

POWER SHIFTS? CHINA'S GROWING INFLUENCE IN THE GULF



Key Trends and Regional Debates in 2023



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POWER SHIFTS? CHINA'S GROWING INFLUENCE IN THE GULF

Key Trends and Regional Debates in 2023

Edited by

ENRICO FARDELLA and ANDREA GHISELLI

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The ongoing development of Sino-Gulf relations, driven by China's deepening ties with the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), represents a significant shift in the Middle East's geopolitical landscape. This evolving relationship reflects broader global power realignments and signals a departure from traditional alliance patterns in the region. Through strategic partnerships, economic engagement, and diplomatic initiatives, particularly the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has emerged as a pivotal actor in the Middle East, offering GCC states new avenues for economic diversification and strategic autonomy.

China's role in facilitating the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement is emblematic of its growing influence, with it presenting itself as a neutral and constructive force capable of fostering regional stability. However, this diplomatic approach came under scrutiny in the aftermath of the Hamas-led attack on Israel on October 7, with its limitations having become more evident. Media narratives from Iran, Iraq, Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and China provide a nuanced understanding of these dynamics, revealing the complexities of Sino-Gulf relations and their implications for both regional and global politics.

Iranian perspectives were marked by anxiety over Tehran's growing strategic dependence on China amidst Western sanctions, coupled with concerns over being marginalized as Beijing strengthens ties across the Gulf. Despite valuing the economic lifeline provided by China, Iran remains cautious, reflecting its precarious position in regional and global politics.

Iraqi narratives focused on the opportunities for economic development provided by the "oil-for-reconstruction" agreement with China, as growing frustration mounted over the perceived limits of this partnership. The discussions suggest a desire for a more empowering relationship that transcends immediate economic benefits and that contributes to Iraq's long-term stability and development.

Israeli media initially viewed engagement with China pragmatically, attempting to safeguard economic and technological cooperation despite American pressure. However, Beijing's perceived pro-Palestine neutrality following the Hamas-led surprise attack led to a narrative shift, as the Israeli press discussed security concerns and the limits of economic engagement without aligned security interests.

In Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the strategic pivot toward China was celebrated for offering economic diversification

and greater foreign policy autonomy. The Saudi-Iranian rapprochement facilitated by China was seen as a diplomatic victory, signaling a shift toward a more balanced and multipolar regional order. Despite recognizing China's diplomatic limits, both countries seem content with its current actions, as they lay a solid foundation for the further development of relations. China's media narrative, emphasizing peace, cooperation, and mutual economic benefits, portrayed Chinese engagement as a benign alternative to the interventionist approaches of the West. Beijing's role in the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement and its response to the Hamas-led attack highlighted its ambition as a global player, yet the Chinese press also acknowledged the challenges and limits of China's diplomatic endeavors.

The Sino-Gulf relationship, characterized by cautious optimism and strategic hedging, reflects the transition toward a multipolar world order, wherein regional states are able to navigate new dynamics in international relations. These relationships, while offering economic opportunities and strategic diversification, also reveal tensions and challenges, including security concerns and geopolitical rivalries.

The evolving dynamics demand nuanced diplomacy and strategic foresight, as Gulf states and China balance economic interests with geopolitical realities. A comprehensive understanding of these interactions, informed by diverse media narratives, is crucial for policymakers, scholars, and observers to effectively navigate the complexities of contemporary international relations.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction to the ChinaMed Project	3
Acknowledgements	4
About the Authors	5
Introduction to the Report	6
China	7
Iran	15
Iraq	19
Israel	22
Saudi Arabia	26
United Arab Emirates	29
Conclusion	32

INTRODUCTION TO THE CHINA *MED* PROJECT



The wider Mediterranean is a vast region that stretches from the Iranian Plateau to the Strait of Gibraltar, from the Alps to the Horn of Africa. It is an area characterized by long-term trends, but it is also the epicenter of centrifugal forces that connect Europe, Africa, and Asia. [Our research team](#) at the [ChinaMed Project](#) analyses how the dynamics of this region intersect with one of the most consequential macro-trends of this century: the transition of China, with its 1.4 billion people, from the periphery to the center of the international system.

Our research platform's mission is to track and investigate how China's presence in the region is changing the balance of power on the ground in a nuanced, yet incremental fashion. We achieve this by collecting data and creating indicators that analyze China's growing economic, commercial, and security ties with the countries of the wider Mediterranean, which we make publicly available at [ChinaMed Data](#).

Moreover, we publish the [ChinaMed Observer](#), sharp and focused analyses of the media discourses in China and the countries of the wider Mediterranean region on the most recent

events and the most pressing trends in Sino-Mediterranean relations.

We also actively engage with and participate in the expanding connections between China and the wider Mediterranean through a range of academic initiatives including: the [China Management & Business Program](#), [scientific publications](#), and [academic events](#). The ChinaMed Project, a part of the [TOChina Hub](#) developed by the [University of Turin](#) and promoted by the [Torino World Affairs Institute](#), carries out these initiatives and its research through its partnerships such as those with the HH Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammad al-Sabah Programme at Durham University, the [China-Global South Project](#), the [Department of East Asian Studies at Tel Aviv University](#), the [Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies](#), and the [Asian Studies Unit of the Research Department of the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies](#). ChinaMed also enjoys the support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and [Fondazione CRT](#), one of Italy's largest charitable foundations

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The TOChina Hub, ChinaMed's resilient sponsor, – with its leadership Prof. Anna Caffarena and Prof. Giovanni Andornino – and the University of Naples "l'Orientale" – with its Rector Prof. Roberto Tottoli – deserve our most sincere gratitude for their generous trust and support. John Cabot University (JCU) – with its President Prof. Franco Pavoncello, the Director of the Guarini Institute for Public Affairs Prof. Federico Argentieri, and the Director of the Master in IA Prof. Michael Driessen – have generously promoted our activities and co-financed this report. We would like to sincerely thank them as their deep trust and warm encouragement provide our team with renewed energy and enthusiasm.

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INTRODUCTION TO THE REPORT

The landscape of international relations and regional geopolitics in the Middle East is witnessing a pivotal transformation, primarily driven by the deepening ties between China and the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council. This evolving relationship reflects broader shifts in global power dynamics, signaling a significant departure from the traditional patterns of alliances that have long-defined the region. The burgeoning Sino-Gulf relationship, characterized by expanding economic ties, strategic partnerships, and diplomatic engagement, encapsulates the complexities and nuances of the contemporary geopolitical environment.

Building upon the findings of last year's ChinaMed Report and the extensive research carried out by the ChinaMed Project team throughout 2023, this new report endeavors to delve into the multifaceted relations between China and the Gulf region. Through an analytical lens, we seek to analyze this relationship, focusing on the portrayal of Sino-Gulf dynamics within the media narratives of key actors in the region and China. In particular, each chapter is structured to highlight the impact that the Hamas-led attack against Israel on October 7, 2023, had on how China and its partners perceive each other.

In recent years, China has significantly bolstered its influence in the region, propelled by its economic success, strategic ambitions, and diplomatic initiatives. The Belt and Road Initiative has further solidified its presence in the Middle East, offering the Gulf states the opportunity to diversify their economic dependencies and strategic alliances. With their abundant energy resources, strategic location for global trade, and increasingly active diplomacy, the Gulf states have emerged as crucial partners for Chinese diplomacy. This mutually beneficial relationship, rooted in shared economic interests and strategic considerations, holds the potential to reshape the regional order and influence the global balance of power.

Far from being naïve about the nature of Chinese power, the media narratives from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Iran, Iraq, and Israel offer a rich tapestry of perspectives on the nature, drivers, and implications of Sino-Gulf relations. These narratives provide invaluable insights into the perceptions, aspirations, and concerns of regional actors regarding China's growing influence. Similarly, within Chinese media coverage one can find optimistic projections about the future of regional politics coexisting with cautious assessments of the challenges facing Chinese policymakers. From economic collaboration and energy partnerships to diplomatic engagement and regional stability, the media discourse encompasses a broad spectrum of themes that shed light on

the complex web of interactions between China and the Gulf states.

