

The Prospects of China's "Global Security Initiative": The Case of the Restoration of Saudi-Iran Ties

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1. News Highlights

On March 10, 2023, Saudi Arabia and Iran declared the resumption of diplomatic relations, which had been interrupted for over seven years, under the mediation of Beijing. Within two months, both sides will reopen their embassies and diplomatic missions and activate the security agreement signed in 2001 and the economic, trade, investment, and technology agreement signed in 1998. As

the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs recently released "The Global Security Initiative Concept Paper" on February 21, 2023, the Chinese government and media view the Saudi-Iran agreement as a successful example of Xi Jinping's "global security initiative," highlighting China's contribution as a "responsible major power." As a result, the outside world is also concerned about China's possible role in the Russo-Ukrainian war and the Israel-Palestine conflict.¹

1. For the joint statement of China, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, see "Tripartite Joint Declaration of People's Republic of China, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Islamic Republic of Iran," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, March 10, 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/26fvhzn2>. For documents related to the Global Security Initiative, see "Xi Jinping's Keynote Address at the Opening Ceremony of the 2022 Annual Conference of the Boao Forum (full text)," *Xinhua News Agency*, April 21, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/2p9dzhah>; "Global Security Initiative Concept Paper (full text)," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, 2023 February 21, <https://tinyurl.com/3ahs63st>; for China's view of the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement as the successful implementation of the Global Security Initiative, see "Wang Yi: The Saudi-Iranian Dialogue in Beijing is A Victory for Peace," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, March 10, 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/7ezm5v2e>; Cheng Xin and Wang Huihui, "Middle East Issue Experts: Facilitating the Resumption of Diplomatic Relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran Demonstrates China's Ability as A Responsible Great Power," *People's Daily Overseas Edition*, March 14, 2023, http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrbhwb/html/2023-03/14/content_25970291.htm.

Since September 2022, China has embarked on a new round of diplomatic offensive. Xi Jinping frequently attended international forums and met with international organizations and leaders. Furthermore, he also proposed the "Global Civilization Initiative" on March 15, 2023, following the issuance of the "Global Development Initiative" in September 2021 and the "Global Security Initiative" in April 2022, demonstrating an attempt to reshape different aspects of the international order. However, since China's mediation between Saudi Arabia and Iran was partly based on the existing dialogue between the two countries, and the Global Security Initiative lacks an effective mechanism for conflict resolution, it is difficult for China to promote the resolution of other regional conflicts.

2. Security Implications

2-1. China's "quasi-mediation diplomacy" is not the key to Saudi-Iranian reconciliation

Although many international observers view China's role in facilitating the Saudi-Iranian détente positively,

some commentators argue that China's diplomatic success is due to the existing desire for rapprochement and dialogue between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Generally speaking, the tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran can be attributed to the execution of a Shia dissident cleric by Saudi Arabia in 2016, which sparked Iranian protesters to attack the Saudi embassy in Iran, resulting in the eventual severing of diplomatic ties between the two nations. Meanwhile, the Trump administration withdrew from the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, also known as the Iran nuclear agreement, in May 2018 and imposed harsh economic sanctions on Iran. As a result, Iran retaliated against US allies in the Middle East, particularly with the drone attack on Saudi Arabia's oil refinery in September 2019. In addition, the two countries were also competing through proxy agents in countries such as Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. However, Saudi Arabia has been facing disruption from the Iran-supported Houthi rebels in Yemen, which is detrimental to the country's economic plan called "Vision 2030." Iran has also been experiencing large-scale domestic protests and economic sanctions from the US. The two countries have therefore

shown their willingness to talk since 2021 and have started dialogues facilitated by Iraq and Oman. That means China didn't actually bring Saudi Arabia and Iran to the table but rather played the mediator role in response to the needs of both countries.²

Commentators, therefore, argue that China's role in the Saudi-Iranian peace talks is less substantive than advertised but reflects the qualities of "quasi-mediation diplomacy." In this concept, China's involvement in the Middle East and North Africa is driven by protecting its economic, political, and diplomatic interests rather than its fundamental security and strategic concerns. In this capacity, China adheres to existing trends rather than taking the lead, focuses on revising agendas rather than setting them, and promotes de-escalating conflicts rather than striving for resolutions.³ Simply put, China only intervenes in mediation when conditions are ripe. In this regard, its

mediation is certainly commendable, but its claim of a "global security initiative" may be exaggerated.

