



RESEARCH PAPER**The Growing Chinese Interests in the Middle East: Prospects of Saudi-Iran Rapprochement**

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to study the Chinese growing interests in the Middle East and its implications for Saudi-Iran rapprochement. For the exceptional rise of China and its energy requirements the Middle East stands one of the most attractive destinations for its foreign policy. The recently held Sino-Arab Summit reflects Beijing's growing interests and influence in the region. Major focus of the Arab-Chinese ties lies in economic development and peaceful resolution of the regional disputes. Beijing mediated the restoration of Riyadh-Tehran diplomatic ties between the two ideological rivals, representing opposing Islamic sects - Sunni and Shia Muslims. The data has been mainly collected through secondary sources with exploratory research design. The Saudi-Iran conflictual ties can hinder Chinese trade and investment in the Middle East therefore, it has keenly assisted the Saudi-Iran rapprochement. Iran and Saudi Arabia need to capitalize Chinese growing economic and political interests in the Middle East that will be helpful for the regional and global peace and stability.

KEYWORDS GCC, JCPOA, Riyadh, Tehran and Beijing

Introduction

March 10, 2023 would be a historic day of the political theater of the Middle East, while Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and Iran, through mediation of China, announced the restoration of diplomatic ties after decades of stalemate. This significant development also indicates China's potential as a regional peace broker and an important player in the Middle East politics. The room for Beijing has been provided by the diplomatic impasse between Washington and Tehran over the controversial Iranian nuclear program and the numerous sanctions placed by the West on Tehran (Khan, Muzaffar, Khan, 2019) The security and economic landscape have changed as a result of Beijing's expanded involvement in the Middle East, which ultimately contains a range of financial, strategic, and geopolitical objectives, other than the traditional energy as well as security requirements. The Chinese interest in the region is mounting because of the Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) and in its efforts to nurture economic, political and diplomatic connections. Beijing has also concluded a number of agreements with different states of the Middle East. Through the first Sino-Arab summit in 2022, Beijing demonstrated its unwavering commitment to maintaining strategic alliances with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states for advancing its strategic objectives beyond its conventional energy-centric goals. Beijing also remained a key player in facilitating Riyadh and Tehran in reestablishing their diplomatic ties after years of stalemate (Bianco, 2024).

This paper aims to examine China's ever growing influence in the Middle East and its implications for the regional and international political environment. It also seeks to observe the likelihood of various changes that Beijing may exert on the regional dynamics, while Washington's role as a significant Middle-East power broker may deteriorate in the upcoming decades. Some of the critical developments like; the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and its demise, the imposition of stringent sanctions against Tehran, the apprehensive relationship of the KSA and USA in the recent past, the ongoing Hamas-Israel conflict, may have far reaching effects on the Middle East politics (Khazaie, Zanoz, & Soleimani, 2021). Hence, China with its exceptional economic rise and increasing political stature is expressing muscles to play its due role in world affairs.

The so called red-dragon has apparently entered into the Gulf region for its economic and political objectives and it has started capitalizing the mistrust amid Washington and the Arab world. China has become the largest trading partner of various states in the region especially, the KSA and Iran, the two largest oil suppliers to China. The exclusive network of roads, sea ports, railways and other infrastructure projects, initiated by China in the Middle East, can knit together Asia, Africa and Europe. Owing to its noninterference policy and soft power projection, China may emerge as a lesser contentious arbitrator and a lesser threatening player than the US.

Literature Review

Mnekhir (2023) highlights the critical aspects of KSA-Iran rivalry and the reasons behind their rapprochements; the challenges that strained their relationship like, regional power struggles, religious differences, interference in Arab countries' internal affairs and disputes over Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon (Muzaffar, Khan & Yaseen, 2017). The scholar also highlights the changing dynamics in their relations, emphasizing the potential benefits of continued reconciliation for regional stability, while acknowledging potential obstacles.

Houghton (2022) discusses China's engagement with Middle Eastern countries has significantly increased since last few decades as an investor, infrastructure builder, and a major importer of energy resources. China's BRI has played a crucial role in strengthening its relationship with the Middle East by promoting trade connectivity across Asia. This article delves into China's growing interest in the Gulf region and its relationships with these key regional powers in the Middle East.