As the region grapples with the challenges and opportunities posed by the shifting geopolitical landscape, the role of China emerges as pivotal, serving as both a catalyst behind and a partner in these transformations. The strategic hedging employed by the Gulf states, as they seek to balance their traditional alliances with the burgeoning relationship with China, epitomizes the nuanced diplomacy prevalent in today's international relations.

For policymakers and scholars alike, the insights gleaned from this analysis are essential for grappling with the intricacies of Sino-Gulf relations. As the global order continues to evolve, the strategic choices made by the Gulf states, in concert with China's regional ambitions, will have profound implications for regional stability, economic development, and international diplomacy. A nuanced understanding of Sino-Gulf relations, as reflected in the media narratives of the involved countries, is crucial for crafting informed policies and strategies that address the multifaceted challenges and harness the opportunities of this transformative era in Middle Eastern geopolitics.

CHINA

In the previous ChinaMed Report, we concluded our analysis of the Chinese media debate in 2022 by emphasizing Chinese commentators and scholars' growing pessimism toward the future of the Middle East, including of the Gulf.

However, throughout much of 2023, the Chinese debate on Middle Eastern affairs took a notably positive tone, with many analysts viewing Chinese President Xi Jinping's state visit to Saudi Arabia in December 2022 as heralding the beginning of what some have termed "Sino-Arab relations 4.0." Chinese commentators saw Xi's visit as a significant diplomatic milestone, marking a departure from a relationship based solely on energy-focused trade to one encompassing broader economic cooperation across various sectors, alongside an expansion of cultural, political and security ties. Against the backdrop of waning US influence and efforts by Middle Eastern states to diversify their international partnerships, the Chinese narrative emphasized Beijing's growing diplomatic prominence and its aspiration for a balanced relationship with the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and beyond.

After the Hamas-led attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, discussions shifted to analyzing the ensuing conflict's implications for regional stability and China's diplomatic efforts. Commentators analyzed whether Beijing could leverage multilateral platforms like BRICS to foster consensus on a "two-state solution" and broker peace. Chinese diplomacy was portrayed as actively seeking solutions to the conflict, prioritizing humanitarian aid, and proposing international conferences to revive peace talks. This period illustrated China's ambition to act as a mediator in Middle Eastern conflicts, positioning itself as a responsible global power with an impartial stance, devoid of selfish motives, and capable of maintaining communication with all parties involved.

The Riyadh Summits

President Xi's trip to Saudi Arabia from December 7 to 10, 2022, marked a pivotal moment in the Chinese media debate on the Gulf and the Middle East. In addition to a state visit to the Kingdom, the Chinese President participated in the

first China-Arab States Summit and the China-GCC Summit. During these summits, Xi met with leaders from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Palestine, Egypt, Sudan, Iraq, Morocco, Algeria, Lebanon, and other Arab states. Moreover, Chinese and Saudi firms signed 34 investment deals in green energy, information technology, cloud services, transport, construction and other sectors reportedly valued at US\$30 billion.

Chinese commentators spared no effort emphasizing the significance of Xi's trip. For instance, Niu Xinchun, the then-head of the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations' (CICIR) Middle East Institute, described the trip as signaling the start of "Sino-Arab relations 4.0."¹ According to Niu, during the first two phases (1949-1978 and 1978-2013) great power competition and energy were the main drivers of the relationship between Beijing and Arab states. The third phase (2013-2022) saw trade relations expand beyond energy through the "1+2+3" model to include nuclear energy, space and renewable energy as key areas of cooperation. Niu argued that with this new 4.0 phase, cultural and political ties are growing to match the importance of trade and investment relations. Other commentators, on the other hand, mostly considered investment projects and energy trade issues (in particular the emerging conditions for the "petroyuan") as the main outcomes of Xi's visit.²

Niu Xinchun also highlighted several Chinese security-related initiatives and peace plans. Similarly, Niu Song, a researcher at Shanghai International Studies University (SISU), wrote that the three summits marked the beginning of a new phase of China's "great power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics" in the Middle East, which is developing within the context of "the GCC, composed of six Gulf Arab monarchies, having become increasingly dominant in the Arab world."³

In another article, Niu Song also wrote that "in the new era, China pays more attention to Saudi Arabia's special status and important role in China-Arab relations and in China's engagement in the Middle East."⁴ That said, others also pointed out the importance of other non-Arab countries like Türkiye, suggesting that Beijing keep an eye on Ankara as its evolving relationship with NATO reflects a broader change in Western influence across the region.⁵

¹ Niu Xinchun, Niú xīnchūn: Zhōng ā guānxì zhèng mài rù 4.0 bǎn 牛新春：中阿关系正迈入4.0版 [Niu Xinchun: Sino-Arab relations are entering the 4.0 phase], *Global Times*, December 9, 2022, [link](#).

² For example: Ding Long, Dīng lóng: Fēnghuì jiànzhèng zhōng ā guānxì lìshǐ xìng fēiyuè 丁隆：峰会见证中阿关系历史性飞跃 [Ding Long: The summits demonstrate a historic leap in China-Arab relations], *Global Times*, December 8, 2022, [link](#); Shu Xiaoting, Shǒujiè zhōng ā fēnghuì jǔxíng, zhōng ā guānxì fāzhǎn yíng lái xīn de lìchéngbēi 首届中阿峰会举行，中阿关系发展迎来新的里程碑 [The first China-Arab summit was held and Sino-Arab relations reached a new milestone], *21st Century Business Herald*, December 9, 2022, [link](#).

³ Niu Song, "Sān huán fēnghuì": Zhōngguó wàijiāo de yòu yī zhòngdà chuàngjǔ "三环峰会": 中国外交的又一重大创举 [The "three summits": Another Pioneering Chinese Diplomatic Initiative], *Dazhong Daily*, December 14, 2022, [link](#).

⁴ Niu Song, Kāiqǐ zhōng shā guānxì xīn shídài 开启中沙关系新时代 [The beginning of a new era for Sino-Saudi relations], *Dazhong Daily*, December 9, 2022, [link](#).

⁵ Qi Xu, Guānyú 2023 nián guójì géjú yǎnbiàn de liù gè zhòngyào pànduàn, xīnmín huánqiú nián huì shàng zhuānjiāmen zhèyàng shuō... 关于2023年国际格局演变的六个重要判断，新民环球年会上专家们这样说... [Six important opinions on the development of the international situation in 2023, this is what the experts said at the annual conference of Xinmin Evening News...], *Xinmin Evening News*, December 19, 2022, [link](#).

Regarding the factors behind this change, Niu Xinchun explained that "Since the end of the Cold War, the Middle East has experienced an era of American dominance. For a long time, the United States was the 'dominant player' in Middle Eastern security, leaving little room for China. At the same time, American and European companies monopolized the upstream industries of the Middle East's economy, making it difficult for China to participate [economically] as well. China imports large amounts of Middle Eastern oil, making energy security the focus of China's Middle East policy. The 'contraction' of the US' Middle East strategy, the global energy transition, and the accelerated pace of economic reform in the Middle East are behind an unprecedented and comprehensive transformation of the region. The common values and shared interests between China and the Arab world are gradually expanding, and Arab countries are urgently looking for partners beyond the United States."⁶

A similar opinion was echoed in the *People's Daily* by Dong Mangyuan, a researcher at the China Institute of International Studies, who stated that "both China and the Arab states are developing countries, sharing the same development aspirations and the same dream of rejuvenation."⁷ This idea of shared values was also at the center of an article on the construction by China State Construction Engineering Corporation of the Central Business District project in Egypt's new administrative capital.⁸

Chinese media outlets have also praised the development policies enacted by Arab governments, in particular those of Saudi Arabia. Numerous articles quoted Chinese and foreign commentators extolling Riyadh's focus on development, its independent foreign policy and the country's bright future. For example, Li Weijian, a senior expert at SISU, described Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates as champions of a new state-building effort in the Middle East that, supported by the growing populations of the region, will bring renewed economic development.⁹

