

China's Balancing Strategy towards Iran and Saudi Arabia in West Asia

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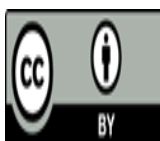
1-Introduction

Based on strategic calculations, China's presence in the Persian Gulf region has significantly increased in recent decades. The proximity of West Asia, especially the Persian Gulf, to China, along with its huge oil and gas reserves, has caused this region to have a special place in China's energy strategy. China's Belt and Road Initiative, launched in 2013, has further strengthened its ties with the Persian Gulf countries, aiming to enhance trade connections across Asia and Europe. China is seeking a rational balance in its relations with regional rivals and seeks to mitigate security competition among various players in the Persian Gulf and West Asia region. However, China's engagement with the Persian Gulf region is not without challenges. The region faces significant security concerns driven by intra-regional threat perceptions and high levels of securitization. The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran lies at the heart of this regional insecurity. The culture of mutual suspicion and tension is rooted in decades of rivalry between these two countries. This competition intensified following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, which removed Saddam Hussein as a regional rival.

Unlike the United States, which has historically exacerbated tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, China has maintained warm relations with Iran. Meanwhile, given that Saudi Arabia has protested whenever Washington has shown signs of easing its hostile stance toward Iran, it is reasonable to question whether

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China's strategy of "be friends with everyone and "Let's not be anyone's enemy" can it be stable in this highly secured area?

2-Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The research methodology employed is qualitative, using the theoretical concept of regional balancing to analyze the data collected from internet and library sources. Regional balancing refers to conditions that leading to a balance in the interests and sphere of influence of the primary actors in regional politics. Regional balance is desirable in situations where there are areas of regional crisis among competing countries. Achieving regional balance necessitates the use of various tools to generate power by the involved countries. Furthermore, any regional power balance is heavily reliant on the interventions of great powers and their commitments to the regional system, as these powers possess superior capabilities and regional actors often depend on the stronger allies. In this regard, China's growing presence in West Asia can be analyzed within this framework.

3-Discussion

China's coordinated strategy in managing relations with regional rivals, particularly Saudi Arabia and Iran, reflects its pragmatic approach to maximizing its gains in the Persian Gulf region without alienating any partner. Since the beginning of China's relations with Saudi Arabia and in fact even before that, Saudi Arabia has tried to distance China from the Islamic Republic. To a large extent, Riyadh has asserted that it can compensate for any losses caused by China's severance of relations with Iran. But for reasons such as; Iran's abundant gas reserves, untapped markets, under-exploited energy opportunities, geographical location and political willingness to align with China in case of tension in Sino-US relations, China will surely maintain and strengthen its relations with Iran. An analysis of the debate in Saudi Arabia about the recent 25-year agreement between Iran and China highlights important issues. First, there is widespread concern among Saudi analysts that this agreement could increase Iran's presence in the region. Second, several analysts point to concerns about China's intentions and question whether the People's Republic of China is and will be a reliable partner for the Arab states of the Persian Gulf.

However, a common perception has formed that China's interests in the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf will ultimately prevail over its interests in Iran, which means that Saudi Arabia has no fear of China-Iran relations in the long run. However, what is clear from all interpretations is that uncertainty is forming in China-Saudi relations. With cracks in China's strategy, questions have also been raised about Beijing's intentions and reliability. While these questions may end without any significant upheaval in Sino-Saudi relations, especially when the Saudis are reminded of the vast economic benefits that ties with China bring, Sino-Iranian relations are always a special issue in Riyadh.

4-Conclusion and Suggestions

This article examines China's balancing strategy in relations with Iran and Riyadh as regional rivals since the beginning of the 21st century and discusses whether the expansion of China's relations with Iran has affected the country's relations with Saudi Arabia and China's position in the country. Along with the growing competition of regional and extra-regional actors to gain more benefits in the Persian Gulf, China is expanding its presence in the Persian Gulf in order to provide energy and trying for its economic and commercial influence, especially through the super project of the Belt and Road Initiative. Therefore, the main question of the research is, what goals does China pursue in West Asia and the Persian Gulf, through its balancing strategy between Iran and Saudi Arabia? The findings of the article indicate that first, China as a growing economy seeks to secure its energy interests. Second, by supporting the security of both Iran and Saudi Arabia through a policy of balancing and respecting their sovereignty, China is positioning itself as a key player in the region and seeking to maintain stability amidst regional tensions. The research methodology employed is qualitative, using the theoretical concept of balancing to analyze the data collected from internet and library sources.

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