach is seen as more neutral and respectful of the sovereignty of the countries involved.

■ **Economic leverage:** China often uses its economic power as a tool in its mediation efforts. By offering economic incentives, such as investments or trade opportunities, China can encourage conflicting parties to come to the negotiating table. This economic leverage is a distinctive feature of China's mediation strategy, compared to traditional diplomatic efforts that may rely more on political or military pressure.

■ **Long-term perspective:** China's mediation efforts are characterized by a long-term perspective, recognizing that complex conflicts require time and patience to resolve. This contrasts with some previous mediation efforts that may have sought quicker, but less sustainable, solutions to conflicts.

■ **Geopolitical context:** The geopolitical context of China's mediation efforts is also different. As a rising global power, China's involvement in mediation is part of its broader strategy to assert its influence on the international stage and challenge the traditional dominance of Western powers. This is in contrast to previous mediation efforts, which may have been driven by the strategic interests of established powers in maintaining their influence in certain regions.

■ **Outcome and impact:** The outcomes of China's mediation efforts are still evolving, and it remains to be seen how effective they will be in the long term. Previous mediation efforts by other actors have had mixed results, with some leading to lasting peace agreements, while others have failed to achieve a durable resolution.<sup>(34)</sup> China's success in mediation will depend on its ability to navigate the complex dynamics of the conflicts it engages in and its ability to offer solutions that are acceptable to all parties involved.

## Impact on Regional Stability

### Short-term and Long-term Impacts

China's mediation efforts in conflicts have both short-term and long-term impacts on regional stability. In the short term, China's involvement as a mediator can help de-escalate tensions and prevent the escalation of conflicts. By providing a neutral

platform for dialogue and negotiation, China can facilitate communication between conflicting parties, reducing the likelihood of immediate violence or military confrontation. This can lead to temporary ceasefires or agreements that provide immediate relief to the region and prevent the further loss of life and destruction.

Moreover, China's economic leverage and investment opportunities can incentivize conflicting parties to engage in negotiations, leading to short-term agreements that stabilize the situation. These economic incentives can also foster a sense of interdependence, making conflict less appealing due to the potential economic costs.

In the long term, successful mediation by China can contribute to the resolution of deep-seated issues and the establishment of lasting peace in the region. By addressing the root causes of conflicts and facilitating agreements that are acceptable to all parties, China can help build a foundation for long-term stability. This can lead to increased cooperation and integration among countries in the region, further enhancing stability.

Furthermore, China's active role in promoting peace and stability can reshape the regional power dynamics and reduce the influence of external powers, leading to a more balanced and multipolar regional order. This can create a more conducive environment for addressing other challenges, such as economic development, governance and human security.

However, the long-term impact of China's mediation efforts will depend on their effectiveness in achieving sustainable solutions and the willingness of regional actors to embrace and uphold these solutions. It will also be influenced by the broader geopolitical context and the evolving interests of China and other global powers in the region.

### **Influence on Neighboring Countries**

China's mediation efforts can have a significant influence on neighboring countries in the Middle East. Firstly, successful mediation can lead to a reduction in regional tensions, which can have a stabilizing effect on neighboring countries. Reduced tensions can decrease the likelihood of spillovers, such as refugee flows, cross-border violence or the spread of extremist ideologies.<sup>(35)</sup> This can create a more secure environment for neighboring countries, allowing them to focus on their own development and governance challenges.

Secondly, China's mediation efforts can influence the balance of power in the region. By acting as a mediator, China can increase its own presence and build stronger relationships with countries in the Middle East. This can alter the traditional power dynamics, which have been dominated by Western powers and regional heavyweights like Iran and Saudi Arabia. Neighboring countries may seek to align themselves with China to benefit from its economic and diplomatic support, leading to a shift in alliances and partnerships.

Thirdly, China's emphasis on economic development as part of its mediation

strategy can also have positive spillover effects on neighboring countries. Investments in infrastructure, energy and trade can boost regional connectivity and economic integration, benefiting neighboring countries through increased trade opportunities and economic growth.<sup>(36)</sup>

### Implications for Global Power Dynamics

China's mediation efforts have significant implications for global power dynamics. By actively engaging in conflict resolution in the Middle East, China is challenging the traditional dominance of Western powers, particularly the United States, in the region. This shift reflects the broader transition toward a multipolar world order, where multiple powers, including China, are exerting influence on the global stage.

China's successful mediation can enhance its global stature and diplomatic credibility, showcasing its ability to contribute constructively to international peace and security. This can strengthen China's position in international forums and negotiations, increasing its leverage in shaping the rules and norms of the international system.

Moreover, China's approach to mediation, which emphasizes neutrality, economic development, and non-interference, offers an alternative model to the interventionist approaches often associated with Western powers.<sup>(37)</sup> This can appeal to countries that are wary of external interference in their internal affairs, leading to a realignment of alliances and partnerships in favor of China.