The *Global Times*, in an article dedicated to Saudi Arabia, also noted how "in order to get rid of dependence on the oil economy, Riyadh is promoting the long-term development of the country through a series of methodical 'Saudi-style reform and opening up' policies. This developing Saudi Arabia is also assuming an increasingly important role in international affairs. 'Investing in the future' and 'looking eastward' have become the general trend in Saudi Arabia."¹⁰ On a related note,

the magazine *Global People* published an article on the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, describing him as an "alternative" Saudi leader and lauding the positive role that he is playing in his country's transformation.¹¹

That said, Saudi Arabia has not surpassed Qatar as Chinese commentators' favorite Gulf state. Niu Song, for example, pointed to China's relations with Doha as evidence for Beijing's desire to maintain balanced relations with all GCC countries, rather than favoring solely Saudi Arabia.¹² Other Chinese experts praised Qatar for leading the economic transition away from dependence on oil and natural gas revenue, as well as its role as a regional mediator and host of major events. For Chinese commentators, it is this skillful diplomacy that has allowed Qatar to weather the confrontation with Saudi Arabia and emerge as a diplomatic heavyweight.¹³

These perspectives are important to keep in mind, especially in light of how Chinese commentators perceive the situation in Iran. As summarized by Ding Long, "given the complex international situation, both China and Iran have a realistic need to deepen cooperation."¹⁴ Nonetheless, as pointed out by Niu Xinchun, China is aware that the current conservative government in Tehran is a better partner than the previous one led by the reformist Hassan Rouhani.¹⁵ Liu also expressed confidence in China's ability to deal with the problems that can arise from pursuing good relations with rival countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia. Indeed, while stressing the need to maintain balanced relations, he also argued that possible Iranian and Saudi discontent is a minor and temporary price to pay if China wants to deepen its engagement in regional issues. "China has gradually realized the complexity of the problem. This is an unavoidable issue for China to participate in Middle Eastern affairs in the future," he stated.

The "Beijing Agreement"

The tripartite statement issued by China, Iran and Saudi Arabia on March 10, 2023, which led to the restoration of diplomatic relations between Riyadh and Tehran, dominated the Chinese media debate for months. Analysts debated the implications of this "Beijing Agreement" for the Middle East, the Gulf, and Beijing's foreign policy and discussed the possible economic opportunities it could provide Chinese companies.

⁶ Niu, "Niu Xinchun: Sino-Arab relations are entering the 4.0 phase."

⁷ Fang Jinglun and Zhang Guigui, Qiáng guānchá [zhōng ā hézuò wéi hé bùduàn mài shàng xīn táijiē? Zhèxiē yuányīn hěn guānjiàn 强观察|中阿合作为何不断迈上新台阶? 这些原因很关键 [Strong Country Observer| Why does China-Arab cooperation continue to reach new heights? These are the main reasons], *People's Daily*, December 13, 2022, [link](#).

⁸ Huang Peizhao and Pan Xiaotong, Fēizhōu zuìgāo lóu chéng zhōng ā yóuyì xīn xiàngzhēng, āiji zǒngtǒng: Bù yǎ yú zài záo yītiáo sūyìshì yùnhé 非洲最高楼成中阿友谊新象征, 埃及总统: 不亚于再凿一条苏伊士运河 [The highest building in Africa is a new symbol of Sino-Arab friendship, the Egyptian president: This is not less important than digging a new Suez Canal], *Global Times*, December 10, 2022, [link](#).

⁹ Qi, "Six important opinions."

¹⁰ Huang Peizhao, Xia Xue, Yuqing, and Wang Zhen, [Huán shí shēndù] biàngé zhōng de shātè, zài dōngfāng tànqún wèilái zhī lù 【环时深度】变革中的沙特, 在东方探寻未来之路 [Global Times In-depth: Saudi Arabia in the middle of revolutionary changes, exploring the path to the future in the East], *Global Times*, December 5, 2022, [link](#).

¹¹ Mao Yufei and Chen Jiali, "另类"沙特王储: 不抽烟, 不晚归, 只有一位妻子 [An "alternative" Saudi crown prince: no smoking, no returning home late, only one wife], *Global People*, December 9, 2022, [link](#).

¹² Niu Song, Zhōnghǎi guānxì dīngwèi yīcì zhì de fēiyuè 中海关系定位一次质的飞跃 [A lead in the relations between China and Gulf countries], *Dazhong Daily*, December 12, 2022, [link](#).

¹³ "Dàn wán xiǎoguo" kǎtǎ'ěr píng shénme wòxuán zhōngdōng? "弹丸小国"卡塔尔凭什么斡旋中东? [How can tiny Qatar mediate in the Middle East?], *Southern Weekly*, December 2, 2022, [link](#).

¹⁴ Zhang Quan, Shēndù | yīlǎng zǒngtǒng míngrì fāng huá, chú le qiān bǎi yì měiyuán dà dān, hái yǒu nǎxiē kàn diǎn 深度|伊朗总统明日访华, 除了签百亿美元大单, 还有哪些看点? [In-depth | Iran's President's visit to China tomorrow, besides signing tens of billions of dollars, what are the highlights?], *Liberation Daily*, February 13, 2023, [link](#).

¹⁵ Zheng Liying, Bù dào bàn nián, zhōng yī yuánshǒu zài dù jiàn miàn 不到半年, 中伊元首再度见面 [Chinese and Iranian leaders meet again less than half a year since the last meeting], *China Newsweek*, February 15, 2023, [link](#).

Numerous Chinese scholars strongly endorsed the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement and China's role in facilitating it. For example, Wen Shaobiao, a researcher at SISU's Middle East Research Institute, told the *Global Times* that "China's successful mediation diplomacy will not only turn two regional powers into friends, but will also lead to the restructuring of relations between the region's two rival camps, have a positive spillover effect on other regional hotspots, such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and help with the de-escalation and resolution of the civil wars in Yemen, Syria and Libya."¹⁶

According to Dong Manyuan, a Middle East expert at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs-affiliated Chinese Institute of International Studies, the Saudi-Iranian reconciliation will inspire developing countries and remind them that "they should control their own security destiny, development destiny and governance destiny, and take their destiny into their own hands, instead of relying on foreign forces."¹⁷

Beyond the Middle East, some posited that this development also has implications for the war¹⁸ in Ukraine. For example, Tsinghua University National Strategy Institute's Qian Feng went as far as to argue that it shows that reconciliation is possible even between bitter enemies and, thus, gives hope to finding a possible resolution to the Russo-Ukrainian war. Niu Xinchun told *China Youth Daily* that "the most important lesson from the dialogue in Beijing is that no major power should be hastily isolated... Just as excluding Iran won't solve the problems of the Middle East, excluding Russia won't solve the Ukraine problem. The United States can dislike Russia, but excluding Russia from the debate on European security certainly won't work."¹⁹

Some Chinese commentators also saw economic opportunities on the horizon. In an article for the *Global Times*, Wang Jin, a scholar at Northwest University in Xi'an, was quoted stating that "there is a strong complementarity between China's Belt and Road Initiative and the economic visions of the Arab Gulf states and Iran."²⁰

Wu Bingbing, director of the Center for Middle East Studies at Peking University, also told the *Global Times* that Chinese enterprises "have their own advantages and characteristics for investment and cooperation in this region". According to Wu, Chinese economic activities in Iran and Saudi Arabia,

and the region more broadly, are expected to greatly benefit from the improvement in the relations between Iran and Arab countries. That said, it is important to mention that Chinese commentators seldom delve into the specifics of what renders Sino-Gulf relations complementary, beyond simply mentioning China's energy needs and the Gulf's abundance of oil and natural gas. It also remains unclear whether Chinese analysts believe that improving Saudi-Iranian ties' supposed benefits for Chinese companies originate from general regional stability or from some more specific factor.

