



Written by [Luis Miguel](#) on March 23, 2023

Shifting Alliances: China Brings Together Saudi Arabia and Iran

Maintaining friendly relations with Saudi Arabia has long been considered an important component of U.S. strategy in the Middle East. But could that relationship potentially be put on the rocks in the future as China seeks to run America out of the region?

China is playing matchmaker to two Middle Eastern powers which have been at odds for seven years now — Iran and Saudi Arabia.

According to [reports](#), Saudi Arabia's King Salman has extended an invitation to Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi at the Saudi capital of Riyadh.



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There is also reportedly planning underway for a meeting between the two countries' foreign ministers. This comes after China brokered a deal that restored Saudi-Iranian relations, which broke down in 2016 after the Sunni Islam kingdom executed a Shia scholar (Iran is a majority-Shia Muslim nation). This prompted Iranian protesters to storm Saudi consulates. Since then, the two nations have been at proxy war with each other in Yemen and Syria.

In addition, Iran backs Hezbollah in Lebanon, whereas Saudi Arabia sides with Israel against this group. Scott Ritter of “Energy Intelligence” provides insight into what this deal means for America’s role in the Middle East and how China hopes to take its place as the ascendant power in the region:

The successful negotiation of a new détente between Saudi Arabia and Iran is a remarkable achievement for China, although even senior Chinese diplomats, with extensive experience in the Middle East, note that this needs to be assessed in a realistic manner. This is not going to open the door to an age of Chinese meddling in the complicated affairs of the Middle East, noted Wu Sike, a former Chinese special envoy for Middle East affairs. Issues such as an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement are most likely beyond the remit of current Chinese diplomacy in the region. And China's diplomatic intervention also came on the heels of recent Iraq-mediated talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Significantly, the deal also ushers in a potential new era of Chinese economic involvement with the two most important Mideast Gulf nations. If the deal is implemented, China's Belt and Road Initiative could become an even more integral part of the social and economic futures of both Saudi Arabia and Iran. If anything defines a regional pivot away from the West and toward the East, this is it.

Notably, the Chinese approach to Middle Eastern politics may bring them greater profit and less strife than the United States has dealt with. Beijing seeks to transform the Shiite Crescent from the “crescent



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of chaos” to a “crescent of stability” where economic activity overtakes military power as the defining hallmark of the Middle East.

While it’s too early to tell if the gambit will pay off, China’s effort to achieve stable relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which have been promoting Sunni-Shiite conflict in the region, could bring relative peace to the Middle East.

While such an eventuality would be greater than what Washington has managed to achieve with its nation-building, China naturally isn’t doing this out of altruistic motives. The clear goal is power.

Beijing long ago realized where true power lies in the modern world. The real wars of today are fought on balance sheets, not battlefields. China understands that economic power is just as important — and in some ways, more important — than military power for the purpose of acquiring political power.

Thus, the Chinese state today operates as a ruthless corporation — a corporation for whom violence, conflict, and war are all bad for business. For Beijing, the goal of Middle Eastern policy is not to “democratize” or “liberalize” its Muslim inhabitants. The goal is to create a stable, reliable environment for business. That means tolerating and maintaining friendly relations with the local regimes — not trying to topple them or alienating them with sanctions if they don’t adopt Western values.

The question is what this all means for the future of the Middle East. Could the region, under the influence of Beijing, be on the ascendant?

History is cyclical. Nations rise, fall, then rise again. For millennia, the Middle East was the cradle and then the center of civilization. There were periods in history when it was much more stable and less war-torn than Europe.

While the region’s perpetual wars appear a given in contemporary times, there’s no reason things could not turn around — and turn around drastically.

But what would this mean for the United States? Will America be left out as allies like Saudi Arabia decide they prefer doing business with the Chinese instead? Who will be the next major power to jump ship in favor of Beijing?

What’s certain is that China is playing a cunning long-term game on the world’s chess board, while U.S. policymakers find themselves outplayed and outsmarted on every significant turn.

If this chilling trend continues, the age of American greatness may come to an end much sooner than anyone could have anticipated.



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