

ROLE OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA IN THE MEDIATION BETWEEN SAUDI ARABIA AND IRAN

РОЛЬ КИТАЙСЬКОЇ НАРОДНОЇ РЕСПУБЛІКИ В ПОСЕРЕДНИЦТВІ МІЖ САУДІВСЬКОЮ АРАВІЄЮ ТА ІРАНОМ

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Abstract. *This article analyses the role and influence of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on diplomatic mediation between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The paper examines the historical contradictions between the states, the prerequisites for diplomatic settlement and mediation by other states, and the importance of China's involvement in the settlement process. In addition, the article discovers the impact of negotiations between Saudi Arabia and Iran on the Middle East region and the positions and benefits of dialogue for all three states. The article also touches upon the role and place of mediation in China's overall foreign policy strategy, and the potential for China's participation in other diplomatic processes, including possible diplomatic settlement of the Russian-Ukrainian war.*

Keywords: *PRC, diplomatic settlement, Saudi Arabia, Iran, energy resources, economic cooperation, mediation, negotiations.*

Анотація. *Дана стаття присвячена аналізу ролі та впливу Китайської Народної Республіки на дипломатичне посередництво між Саудівською Аравією та Іраном. Досліджено історичні протиріччя між державами, передумови дипломатичного врегулювання та посередництва інших держав, а також важливість залучення Китаю до процесу врегулювання. Крім того, проаналізовано вплив дипломатичного врегулювання між Саудівською Аравією та Іраном на регіон Близького Сходу, позиції та переваги діалогу для всіх трьох держав. Також, було проведено аналіз фактору та місця посередництва у загальній зовнішньополітичній стратегії КНР, і потенціалу участі Китаю в інших дипломатичних процесах, зокрема у можливому дипломатичному врегулюванні російсько-української війни.*

Ключові слова: *КНР, дипломатичне врегулювання, Саудівська Аравія, Іран, енергоресурси, економічне співробітництво, посередництво, переговори.*

Introduction. For a long time, relations between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran have been developing and have been quite tense due to several factors. First of all, it is worth noting the factor of religion, which plays a very significant role in the relations between the two countries: the Islamic Republic of Iran professes Shiite Islam, while Saudi Arabia professes Sunni Islam. The difference in the branches of Islam over time has led to significant exacerbations in bilateral relations between the countries. For example, on 31 July 1987, during the Hajj (a pilgrimage

in Islam that involves visiting Mecca and its surroundings, where the main sanctuary of Islam, the Kaaba, is in the Al-Haram Mosque) in Mecca, there was a clash between Saudi security forces and Iranian pilgrims, which resulted in the death of more than 400 people [*The Guardian*, 2015]. Saudi Arabia, like most Arab states, condemned Iran, while Iran blamed the Saudis for the incident. As a result, in April 1988, Saudi Arabia broke off diplomatic relations with Iran and reduced the number of Iranian pilgrims allowed to perform the Hajj to 45,000, compared to 150,000 before the incident. In 1991, diplomatic relations were restored, and an agreement was reached to allow Iranian pilgrims to perform the hajj [*Bezhan*, 2016].

In addition, both states aim to strengthen their influence at the regional level, including consolidating their status as regional leaders, which is why they have a number of contradictions, including over the issue of oil exports. According to a 2009 Rand Corporation study, “Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam”, both countries have large energy reserves but have diametrically opposite export goals: Saudi Arabia is interested in a long-term approach to the formation of stable and predictable energy prices, while Iran focuses on the short-term strategy and high prices on energy resources due to the sanctions regime and the economic situation in the country, which ultimately leads to serious discrepancies between the two states in terms of energy and export policy [*RAND Corporation*, 2009].