Chinese commentators regarded Israel as the only actor negatively impacted by the thawing relations between Riyadh and Tehran. Though not delving into detail, Ding Long stated that "the increased unity within the Islamic world is not good news for Israel."²¹ Wang Shuming of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences highlighted Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's dilemma between "saving the State of Israel or preserving the ruling coalition," suggesting that a provocative foreign policy move might be the sole means to distract public opinion.²²

Against this background, Chinese experts celebrated China's expanded role in regional affairs. Ding Long even wrote that it was symbolic of a paradigm shift in China's Middle East policy.²³ On the one hand, Ding argued that China has finally managed to translate its national power into "diplomatic soft power," something that, according to him, Beijing has in the past not managed to achieve. On the other hand, "China's vision for global development and security has taken root in the Middle East, making it a qualified mediator trusted by all parties to the Middle East conflict."

Expressing these same sentiments in somewhat more grandiose terms, Fan Hongda, another scholar at SISU, similarly argued that "the successful mediation between Saudi Arabia and Iran will, to a certain extent, change the perception of China in the Middle East as a country that only or mainly focuses on economic issues and neglects security issues."²⁴ More broadly, Zhu Yongbiao, a scholar at Lanzhou University, wrote that henceforth the international community can continue to expect China to play an active role in promoting the resolution of other international conflicts and disputes.²⁵ Wang Jin told *The Observer's* Xiong Chaoran that this experience and others in the future will help China contribute more to regional stability.²⁶

¹⁶ Zhao Juehui and Liu Xin, Zhòng bàng jiě jú! Zhè liǎng gè zhōngdōng guójiā zài zhōngguó wòshǒu yìwèizhe shénme? 重磅解局! 这两个中东国家在中国握手意味着什么? [Important development! What does it mean for these two Middle Eastern countries to shake hands in China?], *Global Times*, March 11, 2023, [link](#).

¹⁷ Bo Wenwen, Zhōngdōng yuánhé xiānqǐ "héjiě cháo"? 中东缘何掀起“和解潮”? [Why has a "wave of reconciliation" begun in the Middle East?], *China News*, March 30, 2023, [link](#).

¹⁸ Fu Yumei, Néng ràng zhōngdōng "sǐdùtóu" wòshǒu de, wèishéme shì zhōngguó néng ràng zhōngdōng "sǐdùtóu" wòshǒu de, wèishéme shì zhōngguó 能让中东“死对头”握手的，为什么是中国 [Why is it that China can make the "deadly rivals" in the Middle East shake hands?], *Global Characters*, March 11, 2023, [link](#).

¹⁹ Hu Wenli, Zhōngdōng wèntí zhuānjiǎ niú xīnchūn: Tuīdòng shā yī fùjiāo de zhōngguó fāng'àn, wéi wūkèlán wēijī zhǐmíng fāngxiàng 中东问题专家牛新春：推动沙伊复交的中国方案，为乌克兰危机指明方向 [Middle East expert Niu Xinchun: China's plan to promote the resumption of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran will point the way to solve the Ukraine crisis], *China Youth Daily*, March 16, 2023, [link](#).

²⁰ Huang Peizhao, Gong Jueyuan, and Wang Dong, Zhōngdōng "héjiě cháo" huì dài lái nǎxiē xīn shāngjī? 中东“和解潮”会带来哪些新商机? [What new business opportunities will the "wave of reconciliation" in the Middle East bring?], *Global Times*, March 25, 2023, [link](#).

²¹ Huang Peizhao, Chen Zishuai, Chen Kang, Tao Danfang, and Liu Yupeng, Tú fā! Nèi tā ní yǎ hú zhēn de tuīchíle 突发！内塔尼亚胡真的推迟了 [Sudden event! Netanyahu really decided to postpone], *Global Times*, March 28, 2023, [link](#).

²² Wang Shuming, Xiànzhèng wéijī, bā yǐ chōngtū, yǔ měi jūyǔ: Yísèliè xīn zhèngfǔ hái néng chéng duōjiǔ 宪政危机、巴以冲突、与美龃龉：以色列新政府还能撑多久 [A constitutional crisis, the Palestine-Israel conflict, and discord with the US: How long can Israel's new government last?], *The Paper*, March 15, 2023, [link](#).

²³ Ding Long, Shā yī liǎng guó běijīng fùjiāo: Lǐniàn zhǐyǐn yǔ xíngdòng pèihé xià zhōngguó wàijiāo de fànshì zhuǎnhuàn 沙伊两国北京复交：理念指引与行动配合下中国外交的范式转换 [The Beijing rapprochement of Iran and Saudi Arabia: The paradigmatic shift of Chinese diplomacy guided by concepts and implemented by coordinated actions], *The Paper*, March 11, 2023, [link](#).

²⁴ Fan Hongda, Běijīng huānyíng nǐmen 北京欢迎你们 [Beijing welcomes you], *News China*, March 10, 2023, [link](#).

²⁵ Zhao and Liu, "Important development! What does it mean for these two Middle Eastern countries to shake hands in China?"

²⁶ Xiong Chaoran, Shātè yīlǎng zài běijīng wòshǒu yán hé, "měiguó bàn bùchéng, zhōngguó què zuò dào le" 沙特伊朗在北京握手言和，“美国办不成，中国却做到了” [Saudi Arabia and Iran shake hands in Beijing and make peace - "The United States can't do it, but China has done it"], *The Observer*, March 11, 2023, [link](#).

Tang Zhichao explicitly stated that this transformation not only benefits the region but also China. Indeed, he argued that "China's successful mediation of the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran, is not only a major breakthrough for China's Middle East diplomacy, but also a major victory in two rounds²⁷ of China's struggle against the United States in the Middle East."²⁸ This is why Niu Xinchun wrote that the United States will continue to adjust its policy to weaken China's relations in the region, though he believes that such efforts are unlikely to succeed.²⁹ Interestingly, he seemed to imply that one of the reasons behind Washington's likely failure is the United States' inability to commit large amounts of capital for long periods of time to invest in and support the completion of economic projects desired by Middle Eastern policymakers.

That said, no Chinese commentator, including Fudan University's Sun Degang in an interview for the *People's Daily*, failed to note that many countries in the region, Saudi Arabia and Iran being no exception, are prioritizing domestic economic development and consolidation.³⁰ Sun went on to state that "the Russia-Ukraine conflict is a wake-up call to Middle Eastern countries that resorting to war and force will only lead to them becoming pawns and sacrificial lambs in the competition between major powers. Middle Eastern countries must stand for their own national interests, adhere to strategic autonomy, seek common ground while reserving differences, stop the bleeding soon, and instead promote security through cooperation and peace through development."³¹

At the same time, there is also clear awareness that not every problem has been solved. Fan Hongda wrote it the most clearly: "The Saudi-Iranian rapprochement agreement reached under the auspices of China is indeed a welcome development. But the agreement is only a good starting point; the next question is whether the process of normalizing Saudi-Iranian relations will progress smoothly." This is true not only for Saudi Arabia and Iran, but also for China. As some international observers have noted, it is one thing for China to host the talks, but it is another to play a role in implementing the resulting agreement, and it remains a challenge to see what assurances China will provide if one of the parties does not respect the agreement reached.³² Liu Zhongmin and Sun Degang made similar statements in an article published by the Shanghai-based *The Paper*. As Sun put it: "the resumption of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran is the first step in a long march of ten thousand miles."³³

Ding Long best explained the Chinese perception of the challenges ahead writing that it is necessary "to note that the two countries have complicated conflicts and many issues and differences to be resolve, and that the United States will still encourage Arab countries and Israel to join forces to contain Iran, so we need to guard against the possibility of relations reverting to how they were before the resumption of diplomatic relations."³⁴ From Dong Mangyuan to Zhu Weilie, Ding Long, and Niu Xinchun, Chinese scholars are especially worried about the possible actions of the United States. Meanwhile, they expect China to continue to remain involved in the dialogue with the Saudis and the Iranians to ensure the continuation of their rapprochement. China is "a trusted intermediary between Saudi Arabia and Iran and the two countries' largest trading partner," Niu Xinchun wrote. Moreover, he told *China Youth Daily* that China is still needed as a reliable third party to ensure smooth communication between the two sides and avoid miscalculations, in the absence of fully established diplomatic channels between Saudi Arabia and Iran.³⁵

Besides American attempts to undermine China's position in the region, Niu Xinchun also warned that the Iranian nuclear issue and Iran-Israel-United States relations might become a time bomb and derail the positive changes that are happening in the region.³⁶ Liu Zhongmin, instead, expressed concern that the Palestinian issue might become the most difficult one to manage.³⁷ This opinion is shared also by Niu Song.³⁸ In general, Liu hoped that regional powers would continue to do two interrelated things.³⁹ The first is to decrease their dependence on security and defense cooperation with the United States because that has been creating and deepening divisions in the region. The second, then, is to "reengineer their mindset" to find a compromise and a balance between two extremes, i.e., "blind rejection and blind imitation" of ideas coming from other countries.