2-2. The Global Security Initiative lacks an effective mechanism for conflict resolution

Even though reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran reflects the spirit of the Global Security Initiative, the initiative lacks effective mechanisms for resolving deep or complex regional conflicts, making it difficult to ensure continued peace. The core of the Global Security Initiative consists of six points. The gist is as follows: First, world peace and security require collective participation and cooperation (point 1). Second, the premise of cooperation is "equality," which means not interfering in a country's claimed domestic issues such as territory, institutions, and human rights concerns (point 2). The remaining four

2. Barbara Slavin, "China Shows Its Constructive Side by Brokering a Deal between Iran Saudi Arabia," *Stimson Center*, March 10, 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/mr29ttfm>; Charlie Campbell, "China Just Brokered a Historic Truce Between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Can It Do Ukraine Next?" *Time*, March 15, 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/28dh7vau>; Patsy Widakuswara, "White House Welcomes Chinese-Brokered Saudi-Iran Deal," *VOA*, March 10, 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/4wf2twsr>.

3. Degang Sun and Yahia Zoubir, "China's Participation in Conflict Resolution in the Middle East and North Africa: A Case of Quasi-Mediation Diplomacy?" *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 27, No. 10 (2018), pp. 224-243; Guy Burton, "What the Iran-Saudi Agreement Reveals About China's Approach to Conflict Management," *The Diplomat*, March 15, 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/bsuuxse6>.

points further elaborate on the principle of “equality.” Under the premise of “sovereign equality,” the United Nations is the primary mechanism for states to cooperate in solving security problems as other security structures are considered outdated and antagonistic (point 3); since all states are equal, their security concerns and interests should be valued by other states (point 4). Conflict of security interests between states should be resolved through consultation and peaceful means (point 5); security cooperation based on equality should also extend from traditional to non-traditional areas (point 6).

The “Joint Declaration of the People’s Republic of China, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the Islamic Republic of Iran” coincides with six points on the final two points as the latter two countries agree on “settling disputes through discussion and diplomacy,” “uphold the principles of the United Nations Charter,” and “acknowledge the sovereignty of each nation and refrain from intervening in their internal

affairs.” In other words, the restoration of diplomatic ties and negotiations for peace between both countries rely on equality and mutual consent. However, in the event of a conflict of interest, such as the reactivation of Iran’s nuclear weapons program or the continuation of the proxy war between the two countries in Yemen, relations between the two countries would be difficult to maintain. If that were to happen, China could only call for dialogue and cooperation according to the logic of the Global Security Initiative. Many commentators suggest that regardless of China’s success in diplomacy, the consequences of the situation remain to be seen.⁴

In the theory and practice of international conflict resolution, certain coercive means such as political and economic sanctions and even force-backed de-militarization and humanitarian intervention, are sometimes necessary to avoid armed conflict or to restore peace as soon as possible after the outbreak of conflict.⁵ But in China’s logic, these methods, unless authorized by the UN

4. Nahal Toosi and Phelim Kine, “U.S. Officials Project Calm as China Stuns World with Iran-Saudi Deal,” *Politico*, March 13, 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/mr32pf8f>.

5. Cf. Jacob Bercovitch and Richard Jackson, *Conflict Resolution in the Twenty-first Century: Principles, Methods, and Approaches* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2009).

Security Council, are demonstrations of “interference in internal affairs,” “unilateralism,” and “abuse of unilateral sanctions,” which often caused UN operations to be ineffective. To highlight its differences with the US (and the West), China's Global Security Initiative deliberately ignores the role of “power” in conflict prevention, management, and resolution. As a result, once security interests between countries are difficult to reconcile, there is no effective conflict resolution mechanism for the Global Security Initiative other than the call for equality and dialogue.