Also, in January 2016, the Saudi Embassy in Tehran was attacked after the execution of Shiite preacher Nimr al-Nimr in Saudi Arabia. After the attack on the Saudi Embassy in Iran, Saudi Arabia broke off diplomatic relations with Iran, and the Saudi Foreign Minister said that all Iranian diplomats should leave the country within 48 hours [*BBC*, 2016]. Subsequently, in 2016-2023, diplomatic ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia were virtually non-existent. Thus, it can be concluded that relations between the two states have had a complex record of development, with many troublesome aspects that lead to the aggravation of divergences between them.

The purpose of this article is to evaluate the role of the People's Republic of China in the process of diplomatic settlement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the geopolitical impact of this process on the Middle East and China's position in the region, as well as the importance of China's participation in the negotiated resolution between Riyadh and Tehran in the context of China's overall foreign policy strategy.

Literature review. While working on the research for this article, the author mainly relied on materials presented in such media outlets as The Guardian, BBC, Al Jazeera, Bloomberg and others, which reviewed the relations between China, Saudi Arabia and Iran. In addition, while developing the article, the author analysed the studies of Western and Asian researchers specialising in the topic. In particular, a 2009 study by the RAND Corporation [*RAND Corporation, Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for U.S. Policy*, 2009] investigated bilateral relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, domestic and foreign policy factors of both states within the framework of a broader regional confrontation, which provides a more detailed historical context that is important for understanding the preconditions of the inconsistencies between the states. In turn, Yasmine Farouk, a nonresident scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's Middle East Programme, in her paper “Riyadh's Motivations Behind the Saudi-Iran Deal” [*Farouk, Y., Riyadh's Motivations Behind the Saudi-Iran Deal*, 2023] reviewed in detail China's role in mediating between Saudi Arabia and Iran, as well as Riyadh's possible interest in a peaceful settlement with Tehran, especially in terms of the Saudi Vision 2030 programme, which emphasises the importance of a peaceful resolution with Iran as part of a broader course in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy and economic activities.

Amrita Jash, Associate Professor at the Department of Geopolitics and International Relations at the Manipal Academy of Higher Education, also examined China's role as a mediator, as well as China's geopolitical and economic interests in the region [*Jash, A., The Saudi-Iran Deal: A Test Case of China's Role as an International Mediator*, 2023]. In addition, the author examined the work of Pakistani researchers Dr Adnan Nawaz, Muhammad Afraz Ansar Khan and Zosha Noor, exploring the positions and interests of the United States (US) and China in the Middle East and how the growing Chinese presence could affect the US position in the region [*Nawaz, A., Khan, M., Zosha, N., China-US Competition in the Middle Eastern Political Chessboard: An Analysis*, 2023].

In addition, during the work on the article the author utilised official statements, concepts and publications on official state sources of the People's Republic of China, such as the State Council of the People's Republic of China and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC.

Main results of the study. On 10 March 2023, with the mediation of the People's Republic of China, Saudi Arabia and Iran agreed to restore diplomatic relations. The trilateral statement reads that "...an agreement was reached between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran to restore diplomatic relations between them and to open Embassies and Missions within a period not exceeding two months, as well as to reaffirm respect for the sovereignty of states and non-interference in the internal affairs of states." It also says that the foreign ministers of both countries will meet to implement the agreement, agree on the return of their ambassadors and discuss means of enhancing bilateral relations. In addition, in this statement, all three countries expressed their desire to exert all efforts towards enhancing regional and international peace and security [*Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023*].

In September 2023, Saudi Arabia and Iran exchanged ambassadors, officially restoring diplomatic relations between the two countries after a seven-year period. The new Saudi ambassador, Abdullah Al-Enezi, said upon his arrival in Tehran that he would seek to "strengthen relations and intensify contacts and meetings between the Kingdom and Iran to move to a more hospitable space". In addition, Al-Enezi's arrival in Tehran took place at the same time as Iran sent a new ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Alireza Enayati [*Dagher, S., Shahla, A., Iran and Saudi Arabia Formally End Diplomatic Rupture, 2023*].