The Gulf at the Center of Regional and World Politics

Over time, a clear narrative started to develop among Chinese commentators: the Gulf is unequivocally rising and emerging as the main diplomatic and economic engine of the Middle East, as well as a powerful pole in international politics.

²⁷The Riyadh summits were the first round.

²⁸Tang Zhichao, "Tángzhichāo: 'Hòu měiguó shídài' zhōngdōng dìqū zhìxù jiāsù yǎnjìn 唐志超: "后美国时代"中东地区秩序加速演进 [Tang Zhichao: In the "Post-American Era", the regional order of the Middle East is evolving quickly], *Cfsnet*, May 5, 2023, [link](#).

²⁹Huang Peizhao and Ding Yazhi, "Měi zài zhōngdōng gāo tiělù wǎng 'duìchōng zhōngguó yǐngxiǎng lì', zhuānjiā: Jīhuà wèibì néng luòshí 美在中东搞铁路网"对冲中国影响力", 专家: 计划未必能落实 [The United States is building a railway network in the Middle East to "hedge against China's influence." Expert: The plan may not be implemented], *Global Times*, May 9, 2023, [link](#).

³⁰Zhang Hong, "Yī gè xīn zhōngdōng zhèng zài xíngchéng: héjiě yǔ duìkǎng jiāwǎng jīyù yǔ tiǎozhàn bìngcún [A new Middle East is taking shape: Reconciliation and confrontation are intertwined, opportunities and challenges coexist], *People's Daily*, April 1, 2023, [link](#).

³¹Ibid.

³²Fan, "Beijing welcomes you."

³³Zhu Zhengyong and Yu Xiaoqing, "Shā tè yī rǎn 'bēijīng héjiě': héping de shènglì yǔ zhōngguó jùsè de chāngyǎn [The "Beijing peace" of Saudi Arabia and Iran: The victory of peace and the demonstration of China's role], *The Paper*, March 11, 2023, [link](#).

³⁴Ding, "The Beijing rapprochement of Iran and Saudi Arabia."

³⁵Hu, "Middle East expert Niu Xinchun: China's plan to promote the resumption of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran will point the way to solve the Ukraine crisis."

³⁶Qiu Wenhan, "Xù zōngtǒng xiàn shēn ā méng fēnghuì yīwèizhè shénme 叙总统现身阿盟峰会意味着什么 [What does the presence of the Syrian President at the Arab League summit mean?], *Liberation Daily*, May 19, 2023, [link](#).

³⁷Wang Haizhou, "Guójì guānchá gūn ā méng fēnghuì zhānxiàn sān dà tèdiǎn: Tuánjié, jīyù, liánhé xíngdòng 国际观察 | 阿盟峰会展现三大特点: 团结、机遇、联合行动 [International Observer | The three key features of the Arab League summit: Unity, opportunity, and coordinated action], *Xinhua*, May 20, 2023, [link](#).

³⁸Niu Song, "Bā yǐ yuánhé zài qǐ chōngtú 巴以缘何再起冲突 [Why has the Israeli-Palestinian conflict started again], *People's Liberation Army Daily*, May 19, 2023, [link](#).

³⁹Liu Zhongmin, "Zhōngdōng rui píng jǐ méng fēnghuì hòu, ālābó shìjiè tuánjié zìzhǔ réng yǒulài 'sīxiǎng zàizào' 中东睿评 | 阿盟峰会后, 阿拉伯世界团结自主仍有赖"思想再造" [Middle East Insight | After the Arab League summit, the unity and independence of the Arab world still depends on a "mindset reengineering"], *The Paper*, May 23, 2023, [link](#).

Two main pieces of evidence were usually brought to bear. The first is the influence of Gulf sovereign wealth funds.⁴⁰ While rising interest rates in Europe and the United States have limited the presence of Western capital around the world, Gulf countries are instead eager to find new investment opportunities and, at the same time, use their funds to support their diplomatic ambitions. Quoting *The Economist*, the *Global Times* referred to the Gulf as the "banker of the world." Against this background, Niu Xinchun and Zhejiang International Studies University's Zhou Lie argued that Beijing has much to gain from this phenomenon, especially as policymakers from both China and the Gulf have made efforts to strengthen economic relations beyond energy.

The second piece of evidence are the numerous visits by foreign leaders to the Gulf.⁴¹ Among these visits, a notable one was that by Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida in July 2023, which was the subject of a *Global Times* article by Ding Long.⁴² According to Ding, Kishida's primary objectives were to secure oil supplies and strengthen cooperation in the realm of renewable energy technologies. Nonetheless, he also posited that the Japanese PM's trip could likely be in reaction to China's growing influence in the region, especially since the Saudi Arabia-Iran talks in Beijing. While the scholar is of the opinion that China has no reason to interfere with or hinder the development of Japan-Gulf relations, he however warned Tokyo that if it attempts to join the United States in trying to contain Chinese influence and companies in the Gulf, or instigates the United States or India into exerting pressure on China while reaping the benefits, China's ambivalence would quickly change.

PM Netanyahu's declarations in June 2023 that he would travel to Beijing were, in the eyes of Chinese commentators, a further sign of the changes taking place in the region. Niu Xinchun implied in a *Global Times* article that the Israeli Prime Minister's statements should not be considered simply as a byproduct of the worsening relations between Israel and the United States.⁴³ Rather, they should be "critically seen against the background of new developments in the Middle East's geopolitical situation. A series of new changes have enabled Netanyahu's visit to China to transcend bilateral relations and have regional and even global political significance."

Against this background, it is interesting to read one of the articles published by Liu Zhongmin in his regular column in *The Paper*.⁴⁴ Liu argued that the barycenter of the Middle East's economic and political foreign relations is in Asia. The region is increasingly "Asianized." Therefore, China should look at it

as part of what used to be called "Western regions," together with Central Asia and South Asia. He argued that Chinese scholars and policymakers need to think in terms of "Great Asia" (with the Middle East being part of it under the name of "West Asia"). Otherwise, he warned, it will be difficult for Beijing to seize fully the opportunities, or tackle the threats, that emerge from those growing ties and connections.

Hamas Attacks

In the wake of the conflict that erupted on October 7 after the Hamas-led attack on Israel, Chinese media and scholarly commentary have navigated a complex narrative landscape, blending official diplomatic stances with expert analysis and broader geopolitical considerations. At the heart of the discourse is China's position of neutrality and its statements urging restraint on both sides, advocating for the resumption of the "two-state solution" dialogue, and pressing for an immediate ceasefire.