Garlick and Havlová (2021) examine Iranian oil reserves and its geopolitical position. China uses a hedging strategy that includes both material and conceptual components to engage in economic activity in the Persian Gulf. China can adjust its foreign policy requirements while growing its market presence and securing a variety of oil sources through the BRI's flexible geographic breadth. China maintains cordial ties with a number of regional players, notably Saudi, in an effort to counterbalance US regional prevalence without upending the existing status quo.

Muzaffar, Afzal and Yaseen, (2018) shed light on Saudi-Iran fierce competition in the Middle East as they strive to expand their influence that has penalties for both sides. This study explores the reasons of competition by examining historical events like; fall of Saddam and outbreak of civil war in Iraq, the violent movements triggered by Arab Spring in Syria, Libya, Bahrain, and Yemen that have intensified the Saudi-Iranian rivalry in the region.

Theoretical Framework

The growing China's interests in the Middle East along with the prospects of Saudi-Iran rapprochement is related to the regional security complexes theory (RSCT), by Ole Weaver and Barry Buzan (Buzan, & Waever, 2003). The RSCT maintains that the security concerns amid countries are pigeonholed into regional complexes through regional assemblages, created due to the international anarchy, where security interdependence is evidently more intense amid states inside such a complex than those outside of it. States are connected to one another and set apart from neighboring regions by a certain level of security interdependence is referred to as the regional security complex (RSC). Therefore, the borders of RSCs do not necessarily have to line up with those of established geographical or geopolitical regions. According to Buzan and Waever, RSCs are defined as substructures of the international system based on the degree of security indifferences and interdependence among their units relative to one another. Since security concerns seldom impact far-flung areas as compared to the neighboring states, for geographic proximity of the states is crucial. Within a single security complex, the military, political, social, and environmental domains exhibit the highest levels of interdependence and intensity of security interactions.

According to the RSC lens, the Middle East has a critical regional security complex which is based on the interaction of the regional powers. In terms of rivalry the RSC is also regarded as a typical conflict formation, with the relationships amid the regional powers primarily shaping politics of intense security. The Middle East has also been consistently attracting a lot of fascination from major world powers due to the immense reserves of energy supplies, its strategic location and ethnic diversities. The issues like Islamic fundamentalism, radicalism and the ever expanding terrorist organizations are now receiving far more attention with deeper concerns from around the world. Moreover, internal socioeconomic challenges in many states and the regional arms race, conflicts over natural resources and raw materials, sectarian and ethnic violence, political instability, and the fragility of state structures are other major issues being faced by the region that eventually influence the Middle Eastern complex regional security system.

Material and Methods

Qualitative research approach with a descriptive research design have been used in the study. The data has been collected predominantly through secondary sources by adopting a historical and analytical model. The major sources of data collection have been books, scholarly journals, research articles, newspapers, and government reports. This aimed to certify that the findings and insights generated are reliable and trustworthy. The research has also emphasized on the precision of data and its ultimate findings by ensuring proper referencing and citation of all the articles, essays, reports, and testimonies consulted during the study. Some of the Primary data sources like official websites and speeches of heads of government from China, Saudi Arabia, and Iran have also been incorporated. This comprehensive approach aims to capture a wide range of perspectives and opinions, enabling a more holistic analysis of the subject. By thoroughly examining the historical development and dynamics of this alignment, the study seeks to contribute valuable insights to the existing literature on international relations, regional studies, and Middle East politics.

Results and Discussion

The Key Chinese Interests in the Middle East Region

The unprecedented economic rise of China in the recent past is certainly nurturing new openings and challenges to the contemporary global system with new political and economic alliances amid key actors, primarily in Asia as well as world over. Likewise, some of the latest developments in the Middle East region also reveal new facts and findings. Owing to the rapid rise in the past few decades and its ever soaring energy requirements from the region the Chinese authorities have certainly rejuvenated the economic, political and geostrategic underpinning in the Middle East. Their frequent high profiler visits to Tehran and Riyadh are unfolding new opportunities in the region. In the past few decades the Chinese growing trade ties Saudi Arabia, Iran and many other countries in the region and the ever increasing foreign direct investments (FDIs) initiatives and the BRI projects from Beijing in the region are the symbols of complex interdependence amid the Arab states and China. The 2023 Tehran-Riyadh rapprochement with the support of China after decades of rivalry, the Arabs-Chinese summit and various other developments can affirm the Chinese growing interests and influence along with emergence of new dynamics with new challenges in the region.