It is worth noting that China was not the only country interested and involved in a diplomatic settlement between Iran and Saudi Arabia. In April 2021, Iran and Saudi Arabia held the first direct talks in five years in Baghdad, mediated by Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi. The parties mainly discussed the issue of Yemen, where Saudi Arabia and Iran have been supporting the opposing sides since the outbreak of the civil war in 2014 (Saudi Arabia supports the Sunni government of Yemen, while Iran supports the Houthi rebels). In addition, the delegations discussed the political and financial crisis in Lebanon, where, again, the parties support opposing sides. In general, several rounds of negotiations between Saudi Arabia and Iran took place during 2021-2022 with the mediation of Iraq and Oman, but during these negotiations, the parties did not resolve key differences between them [*The Iran Primer, 2022*][*Al Jazeera, 2023*]. However, the mediation efforts of Iraq and Oman did not go unnoticed, as the trilateral statement by China, Saudi Arabia and Iran specifically mentioned that "the Saudi and Iranian sides expressed their appreciation and gratitude to the Republic of Iraq and the Sultanate of Oman for hosting the rounds of dialogue that took place between both sides during the years 2021-2022", which recognised and emphasised the mediation efforts of Iraq and Oman in the settlement between Iran and Saudi Arabia [*Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023*].

According to researcher Amrita Jash, several events that took place during 2022-2023 are vital for understanding the importance of China's role in the diplomatic settlement that eventually led to the signing of the agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran. First, in December 2022, Xi Jinping visited Saudi Arabia for a series of meetings. During his visit, the two countries issued a joint statement reaffirming that "China and Saudi Arabia will continue to uphold the model of solidarity and cooperation for mutual benefit between the two countries". The two countries also reaffirmed their support for each other's national sovereignty and territorial integrity (Saudi Arabia reaffirmed its commitment to the "One China" principle in this statement), as well as the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states. In addition, the parties stressed the importance of energy cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia and the stability of the global oil market [*The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2022*]. It is also worth highlighting the holding of the first China-Gulf Cooperation Council summit on 9 December 2022. In his speech, Xi Jinping said that "China and the Gulf Cooperation Council should be partners for greater solidarity, further consolidate political mutual trust and firmly support each other's core interests; that China and the countries of the region should be partners for common development and common security." [*Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022*] [*Jash, A., 2023*].

Also, according to Amrita Jash, another important point in this context is the visit of Iranian President Raisi to Beijing in February 2023, which marked the first state visit of an Iranian leader to

the Chinese capital in more than two decades. During this visit, Xi Jinping expressed support for Iran's territorial integrity and emphasised the importance of the principle of non-interference in Iranian internal affairs. In addition, Xi Jinping pointed out that maintaining stability in the Middle East is essential to safeguarding peace in the region, promoting global economic development and ensuring stable energy supplies, and emphasised that China is ready to continue to play a constructive role in promoting regional peace and stability [*Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023*][*Jash, A., 2023*]. Thus, we can see that China not only had the necessary political and economic influence on both states but also created the necessary preconditions that undoubtedly contributed to more effective negotiations between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Analysing the positions and interests of the parties involved in the settlement, it is worth noting that the restoration of diplomatic relations and intensification of dialogue between the parties is a mutually beneficial step for all three states. Speaking of Iran, Garrett Nada believes that the resumption of dialogue and diplomatic ties with Saudi Arabia can be seen as a rather strong diplomatic achievement for the Iranian authorities, who are facing a number of economic, domestic and foreign policy challenges. In addition, the potential improvement of relations with Saudi Arabia could lead to a settlement of the conflict in Yemen, in which both countries support opposing sides, which would help improve the security situation in the entire Middle East [*Gallagher, A., Hamasaed, S., Nada, G., 2023*]. Another important factor for Iran is the deepening of bilateral relations with China. In 2021, Iran and China signed a 25-year bilateral cooperation agreement to strengthen economic and political relations between the two countries. In particular, it is important to note that this agreement involves Iran in China's Belt and Road Initiative, which underscores China's strategic interest in stability in the region [*Reuters, 2021*].