Chinese commentators debated much about China's role. Wang Jin, together with Zou Zhiqiang, a researcher at Fudan University, believe that there is a tangible expectation from Muslim and Arab countries for China to play a more substantial role in Middle East peacemaking, drawing on the proactive role Beijing played in the reconciliation between Tehran and Arab countries of the Gulf.⁴⁵

Still, the majority emphasized that a solution to the conflict will only emerge in the long run, in part due to China consistently representing its stance and its efforts to forge consensus, laying the groundwork for a future settlement.⁴⁶ China remains well-positioned to do this because "among the world's major powers, China is one of the few countries that can maintain close communication and engage in mediation dialogue with all parties involved in the Palestinian-Israeli issue, and China always upholds a fair stance and has no selfish motives."⁴⁷

In particular, Yu Guoqing from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences highlighted the significance of the last BRICS summit and Chinese engagement in favor of developing countries and emerging powers having a greater voice in shaping future peace settlements (including regarding the Palestinian issue), especially because the US has proved once again to have a "biased" approach.⁴⁸

⁴⁰ Huang Peizhao, Xin Bin, and Wang Dong, Rì tǔ yìn zhāduī fāngwèn, zhōngdōng zībēn wèishéme chéngle shìjiè de "qián dài"? 日土印扎堆访问，中东资本为什么成了世界的“钱袋”？ [Japanese, Turkish, and Indian leaders visit the Middle East, why has it become the world's "money bag"?], *Global Times*, July 19, 2023, [link](#).

⁴¹ Qian Xiaoyan, Shíyóu bù zài shì wéiyī zhòngdiǎn! Wàiguó lǐngdǎo rén zhēngxiānkǒnghòu dào fǎng hǎiwān guójiā wèi nǎ bān 石油不再是唯一重点！外国领导人争先恐后到访海湾国家为哪般 [Petroleum is no longer the only focus! Foreign leaders are scrambling to visit Gulf countries], *China Business Network*, July 20, 2023, [link](#).

⁴² Ding Long, Dīng lóng: Àntián gāodiào dì hǎiwān zhī xíng, bùzhǐ wèi "xún yóu" 丁隆：岸田高调的海湾之行，不止为“寻油” [Ding Long: Kishida's high-profile trip is not just about "oil hunting"], *Global Times*, July 22, 2023, [link](#).

⁴³ Niu Xinchun, Niú xīnchūn: Zhōngdōng zhèngzhì xīn biànhuà cù yìsèliè qiú biàn 牛新春：中东政治新变化促以色列求变 [Niu Xinchun: The new developments in Middle Eastern politics push Israel to seek change], *Global Times*, July 4, 2023, [link](#).

⁴⁴ Liu Zhongmin, Zhōngdōng ruì píng | dāngzhōng dōng guójiā jījī xiàng yàzhōu huíguī, zhōngguó xūyào zuò shénme zhǔnbèi? 中东睿评 | 当中东国家积极向亚洲回归，中国需要做什么准备？ [Middle East Insight | Middle Eastern countries return to Asia, what preparations should China make?], *The Paper*, July 21, 2023, [link](#).

⁴⁵ Ālābó, Yīslán guójiā wàizhǎng zǔtuán wòxuán Bā-Yī chōngtǔ, shǒuzhàn wéihé xuǎn zài Zhōngguó? 阿拉伯、伊斯兰国家外长组团斡旋巴以冲突，首站为何选在中国？ [Arab and Muslim countries mediate in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict - Why did they choose China as their first stop?], *China News*, November 21, 2023, [link](#).

⁴⁶ Bā-Yī chōngtǔ yínglái zhuànjī, Jīnzhuan shēngyīn tuīdòng tínghuǒ zhǐ zhàn 20231122 | 《Huánqiú shìxiàn》 CCTV zhōngwén guójiā Bā-Yī chōngtǔ yínglái zhuànjī, Jīnzhuan shēngyīn tuīdòng tínghuǒ zhǐ zhàn 20231122 | 《环球视线》 CCTV中文国际 [Turning point in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, BRICS promotes a ceasefire and an end to the war 20231122 | "The World" CCTV Chinese International], *CCTV Chinese International*, November 22, 2023, [link](#).

⁴⁷ "Arab and Muslim countries mediate in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict - Why did they choose China as their first stop?"

⁴⁸ Guójiè shìjú : línshí tínghuǒ 4 tiān, Bā-Yī chōngtǔ yíng zhuǎnzhe? Zhè diǎn zhídé guānzhù ! 国际识局：临时停火4天，巴以冲突迎转折？这点值得关注！ [International Think tanks: 4-day temporary ceasefire, is the Palestinian-Israeli conflict ushering in a turning point? This deserves attention!], *China News*, November 23, 2023, [link](#).

The debate on China's role proceeded in parallel with that on the causes of the attack. Chinese commentators have contextualized differently the recent outbreak of violence, with some emphasizing the importance of recent developments in the Middle East, while others underscored the enduring contradictions in the Israel-Palestine relationship.

The sheer scale of the attack led many to question whether Hamas alone had the capacity to conduct such an operation. In this context, Israeli politicians were quick to accuse Iran of aiding Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Many Chinese scholars agreed, with Vice-Director of the Shanghai Institute of International Relations Wang Shuming, Song Zhongping, and Zou Zhiqiang all convinced that Iran was involved, despite Tehran rejecting such allegations.⁴⁹ However, Song added that Tel Aviv's emphasis on possible Iranian involvement conveniently diverts public attention away from the Israeli security apparatus' mistakes.⁵⁰

Chinese scholars also highlighted changes in Israel's defense mentality and domestic political dynamics. Wang Jin argued that Israel's superior high-tech military and sophisticated security systems, such as the "Iron Dome," created a false sense that Israel's defense is "impregnable."⁵¹ Song supported this assessment, adding that "underestimating the enemy" and "lacking a deep understanding" of the adversary was a defect shared by multiple branches of Israel's security forces in their dealings with Hamas.⁵²

Additionally, some experts emphasized Israel's political instability. For Sun Degang, Tel Aviv's preoccupation with internal disputes has led it to neglect monitoring Hamas.⁵³ Li Shaoxian contended that security agencies were not the only victims of a false sense of security, but rather it is a problem that extends to Israeli society as a whole. In his analysis, he highlighted two significant contributing factors: First, Israelis erroneously interpreted Hamas' inaction following the elimination of senior members of Palestinian Islamic Jihad in May 2023 as a sign of surrender. Secondly, the Israeli public is very politically polarized due to PM Netanyahu's controversial judicial reform, which sparked the largest protests in the

country's history. Li argued that division has permeated all levels of society, including the military. "I believe it also includes the Mossad. The chaotic divisions in society seriously affected the Mossad's response," he wrote.⁵⁴

Hamas' operation appears to have been meticulously planned. Its timing—commencing on the Jewish holiday of Shemini Atzeret—recalls the 1973 Yom Kippur War, which erupted almost precisely fifty years before the day of the attack.⁵⁵ Apart from symbolism, multiple Chinese experts considered the ongoing normalization talks between Netanyahu and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman as an important trigger behind this attack. Wang pointed out that Palestinian factions have consistently opposed the normalization of relations between Arab states and Israel, demanding a peaceful settlement of the Palestinian issue as a prerequisite for any Arab-Israeli reconciliation. As expressed by Wang Jin, Li Shaoxian, Zou Zhiqiang, together with Associate Professor Wang Zhen from the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, the Palestinian question risked being further marginalized in the context of advancing negotiations between Israel and Saudi Arabia, and the inevitable snowball effect that Israel's recognition by Saudi Arabia would cause.⁵⁶ Wang Jin posited that "this conflict is likely to be a manifestation of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad's opposition to the normalization of relations between Arab countries and Israel through violent means."⁵⁷

This explanation is shared by Zou Zhiqiang and Li Shaoxian. For Zou, a "now or never" attitude among Palestinians also played a part in the attack. As he stated, "The cause for Palestine's sudden action came from changes in the external environment, which raised concerns regarding its own destiny. Rather than sit back and wait for certain death, it is better to take the initiative."⁵⁸ It is crucial to highlight that Chinese scholars often conflated Hamas with the broader Palestinian population, seemingly to partially justify Hamas' attack. It is difficult to ascertain whether they did so out of genuine belief or due to pressure to conform to Beijing's official line and the mainstream Chinese media narrative. Indeed, a senior scholar

⁴⁹ Bā Yí chōngtū ruìpíng 8. Hāmāsī dǎfǎ xiōngmèng, Yísèliè qíngbào shū zài nǎ ? Zhuānjiā liánhé jièxī 巴以冲突锐评 ① 巴以冲突锐评 ⑧ 哈马斯打法凶猛，以色列情报输在哪？专家联合解析 [Critical Commentary on the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict VIII. Hamas initiates fierce attack, how Israeli intelligence failed? Scholars explain it with four reasons], *The Paper*, October 10, 2023, [link](#); Zeng Yangxi and Wang Jiangjun, Bā Yí "huǒyàotǒng" zài bèi diǎnrán, liǎngzhě chóuhèn wéihé nányí huàjiě 巴以“火药桶”再被点燃，两者仇恨为何难以化解 [The Palestinian-Israeli "gunpowder-barrel" is reignited again, why their hatred against each other is so difficult to resolve], *Chaoxinwen*, October 9, 2023, [link](#); An Jing, Bā Yí jīliè chōngtū : Zhōng Dōng xīnbiàn jú háishi "cháhuǒ de fēngbào" ? 巴以激烈冲突：中东新变局还是“茶壶里的风暴”？ [Fierce Palestinian-Israeli conflict: New changes in the Middle East or a "storm in a teapot"?] *Jiemian Xinwen*, October 9, 2023, [link](#).