China's growing involvement in the Middle East also has implications for its strategic competition with the United States. As China seeks to expand its presence in a region that has been a traditional sphere of US interests, it can lead to increased geopolitical competition between the two powers. This competition can extend beyond the Middle East to other regions, further reshaping the global power dynamics.

However, China's rise as a mediator and global power also brings challenges. It will need to navigate complex regional politics, manage its relationships with other powers, and address concerns about its intentions and the sustainability of its mediation efforts. The impact of China's mediation on global power dynamics will depend on its ability to balance its interests with those of the international community and contribute to lasting peace and stability.

### Possibilities of Success or Failure

#### Factors Contributing to Success

The success of China's mediation efforts depends on several factors:

- **Neutrality and credibility:** China's ability to maintain a neutral stance and be perceived as a credible mediator by all parties is crucial. This requires a balanced approach that respects the sovereignty and interests of the conflicting parties without favoring one side over the other.
- **Economic leverage:** China's economic presence in the region, through trade,

investment and development projects, can be a powerful incentive for parties to engage in dialogue and reach agreements. The promise of economic benefits can encourage cooperation and compromise.<sup>(38)</sup>

■ **Diplomatic skill:** The effectiveness of China's diplomatic efforts, including its ability to understand the complexities of the conflict, build trust with the parties and facilitate constructive negotiations, is key to the success of its mediation.

■ **Regional and international support:** Support from other regional powers and the international community can enhance the legitimacy and impact of China's mediation efforts. Collaborating with other actors can also bring additional resources and perspectives to the mediation process.

■ **Long-term commitment:** Successful mediation often requires sustained engagement and follow-up to ensure that agreements are implemented and that underlying issues are addressed.<sup>(39)</sup> China's willingness to commit to the long-term process of peacebuilding is essential for lasting success.

■ **Addressing root causes:** The ability of China's mediation to address the root causes of the conflict, rather than just focusing on short-term solutions, will determine its long-term success. This includes tackling issues such as sectarian tensions, power imbalances and regional rivalries.

### Potential Obstacles and Challenges

China's mediation efforts face several potential obstacles and challenges:

■ **Deep-seated hostilities:** The longstanding and deeply entrenched nature of the Iran-Saudi rivalry, driven by religious, ideological and geopolitical factors, poses a significant challenge to mediation efforts. Overcoming deep-rooted mistrust and animosity requires time and sustained engagement.

■ **Regional dynamics:** The complex regional dynamics of the Middle East, with multiple actors and interests at play, can complicate mediation efforts. Balancing the interests of different regional powers and addressing their concerns is a challenging task.

■ **External influences:** The involvement of external powers, such as the United States and Russia, in the Middle East can impact the effectiveness of China's mediation. These powers may have competing interests and agendas, which can influence the willingness of conflicting parties to engage in negotiations.

■ **Implementation and enforcement:** Even if an agreement is reached, ensuring its implementation and enforcement is a significant challenge. The lack of a robust mechanism for monitoring and verifying compliance can undermine the durability of peace agreements.

### Scenario Analysis

Scenario analysis is a useful tool for exploring the potential outcomes of China's mediation efforts in the Iran-Saudi conflict. By considering different scenarios, policymakers and analysts can better understand the range of possibilities and prepare for various eventualities.

■ **Successful mediation:** In this scenario, China's mediation leads to a break-

through agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The agreement addresses key issues such as security concerns, regional influence and economic cooperation. China's neutral stance and economic incentives contribute to building trust and facilitating dialogue. The successful mediation enhances China's global stature and contributes to regional stability.

■ **Partial success:** China's mediation results in a partial agreement that de-escalates tensions but does not fully resolve the underlying issues. The agreement might include confidence-building measures or limited cooperation in specific areas. While this scenario does not achieve a comprehensive peace, it reduces the risk of conflict and opens the door for further negotiations in the future.

■ **Stalemate:** Despite China's efforts, the mediation process reaches a stalemate, with neither Iran nor Saudi Arabia willing to make significant concessions. The deep-rooted rivalry and external influences hinder progress. In this scenario, China's role as a mediator is limited, and the status quo in the region remains unchanged.

■ **Escalation of conflict:** The mediation efforts fail, and tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia escalate into a more direct conflict. This scenario could result from a breakdown in negotiations, external provocations or domestic pressures. The escalation of conflict would have significant implications for regional stability and global security, and it would undermine China's position as a mediator.

Each scenario highlights different challenges and opportunities for China's mediation efforts and underscores the importance of a nuanced and adaptable approach to conflict resolution in the Middle East.