Economic Interests of China

Beijing has initiated number of projects aiming to build positive connections with different Middle Eastern states. Eventually these ventures in the region will lead to harvest political, security, and economic offspring. The vast infrastructural, technological and digital connectivity projects shall make Beijing the largest trading partner of the Middle East's countries (Lons, 2019). Beijing has surpassed the US and the EU as the GCC's largest trading partner in the past few years, and it is currently Riyadh's most important trading partner with US\$ 87.3 B bilateral trade in 2021 (Yu, H. (2024). China is currently the largest trading partner of the KSA and the biggest importer of her oil and petrochemical products. The Chinese exports to Saudi Arabia are more than US\$ 30 billion, predominantly containing textiles, machinery and electronics while its imports from the KSA worth around US\$ 57 Billion mainly in plastic goods and crude oil (Yu, 2024). The two sides have also established a US\$ 20 billion investment funds to connect BRI with Saudi Vision 2030 (Chen, Shu & Wen, 2018). They have also reached to an inclusive strategic partnership comprising thirty-four energy and investment transactions in the recent past; whereas, Beijing has emerged as Tehran's chief oil importer in 2022, with bilateral trade more than US\$ 53 billion (Yu, 2024). The Middle East region is also a crucial destination for the BRI's maritime component (Wang, 2021).

The Chinese Investment and Digital Silk Road Projects

The 25 years Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) for cooperation covering a variety of industries was signed between Beijing and Tehran in March 2021, with an estimated worth of US\$ 400 billion (Lons, 2019). Compared to 2020, the investment climbed by 360 percent and construction engagement by 116 percent in 2021 (Cornwell, 2019). Beijing has also promised to provide billions of dollars in loans, investments, aid and reconstruction assistance to Tehran. China also aims to strengthen its high-tech power position by using data to support economic transformation and development through the Digital Silk Road plan. As China has recently made excessive progress in obtaining 5G technology deals, especially with GCC states and it is anticipated that in near future majority of the world's 5G users would come from this region. Correspondingly, one of the key artificial intelligence (AI) initiatives is related to Riyadh's Vision 2030 is the proposed Neom city. This AI-managed metropolis is predominantly being built by the major Chinese companies consuming eco-friendly technologies. As a vital component of

the BRI, analysts of the IMF have also noted that China's assistance would be essential to the development of such state of the art projects. These agreements will help the growth of the host states and Beijing's shift into a digital powerhouse, laying the groundwork for its ascent to the top of important industries' technological ladder (Chipman, 2020).

China's Political Engagements in the Middle East

The Middle East is a key subject of the foreign policy of China as reflected by the shortly called Sino-Arab summit in the recent past, considered as a momentous political development in the international politics (Aguinaldo, 2020). The Middle East's political and strategic significance for China and Chinese historical, cultural and economic ties with various states in the region are the well-known phenomena. Thus, strong political, economic and strategic cooperation amid China and the Arab world, for their ample mutual benefits certainly seems natural. Hence, China has rightly directed the beacon of its foreign policy objectives towards realigning the global political landscape and particularly its approach to the Middle East. A more proactive Chinese policy towards the Middle East will undeniably help in expanding cooperation with Arab nations for improving opportunities for China's economic and political interests, given the significance of the region in Western countries. The potential for a large number of the Arab states to work with China in the fields of energy, trade, finance and investment is enormous. Thus the Chinese recent energetic engagement in affairs of the Arab world reflects its renewed concentration of its foreign policy objectives in the region, even though in a different regional and international political environment. It is essential to note that the Arab-Chinese relations are reflecting some new trends in addition to the conventional ones.

In the midst of intricate political unrest in the region, the Arab world looks towards their longstanding ally, China, for her assistance in mediating critical disputes. On the other hand, China seeks peace for economic development, but Beijing also entails the Arab world's support at the international arena. China, in its recent drive of expanding the BRICS and anti-dollar campaign has invited various Arab nations for the union. Undeniably, both sides seek to advance their political cooperation in order to forge closer strategic ties that will accelerate their economic and political interests.