⁵⁰ Wang Hui and Zhang Jingjuan, Jiēxiàlái, Yísèliè huì fā dòng „dì miàn zhàn” ma? 接下来，以色列会发动“地面战”吗？ [Coming up, Israel is about to initiate ground war?], *Guanchazhe*, October 10, 2023, [link](#).

⁵¹ Wang Jin, Shí gé 50 nián de yòu yì tū rán xī jī, zhàn huǒ zhōng huò yǐncáng zhe Bā Yí hé píng xīn qí jī 时隔50年的又一次突然袭击，战火中或隐藏着巴以和平新契机 [Another sudden attack after 50 years. The war may hide a chance for a Palestinian-Israeli peace], *The Paper*, October 8, 2023, [link](#).

⁵² Wang and Zhang, "Coming up, Israel is about to initiate ground war?"

⁵³ Huang Yuehan and Li Xiaomeng, Yuánzhuō · Sì wèn Bā Yí chōngtū 2. | Nèiyōu yǐnlái wàihuàn? Mósà dé zěnme "shīlíng" le 圆桌·四问巴以冲突 ② | 内忧引来外患？摩萨德怎么“失灵”了 [Round Table·Four Questions on the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict II. | Does internal trouble lead to foreign trouble? Why did Mossad "fail"?], *The Paper*, October 9, 2023, [link](#).

⁵⁴ An, "Fierce Palestinian-Israeli conflict: New changes in the Middle East or a 'storm in a teapot'?"

⁵⁵ Ding Long, Dīng Lóng : Bā Yí chōngtū tū xiǎn " liǎng-guó fāng'àn " zhòng yào yì yì 丁隆：巴以冲突凸显“两国方案”重要意义 [Ding Long: The Palestinian-Israeli conflict highlights the importance of the "two-state solution"], *Global Times*, October 13, 2023, [link](#); Wang and Zhang, "Coming up, Israel is about to initiate ground war?"; An, "Fierce Palestinian-Israeli conflict: New changes in the Middle East or a 'storm in a teapot'?"

⁵⁶ An, "Fierce Palestinian-Israeli conflict: New changes in the Middle East or a 'storm in a teapot'?" ; Bā Yí chōngtū ruìpíng 4. Zhōng Dōng "héjiěchào" bèihòu, bālèsītǎnrén juéyì "bào fù" ? 巴以冲突锐评 ④ 中东“和解潮”背后，巴勒斯坦人决意“报复”？ [Critical Commentary on the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict IV: Behind the "reconciliation wave" in the Middle East, are the Palestinians determined to "retaliate"?], *The Paper*, October 10, 2023, [link](#).

⁵⁷ Wang Jin, Wáng Jin: Bā Yí wéi hé tū rán bào fā jī liè chōngtū 王晋：巴以为何突然爆发激烈冲突 [Wang Jin: Why did violent conflict suddenly break out between Palestine and Israel?], *Global Times*, October 8, 2023, [link](#).

⁵⁸ Zeng and Wang, "The Palestinian-Israeli 'gunpowder-barrel' is reignited again."

was criticized by Chinese netizens after advocating for a more nuanced analysis of the situation during a TV interview.⁵⁹

Now, after Hamas' attack and the Israeli reaction, Niu Xinchun affirmed that the Palestinian issue can no longer be bypassed.⁶⁰ Wang Jin, Ding Long, and Wang Zhen agreed. As Wang Zhen put it, "Now, for a leader of an Arab Gulf state to resume negotiations with Israel is equal to political suicide."⁶¹

In any case, Chinese experts have refrained from making long-term predictions. Rather, they simply affirmed that Israel's response to Hamas and its overall handling of the Palestinian issue will significantly impact how Arab nations perceive the future of the normalization process.⁶² Nevertheless, some experts, like Li Shaoxian and Ding Long, foresaw only a temporary disruption in normalization proceedings, as they believe that an Arab-Israeli rapprochement is inevitable.⁶³

Besides the specific reasons behind Hamas' attack, Chinese scholars emphasized the role of long-term regional dynamics. One of them is the rising competition among great powers. Indeed, as the editorial team of *Chaoxinwen* wrote, "the development of the Palestine-Israel issue has always been driven by competition among major powers, and major powers have intervened on numerous occasions."⁶⁴

Zou Zhiqiang, approaching the situation from a historical perspective, argued that during the Cold War, the rivalry between Washington and Moscow made it impossible to establish both a Jewish and Arab state, despite the various UN resolutions calling for a two-state solution. The resulting proxy wars between the two superpowers ended with the Palestinian side losing.⁶⁵ According to Wang Jin, the US' inability to bring lasting peace in the post-Cold War era opened the door for more unresolved conflicts, and ultimately contributed to the recent build-up of hatred and resentment between the two groups. This environment has allowed fundamentalist

extreme forces such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad to affirm themselves and rally popular support.⁶⁶

Another element that Chinese commentators have highlighted is revenge. Associate Professor Zhang Chuchu of Fudan University posited that Hamas' assault aimed to make Israeli people experience the same perpetual fear that Gaza residents have endured due to Israeli raids and bombings.⁶⁷ Li Shaoxian and Zou Zhiqiang characterized Hamas' attack as a "prison-break" in reaction to movement restrictions imposed by Israel since 2007, that have virtually isolated the Gaza Strip from the rest of the world.⁶⁸ They, along with Wang Zhen, also argued that Hamas' operation was clearly fueled by discontent regarding Israeli measures to limit the presence of Muslims near the Al-Aqsa Mosque, considered by many as the third-holiest site in Islam.⁶⁹ In support of this thesis, *Xinhua News Agency's* team published a list of clashes between Palestinians and Israelis since 2014, the year when direct peace talks stalled.⁷⁰

The question on how to achieve peace remains a subject of debate among Chinese scholars. While Wang Guangda argued that the exchange of prisoners and the temporary ceasefire has "established a certain level of trust", Niu Xinchun disagreed, arguing that "ceasefire and peace agreement are two completely distinct matters."⁷¹

Tsinghua University's She Gangzheng supported Niu's perspective, positing that Israel is bent on pursuing a military solution.⁷² She and Niu also both emphasized that Tel Aviv's actions run counter to the international community's wish for a diplomatic solution. As expressed by Niu Xinchun, "The temporary ceasefire was only possible because of the exchange of prisoners. The idea of a comprehensive and lasting ceasefire is opposed by every facet of Israeli society. As for international actors, the US and Europe reject the idea, while Third World countries and BRICS members support it" A lasting ceasefire can only be achieved by international organizations doubling their efforts on reaching a consensus.⁷³

⁵⁹ Guānyú Bā-Yī chōngtú, Zhōngguó shèkēyuàn yánjiùyuán Yīn Gāng de yánlùn bùshì gǎn shuō, ér shì luàn shuō关于巴以冲突，中国社科院研究员殷罡的言论不是敢说，而是乱说 [Regarding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Yin Gang, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, gave a speech of nonsense, instead of a speech of bravery], *Tengxun Network*, November 25, 2023, [link](#).