3. Trend Observation

3-1. China can hardly promote peace between Russia and Ukraine

After the resumption of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, public opinion in the international community is concerned about China's role in promoting peace between Russia and Ukraine due to Xi Jinping's visit to Russia between March 20 to 22. From the Chinese Foreign Ministry's “China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis” on February 24, 2023,

to the “Joint Declaration” and press conference released during Xi Jinping's visit to Russia, China has continued its logic of the Global Security Initiative. On the one hand, China stressed that “the purposes and principles of the UN Charter must be observed;” and on the other hand, it criticizes the US and the democracies supporting Ukraine as “seeking military, political, and other advantages while harming the legitimate security interests of other countries” without naming them. In the meantime, China repeatedly says that “the legitimate security concerns of all countries must be respected.” China's position is, in fact, using UN Charter to support Russia's “legitimate security concerns,” implying that the actions of the US and other countries are not complying with international law, and encouraging dialogue and peace talks between Russia and Ukraine after excluding the legitimacy of foreign assistance to Ukraine. With Russia not giving up occupied Ukrainian territory and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky still insisting on an immediate and unconditional ceasefire and withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukrainian territory, the two countries' security interests do not align. As a result, China's “global security initiative” is

reduced to empty talk. While it may have short-term benefits for domestic and overseas propaganda purposes, China's initiative would risk being perceived as vague by the outside world in the medium to long term.⁶

3-2. China will target third-world countries for its global initiatives

Since the Global Security Initiative is not likely to address deep structural issues, China's role in facilitating the Russia-Ukraine war and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is expected to be limited. However, since Xi Jinping is actively promoting the Global Development Initiative, Global Security Initiative, and Global Civilization Initiative, China will continue to create an impression that these initiatives are popular and practical in the future. The "Concept Paper on Global Security Initiative" clearly focuses on the ASEAN, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America,

the Caribbean, and the Pacific Islands as the key directions of cooperation and declares that it will "leverage the roles of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, BRICS cooperation, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, the 'China+Central Asia' mechanism, and relevant mechanisms of East Asia cooperation," "organize high-level activities of the GSI," "support the China-Africa Peace and Security Forum, the Middle East Security Forum, the Beijing Xiangshan Forum, the Global Public Security Cooperation Forum (Lianyungang) and other international dialogue platforms," revealing the future channels or platforms for promoting GSI in various regions. These are the regions or countries where the Global Development Initiative and the Global Civilization Initiative are most likely to have an impact due to their colonial experience, political systems, and economic development patterns.

6. For China's position on the Russia-Ukraine war, see "China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, February 24, 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/3m3v2v2y>; "Joint Declaration of the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation on Deepening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in the New Era," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, March 22, 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/mrf9tk6a>. For Zelenskyy's peace advocacy, see Olena Roshchina, "Zelenskyy Outlines Ukraine's 10-point 'Formula for Peace' at G20 Summit," *Ukrainska Pravda*, November 15, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/bdzmf2mc>; "Joint Statement on Special Global Partnership between Ukraine and Japan," President of Ukraine, March 21, 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/52juycrt>.

In the case of the resumption of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, China succeeded not only because the sides were in need of reconciliation but also because it is the largest trading partner of both to enjoy a strong influence over them, especially Iran.⁷ China may therefore use its political and economic influence in a similar way to facilitate peace talks between countries in conflict or tension to establish an image of a "responsible power." Nevertheless, whether these regional issues can be effectively resolved will be a different matter.

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(The contents and views in the assessments are the personal opinions of the author, and do not represent the position of the Institute for National Defense and Security Research.)

7. Barbara Slavin, "China Shows Its Constructive Side by Brokering a Deal between Iran Saudi Arabia"; David Pierson, "China's Role in Iran-Saudi Arabia Deal Shows Xi's Global Goals," *The New York Times*, March 11, 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/kw8bp2fw>.