China's Defense Engagement with the Middle East

In addition to collaboration in energy and infrastructure initiatives, Beijing has recently amplified its military engagement in the Middle East. It aims to strengthen the diplomatic connections and safeguarding its strategic interests along with the BRI routes. Beijing has so far signed different security agreements with a number of Middle Eastern nations, including maritime security and counterterrorism in the region. Owing to a persistent unrest and various conflicts in the region, the demand for defense technologies and advanced weapons is aggregating in the Middle East. This is mainly because of the existing threats that some of the countries continue to confront, various ongoing proxies as well as obstinate tensions amid several states in the region. The Gulf States seem to look for transcending their exclusive military cooperation with the US and eventually bolster their relations with the rest of the powers, especially China, ultimately shaping who would emerge as the region's next strategic partner in the era (Liangxiang, 2020).

For a variety of reasons, several countries in the Middle East are looking for developing their own defense industrial bases. In pursuit of these ambitions, various countries have sought a blend of foreign investment, diverse suppliers, and external partnerships that include technology transfers, research and development, and co-

production agreements. The American security cooperation is notoriously inflexible; while those of China and Russia are perceived to be more flexible. On the other hand, some of the US partners observe that Washington has been entering into various defense agreements with other countries like; the AUKUS arrangement with Australia and the UK or INDUS-X with India; while a general lack of interest in inking such agreements can be observed in the Middle East (Liangxiang, 2020).

Chinese Interests in Saudi-Iran Rapprochement

The Chinese mediator role in normalizing the rivalry between Saudi-Iran can be labeled as one of the most critical development in the region in the recent past. These states represent two major Islamic factions, Sunni and Shiite simultaneously. Saudi and Iran, traditional rivals in the Middle East, have allegedly sponsored sectarian conflicts between Sunnis and Shias beyond the region in several states. This ideological rift is one of the most critical security complexes but due to China's facilitated reconciliation, this security complex may turn to an opportunity of rapprochement and stability, leading further to Beijing's deeper influence in the region. The Riyadh-Tehran diplomatic breakup after attacks on Saudi's embassy in Tehran in January 2016 is a significant milestone for the three countries that will have far reaching impact on a number of other regional issues (Haghirian, 2023). Riyadh and Tehran have long been adversaries and their rivalry and rapprochement shall influence several other Middle Eastern states and their regional complexities. The KSA-Iran restoring ties will pave the way for the two states towards resolving various other issues like; the Yemeni crisis, the Syrian crisis (Yasee, Muzaffar, & Naseem, (2018). As Riyadh and Tehran possess numerous leverage points, implacable to compel the opposing parties towards negotiation and ultimately the settlement of conflicts.

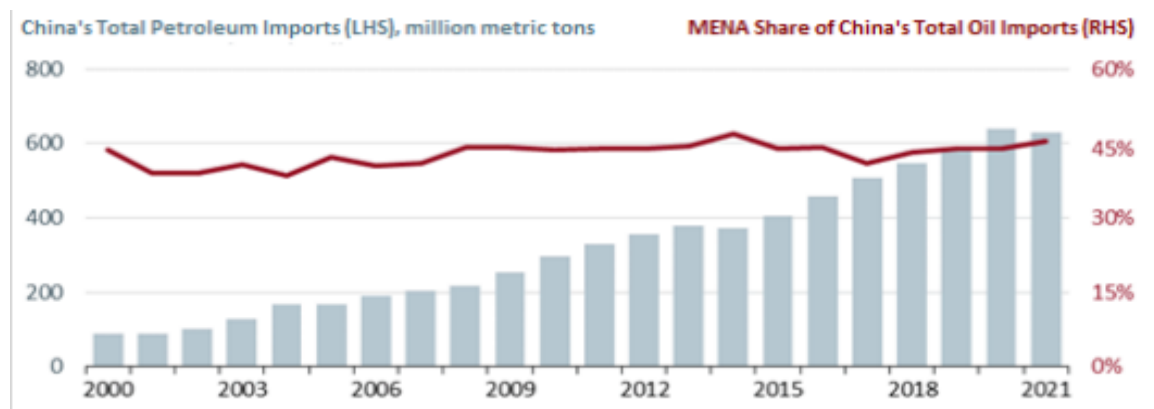
Resolving disputes in the region, especially between Saudi and Iran, will contribute to sustainable development by facilitating trade and joint ventures for both states have abundant oil resources and economic potential. Fighting terrorism; resolving the Saudi-Iranian conflict and other regional challenges will surely assist other countries in the region in curbing terrorist organizations, militias and violent groups that will bring about security and stability in the Middle East and beyond. China believes security in the Middle East is a prerequisite for achieving security worldwide. China proposed a five-point plan to attain security and stability in the Middle East containing; first, the demand for regard for one another state; secondly, dedication to justice and fairness; thirdly, to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons; fourth, to cooperate to attain security for all and quicken the rate of collaboration and development (LIU & HE, 2017). China anticipates for understanding sound security and supports the constructive role of the Arab-League states and other regional organizations. It supports the positive momentum and efforts made by the Middle Eastern countries to promote dialogue and improve relations. Referring back to RSCT these endeavors of negotiation are first step towards establishing security in the region as negotiations and restoration of diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudia, representing different outlet of Islam. Sectarian and ethnic violence, primarily between Sunni and Shia Muslims, is one of the region's primary concerns. Thus, patching Saudi-Iran diplomatic ties is a crucial first step toward ending the sectarian and ethnic clashes (Afzal & Yaseen, 2023).