Considering Saudi Arabia's position and interests in the settlement with Iran, according to Yasmine Farouk, it is worth noting that de-escalation with Iran may be part of a more global foreign policy course, which aims to implement and support Saudi Arabia's plan for socio-economic development, better known as "Vision 2030", the idea of which is to diversify the Saudi economy and includes a number of goals and reform strategies for the Kingdom's long-term economic success [*Farouk, Y., 2023*][*The Embassy of The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the USA, 2018*]. Stability in the Gulf region can have a positive impact not only on relations between the countries but also on attracting foreign capital and investors, which are extremely important under "Vision 2030".

In addition, stability in the region and a demonstration of constructiveness in negotiations could potentially have an impact on Riyadh's foreign policy ambitions, namely, strengthening as a powerful regional and global actor. At the moment, it can be argued that the conditions are quite favourable for reinforcing Saudi Arabia's role in the region: high prices for oil and energy resources as a whole, strengthening its position in the international arena, especially in terms of maintaining the balance of energy prices after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine [*Farouk, Y., 2023*]. Another important factor is the fact that Saudi Arabia is currently seeking to balance its foreign policy: to maintain a strategic alliance with the United States and at the same time build closer bilateral relations with China. The diversification strategy can be considered quite beneficial, as Riyadh can potentially reach a strategic level of cooperation with the two most powerful countries in the world, which will have a positive impact on the economic development of the country and its geopolitical role in the region and the world as a whole [*Gallagher, A., Hamasaed, S., Nada, G., 2023*]. That is why the settlement with Iran might be considered a favourable foreign policy step for Riyadh.

Speaking about China, according to Amrita Jash, it is crucial to mention that, first of all, China has a great interest in the stability of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, as well as the region as a whole, due to the importance of the Persian Gulf for China's energy needs: for both Saudi Arabia and Iran, China is the main importer of their oil and the main trading partner. For example, in 2022, Saudi Arabia was the largest oil supplier to China - 1.75 million barrels per day, while Iran has established itself as the third largest oil exporter to China (about 1.2 million barrels per day as of the end of 2022) after Saudi Arabia and Russia [*Al Jazeera, 2023*][*Jash, A., 2023*]. Also, according to Amrita Jash, one more important aspect is that in August 2022, Saudi Arabia's national oil company Aramco signed a Memorandum of Understanding with China's Sinopec, which covers numerous areas of potential cooperation between the parties in Saudi Arabia. According to the official statement, this memorandum "outlines pathways for strategic cooperation between Aramco and

Sinopec and supports the long-term relationship between the two companies and their existing joint ventures in China and the Kingdom.” [*Saudi Aramco, 2022*].

In addition, the PRC and Chinese companies are actively involved in joint projects with companies in the Middle East, which is why China's economic interests in the Gulf region are an important factor in consolidating China's presence and the importance of stability in the region for the country. First of all, as per Amrita Jash, it is important to emphasize that China is the main bilateral trading partner of a number of Arab countries (for example, according to her, in 2021 China's trade turnover amounted to 330 billion US dollars, of which 200 billion US dollars were accounted for by China's trade with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates alone). In addition, the Persian Gulf is of crucial geopolitical importance for China's Belt and Road Initiative due to the geographical location of the region and its large transit and transportation potential, as well as its huge energy reserves, uninterrupted and stable access to which is of paramount value to China [*Jash, A., 2023*].

Speaking about the geopolitical importance of China's mediation in the settlement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, first of all, this process should be considered within the framework of Xi Jinping's “Global Security Initiative”, which was announced on April 21, 2022, during the Boao Forum for Asia. During this speech, he mentioned the significance of commitment to the vision of “common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security”, and emphasised the need for states to “stay committed to respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries, stay committed to abiding by the purposes and principles of the UN Charter”. Attention was also paid to the need for joint cooperation to overcome the challenges of global governance and rebuild a balanced and sustainable security architecture around the world [*Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference, 2022*]. In this context, it is crucial to analyse China's publication of the conceptual document “Global Security Initiative”, which refers to the commitment to the principles of “ensuring security through political dialogue and peaceful negotiations” [*Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023*]. In this regard, it can be assumed that China's mediation in the settlement between Riyadh and Tehran might be a sign of the implementation of this strategy by Xi Jinping in China's foreign policy.