## Costs for China

### Economic, Political and Strategic Costs

China's mediation efforts involve various economic, political and strategic costs:

■ **Economic costs:** China's mediation efforts may require significant financial investments, including funding for peacekeeping missions, humanitarian aid or reconstruction efforts in post-conflict scenarios. Additionally, China's economic interests in the region, such as energy supplies and infrastructure projects, could be risked if the mediation efforts fail and lead to further instability.

■ **Political costs:** Engaging in mediation carries political risks for China. Failure to achieve a resolution could damage China's reputation as a reliable mediator and global power. Moreover, China must carefully balance its relationships with different countries in the region, as favoring one side over another could lead to diplomatic fallout and harm its interests in other parts of the Middle East.

■ **Strategic costs:** China's involvement in Middle Eastern conflicts could entangle it in complex regional dynamics and power struggles, potentially diverting attention and resources from other strategic priorities. Additionally, China risks being drawn into conflicts with other major powers, such as the United States or Russia, which have their own interests in the region. This could lead to increased

geopolitical tensions and challenges to China's pursuit of peaceful ascendance.

### Risks of Involvement in Middle Eastern Conflicts

China's involvement in Middle Eastern conflicts, such as mediating the Iran-Saudi dispute, presents several risks:

■ **Reputational risk:** Failure to successfully mediate a resolution could tarnish China's image as an effective global mediator and undermine its credibility in international diplomacy. This could impact China's ability to play a constructive role in other conflicts and global issues.

■ **Entanglement in regional rivalries:** The Middle East is a complex region with deep-seated rivalries and shifting alliances.<sup>(40)</sup> China risks being drawn into these rivalries, which could strain its relationships with regional powers and complicate its foreign policy objectives.

■ **Impact on economic interests:** China has significant economic interests in the Middle East, particularly in energy and trade. Escalation of conflicts or instability in the region could disrupt oil supplies, endanger investments and affect global energy markets, impacting China's economy.

■ **Security risks:** Increased involvement in Middle Eastern conflicts could expose China to security threats, including terrorism and cyberattacks. Protecting Chinese citizens and assets in the region could become more challenging.

■ **Geopolitical tensions:** China's mediation efforts might lead to tensions with other global powers, such as the United States, which have their own interests and strategies in the Middle East. Navigating these geopolitical dynamics requires careful diplomacy to avoid escalating conflicts or triggering a broader confrontation.

### Impact on China's Global Image

China's involvement in mediating conflicts can have a significant impact on its global image:

■ **Positive impact:** Successful mediation can enhance China's reputation as a responsible global power committed to peace and stability. It can showcase China's diplomatic prowess and ability to contribute constructively to international affairs. This can bolster China's soft power and strengthen its relationships with countries in the Middle East and beyond.

■ **Demonstration of leadership:** By playing a proactive role in resolving complex conflicts, China can assert itself as a leader in global governance. This can position China as an alternative to traditional Western powers and increase its influence in shaping the international order.

■ **Neutral or negative impact:** If China's mediation efforts are perceived as biased, ineffective, or driven by self-interest, it could harm its global image. Failure to achieve tangible results or being seen as exacerbating conflicts could lead to criticism and skepticism about China's intentions and capabilities.

■ **Balancing act:** China's involvement in Middle Eastern conflicts requires a delicate balancing act. It must navigate regional sensitivities, manage relations with

competing powers and uphold its principle of non-interference, all while pursuing its own interests. How China manages these challenges will influence its global image and the perception of its rise as a major power.

## **Conclusion**

China's role as a mediator in the Iran-Saudi conflict represents a significant development in its foreign policy and growing influence in the Middle East. By adopting a neutral stance and leveraging its economic power, China has positioned itself as a key player in regional diplomacy. The success of its mediation efforts could enhance its global stature, contribute to regional stability and promote a multipolar world order.

However, China's involvement in Middle Eastern conflicts is not without challenges. The deeply entrenched rivalries, complex regional dynamics and the presence of other global powers pose significant obstacles to successful mediation. Moreover, China must carefully manage the economic, political and strategic costs of its engagement, as well as the risks of becoming entangled in regional conflicts.

The impact of China's mediation on global power dynamics is profound. As it seeks to assert its influence in the Middle East, China's actions have implications for its relationships with other powers, particularly the United States, and for the broader international order. The success or failure of its mediation efforts will not only affect regional stability but also shape perceptions of China's role as a global leader.

In this evolving geopolitical landscape, the outcomes of China's mediation in the Iran-Saudi Arabia conflict will be closely watched. They will provide valuable insights into the possibilities and limitations of China's diplomatic approach, as well as its ability to navigate the intricate web of interests and rivalries in the Middle East. As China continues to assert its presence on the global stage, its role in mediating conflicts will be a critical test of its aspirations and capabilities as a major power in the 21st century.

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