The Chinese and Middle East Trade

China's growing energy requirements influences its interest in the Middle East. From offshore trade and investment networks to Beijing's ambitions to replace Washington is more appealing to Arab states as China's increasing influence in the Middle East coincides with the region's growing discontent with the US. Beijing will require almost three quarters of its energy imports by 2030 and the Chinese analysts warn that energy

shortages could impede China's rapid economic growth (LIU & HE, 2017). In recent years China has emerged as the global leader in the import of crude oil and Saudi Arabia has long made a substantial contribution to China's imports of crude oil. It has overtaken all other states as the top importer in 2021, making up seventeen percent of all imports (Ali, 2022). The Chinese oil imports from the Middle Eastern in 2022 accounted half of its oil imports and Beijing's exports of goods and services to the region balanced its energy imports from the ME. The trade amid China and the Middle East has increased since 2000 and its oil imports have increased five times while Chinese exports to Middle East have climbed more than seven times (Blanchard, 2023).

Figure 1: China Oil Imports and Share of Oil Imports from the MENA Region 2000-2021



Source: CRS, data from BP's Statistical Review of World Energy, (2001-2022).

The Pivot of China's foreign policy towards Middle East

The Chinese foreign policy to Middle East is influenced by its oil imports, mainly after First Gulf War, when it became a net oil importer. The Chinese decision-makers have to consider, how to achieve energy security and its engagement with the US due to China's growing reliance on foreign energy resources and the fact that the United States frequently controlled the supply lines. It is generally maintained that China's foreign policy is significantly influenced by its ties with the US, which were dwindling in the 1990s over Taiwan, as China tested missiles in the waters around Taiwan infuriated the US, which sent two aircraft carriers and numerous battleships to the region. Keeping this in mind the Chinese leadership had to reconsider their energy security as they feared that if tensions with the US increased, the US Navy might hinder its oil imports that would sharply fluctuate oil price and jeopardize China's expanding economy. Consequently, China began to foster better relationships with the US and other oil-exporting states (Hale, 2023).

China's energy policy is dominated by its efforts of securing its consistent, affordable, and dependable foreign oil supplies for it is the cornerstone of China's energy security and economic development. It is also key to the legitimacy of China's Communist Party whose leaders aim long-term strategy to position China as one of the world's top manufacturers. In coming years, oil being one of the major fuel sources of the country's exploding transport and energy needs but it is far more challenging to extract offshore oil in the East China Sea. China's internal stability would depend on its reliable and affordable energy. Beijing knows that political unrest in its region could disrupt energy supplies of its neighbors like; Pakistan and Central Asia where energy infrastructure is being built (Lons, 2020).

Chinese leaders consistently emphasize upon the need for maintaining a just and peaceful environment for promoting trade and investment throughout the region. The Chinese grand geo-economics benefits include energy security as summed up in three ways: first, Beijing's strategic plan aims at importing secure oil and its supply lines and its businesses are heavily investing in it. Second, while signing contracts, China's oil companies are mostly state-run and they utilize it as a tool of foreign policy making. Finally, since the US military secures the oil supply lines, China's reliance on Gulf energy sources shouldn't be at the expense of American conflict. Hence, China searches for new and long-term energy supplies that would strengthened its ties with the Middle East for securer, reliable and affordable energy incomes (Harrison, 2023).