Also, the fact of such mediation undoubtedly strengthens China's position in the Middle East and creates a certain counterbalance to the United States in the region. According to Pakistani researchers A. Nawaz, M.A.A. Khan and Z. Noor, “For most of the last century, the US has dominated the region, primarily through its military presence and strong economic ties with the states of the region”. According to the scholars, the United States has traditionally pursued several goals in the Middle East, such as ensuring the security of its allies, protecting its energy interests, and fighting terrorism. Taking into account that the US has military facilities and units in certain countries in the region, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, and others, the United States has maintained a significant military presence in the region, which allows it to project power and provide the necessary security support to strategic regional partners. In addition, the United States plays a crucial role as an important trade and economic partner especially in the energy and technology sectors [*Nawaz, A., Khan, M., Zosha, N., 2023*].

As A. Nawaz, M.A.A. Khan and Z. Noor point out, the PRC, in turn, has significantly bolstered its position in the Middle East in recent years, primarily through trade and investment. China is one of the largest oil and gas exporters from the Middle East, which makes this country a very important partner for most states in the region. Moreover, as part of the Belt and Road Initiative, China is paying significant attention to the implementation of infrastructure projects in the region, deepening economic cooperation and strengthening bilateral relations between individual countries in the region and China. In general, in recent years, China has significantly strengthened its position in the Middle East, primarily through economic and energy cooperation with the states of the region [*Nawaz, A., Khan, M., Zosha, N., 2023*]. Thus, the People's Republic of China is consolidating itself as a powerful and influential actor in the Middle East, acting not only as an investor and major economic partner, but also as a key country in terms of its potential and effectiveness as a mediator in the diplomatic settlement of conflicts in the region.

In general, the United States remains the most influential actor in the region, primarily because of the security aspect, as well as military and political cooperation with many countries in the region. China, in turn, prefers economic cooperation with the states of the region, which makes it possible

for China to create a certain alternative pole of power in the Middle East. For both the US and China, strengthening their presence in the region is an important element in planning and implementing their foreign policy strategies, so the geopolitical rivalry for influence in the region may become another platform for confrontation between states, which eventually may reach the global level of strategic disputes. In turn, for the countries of the Middle East, this means the possibility of balancing between the two most powerful countries in the world in matters of politics, economy and security.

An important factor in China's mediation between Saudi Arabia and Iran might be to consolidate China's position as one of the probable mediators in the context of a possible diplomatic settlement between Ukraine and Russia. On 24 February 2023, China published 12 points political settlement plan, that provide an overview of China's position and vision for a political settlement and de-escalation [*Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023*]. China's participation in mediation between Riyadh and Tehran gives Beijing a basis for strengthening its credibility as an effective mediator that can play an important role in a possible future diplomatic dialogue between Ukraine and Russia. Given that China is one of Ukraine's largest trading partners and a key economic and political ally of Russia, the issue of involving China in a diplomatic settlement may become a possibility, taking into consideration China's experience in mediating between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Conclusions. Thus, it can be concluded that the People's Republic of China has played a significant role in mediating between Saudi Arabia and Iran, achieving several important goals at the same time. First, China's involvement in mediation is an important element in maintaining stability in the Middle East, which is crucial for China from an economic and foreign policy perspective, especially in the context of stable energy exports and uninterrupted transit. Secondly, China has demonstrated the ability to play a key mediating role in complex and deep conflicts between states, which allows China to potentially mediate more conflicts between other states and thus strengthen the country's position as an influential diplomatic actor and mediator. Thirdly, China's consistent policy in the Middle East challenges the United States leadership in the region and creates an economic and political alternative to the US for the countries of the region, which is an important element in terms of further global confrontation between states.

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