Role of the US in China-Middle East Ties

The Sino-Middle East growing ties have far reaching implications, particularly for the US, which has several military stations in the region and a primary security ally of various states. The freedom of movement and access to energy resources is Washington's main interest in the region and its conflict of interest with Beijing is key challenge for the two great powers and their bilateral relationship. Though, many of the Sino-US interests in the region may align but Washington is anxious about Beijing's expanding economic connections and influence in the region for earlier sees the later as a threat to its stakes (Eslammi, 2023). The US believes that China uses the security cover without adding to the stability of the Middle East. The growing Chinese engagement in energy, technology, infrastructure development, and economic sectors will certainly worsen the American concerns in the region. The technological advancement of China and Middle Eastern growing 5G networks are viewed as a serious threat to Washington's dominance, for this can be a threat in areas of American military presence in the region.

Iran is also challenging the American dominance by strengthening ties with Middle Eastern states, particularly KSA and by enhancing trade and military ties with China and these developments can reduce JCPOA as outdated. The American huge military presence and being the top weapon supplier to Middle Eastern states, which mainly depend for their security and weapon supplies, whereas Beijing is rapidly growing influence in the region is a matter of concern for the US. It seems improbable that the Middle Eastern states will completely sever their defense engagement with Washington in favor of Beijing. China is closely monitored by the US, which has forced Abu Dhabi to stop building Chinese military base at Port Khalifa. Thus Washington has more political clout in the region than does Beijing, which has increased its diplomatic and economic influence in Middle East. Eventually, the US might still be in the lead on matters of regional security (Fulton, 2019).

Implications of China's Growing Influence in the Middle East

China's stakes in the Middle East coincided with growing regional doubts of Washington's commitment, which remained beneficial for various Arab states, which are reevaluating their alignment the United States for a number of reasons. It is getting clearer how different the American and Chinese approaches to the Middle East are; Beijing continues policy of non-interference, placing strong emphasis on national autonomy and territorial integrity of all states. Beijing maintains the strategy of moderate military presence while Washington has history of heavy military involvements, interferences and stringent sanctions against states in the Middle East. Following decades of conflicts, civil wars and sanctions imposed by West China has initiated Economic, investment and infrastructure enterprises in the region.

The Beijing-Tehran strategic and economic cooperation offers enormous potential of military and intelligence domains as well as trade through building ports, highways and trains as part of BRI (Salacanian, 2023). The Middle East has been plagued by civil wars, overt foreign interventions, proxy wars and other regional challenges that have caused destruction, susceptibility to foreign threats, instability, and economic destitution and the US is allegedly responsible for these issues. However, Beijing's growing interdependence through trade and investments hinges it as a plethora of opportunities. The Middle Eastern economies are growing, especially in the GCC states, by virtue of Chinese investments and technological assistance (Lnday, 2023).

Conclusion

The United States dominated the Middle East for several decades, taking the region as a grave challenge while China has stepped up its strategic outreach through BRI, connecting states and civilizations from Asia, Europe, and Africa. The Chinese outlays in technology and infrastructure has made it a major partner of Middle Eastern states and Beijing has to defend its trade and investments interests in the region. While its partners are eager to expand their ties with Beijing to minimize their reliance on Washington, whose strong military posture in the region gives it an edge over Beijing as substitute. However, the Sino-US cooperation can preserve peace and stability in the region. The balance of power strategy and finding medium grounds between the US and China would benefit the region. The China-Middle East ties reflect long-standing, respectful and trustworthy associations, clearly evident at the Sino-Arab Summit. Both sides respect each other's sovereignty, cultures and histories that can be used to witness the power-shift in the region. Determined to uphold the codes of cooperation, harmony and justice in world affairs; defending the interests of emergent states for preserving the world order based on international law and multilateralism, China and the Arab States seem committed to assist one another in different fields. The world's attention was focused on recent events like; the Chinese mediation in KSA-Iran rapprochement and the first-ever Sino-Arab summit is a significant shift in the Middle East politic. Hence, the Chinese growing influence in the Middle East may alter the dynamics of regional politics, particularly the transforming Saudi-Iran rivalry into rapprochement.

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