⁶⁰ Huang Yuehan and Li Xiaomeng, Yuánzhuō · Sì wèn Bā Yī chōngtú 3. | Xiàng Dìzhōng Hǎi pài hángmǔ hé zhànjī, Měiguó huìfǒu shēndù jièrù ? 圆桌 · 四问巴以冲突③ | 向地中海派航母和战机，美国会否深度介入 [Roundtable: Four Questions on the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict III. | Sending aircraft carriers and fighter jets to the Mediterranean Sea, will the United States be deeply involved?], *The Paper*, October 9, 2023, [link](#).

⁶¹ "Critical Commentary on the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict IV: Behind the 'reconciliation wave' in the Middle East." *The Paper*.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Ding, "Ding Long: The Palestinian-Israeli conflict highlights the importance of the 'two-state solution'"; An, "Fierce Palestinian-Israeli conflict: New changes in the Middle East or a 'storm in a teapot'?" Heavy casualties reported in Gaza, Israel after Hamas surprise attack prompts retaliation, *Xinhua*, October 8, 2023, [link](#).

⁶⁴ Zeng and Wang, "The Palestinian-Israeli 'gunpowder-barrel' is reignited again."

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ "Critical Commentary on the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict IV: Behind the 'reconciliation wave' in the Middle East." *The Paper*.

⁶⁸ An, "Fierce Palestinian-Israeli conflict: New changes in the Middle East or a 'storm in a teapot'?"

⁶⁹ An, "Fierce Palestinian-Israeli conflict: New changes in the Middle East or a 'storm in a teapot'?" "Critical Commentary on the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict IV: Behind the 'reconciliation wave' in the Middle East," *The Paper*.

⁷⁰ Backgrounder: Major Palestinian-Israeli conflicts in recent years, *Xinhua*, October 8, 2023, [link](#).

⁷¹ Bùnéng ràng zhànhuǒ chóng rán! Wáng yì wàizhǎng qīnzì fù liánhéguó zhǔchí bā yǐ wèntí gāo jíbié huìyì 不能让战火重燃！王毅外长亲自赴联合国主持巴以问题高级别会议 [Don't let the war reignite! Foreign Minister Wang Yi personally went to the United Nations to chair a high-level meeting on the Palestinian-Israeli issue], *Xinmin Wanbao*, November 29, 2023, [link](#).

⁷² Turning point in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, BRICS promotes a ceasefire and an end to the war 20231122 | "The World" CCTV Chinese International, *CCTV Chinese International*. Rèdiǎn wèndá | Yísèliè hé Hāmāsī tínghuǒ xiéyì shēngxiào | Héping qián jǐng rúhé 热点问答 | 以色列和哈马斯停火协议生效 和平前景如何 [Trending questions and answers: What are the prospects for peace after the ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas took effect?], *Xinhua*, November 24, 2023, [link](#).

⁷³ "Turning point in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, BRICS promotes a ceasefire and an end to the war 20231122 | "The World" CCTV Chinese International", *CCTV Chinese International*.

Director of the Department for European Studies at CIIS, Professor Cui Hongjian, stated that a ceasefire agreement would be in and of itself very difficult to reach because of the necessity of mutual security guarantees.⁷⁴

The bottom line is drawn by Cui and Niu Xinchun, who stated that although international (including US) pressure on Israel is increasing, neither side has fundamentally changed or achieved their main goals, therefore, "both Hamas and Israel are preparing for an even larger-scale round of the conflict."⁷⁵

Conclusion

Prior to the Hamas-led attack on Israel in October 2023, Chinese commentary on the Middle Eastern affairs and especially the Gulf region reflected an optimistic outlook, driven by significant diplomatic engagements such as President Xi Jinping's historic visit to Saudi Arabia in December 2022. This period was marked by a hopeful narrative on China's expanding role and influence in the region. The discourse highlighted a shift from traditional energy-centric relations to a broader scope of economic, cultural, political, and security ties. China's strategic diplomacy was praised for fostering deeper connections with GCC countries and beyond, amidst a landscape of declining American influence and the Middle East's exploration of new international partnerships.

However, the outbreak of violence following Hamas' attack dramatically shifted the tone of the Chinese media debate. The optimism gave way to a more cautious, if not pessimistic, outlook as the long-neglected Palestinian issue erupted into significant violence. This abrupt transition underscored a critical oversight in the initial positive projections on the region's future. Chinese commentators quickly recognized the Palestinian issue as a deeply rooted problem that could no longer be sidelined or ignored, highlighting the complex and volatile nature of Middle Eastern geopolitics.

The shift in narrative from optimism to caution underscores the challenges that lie in predicting and navigating the geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East. It also reflects China's attempts of positioning itself as a mediator seeking to address not just the symptoms but the underlying causes of regional conflicts.

⁷⁴ Jiāshā línshí tíngguǒ zhèng shì shēngxiào, Bā-Yǐ jìjiāng hùhuàn shǒu pī bèikòurényuán 20231124 | 《Jīnrì Guānzhù》 CCTV zhōngwén guójì 加沙临时停火正式生效 巴以即将互换首批被扣人员 20231124 | 《今日关注》 CCTV中文国际 [Temporary ceasefire in Gaza is officially coming into effect, Israel and Palestine to exchange the first group of prisoners], CCTV Chinese International, November 24, 2023, [link](#).

⁷⁵ Ibid.

IRAN

In last year's ChinaMed Report, we emphasized the emergence of China as a wedge issue within the Iranian media landscape. 2023 was no different as Tehran's increasing reliance on Beijing in economic and diplomatic affairs fueled intense debates in the Iranian press regarding China's role with respect to both Iran and the entire Middle East. Events like the Riyadh Summits, the reestablishment of relations with Saudi Arabia, the Hamas-led attack on Israel and the ensuing war in Gaza have further inflamed discussions among Iranian analysts and journalists on Chinese regional engagement's implications for Iran.

Concerns as Beijing Looks Toward Riyadh

Unsurprisingly, the Riyadh Summits of December 2022 ignited a heated debate in Iran. While the significant rapprochement between China and Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) did not come as a surprise to many Iranian analysts due to the extensive scope of Beijing's cooperation with Arab countries in infrastructure, trade, energy (including nuclear and renewable energy) and aerospace, there were differing perspectives on what this development entails for Iran.

According to Hamid Vafaei, a professor of Chinese Studies at Tehran University, this expansion of China's relations with Arab states and even Israel is conducive to Tehran's interests as it weakens the United States' influence and thus contributes to realigning the regional equilibrium in Iran's favor. Therefore, Vafaei endorsed Tehran's "Look East" policy, which seeks to strengthen ties with China and Russia at the expense of relations with the West. However, he also cautioned that the Islamic Republic's domestic challenges and its inability to effectively implement its agreements with China might hinder Iran from fully capitalizing on these developments.

Vafaei's point on declining American influence is commonly found among pro-government voices in Iran. This view can be seen in an article published by the Iranian official press agency IRNA, which also asserted that "Russia, China and Iran share a common project aimed at stemming the tensions and conflicts fueled by the West."⁷⁶

Many other commentators voiced their concerns more explicitly regarding the future of Sino-Iranian relations in the context of the Riyadh Summits. Scholars Mohammed Javad Qahremani and Hossein Siyahi, for instance, pointed out that deepening Sino-Saudi and Sino-Gulf relations could influence Beijing's attitude toward Iran, both as an economic partner/oil supplier and as a strategic partner.⁷⁷ Referring to the joint China-GCC statement issued at the conclusion of the Riyadh Summits, which allegedly sided with the United Arab Emirates regarding the territorial dispute over the three Iran-governed Gulf islands of Abu Musa, Greater Tunb and Lesser Tunb, a report by Etemad accused China of "pleasing one of its strategic partners at the expense of another," though its authors acknowledged that China's alignment toward the GCC was partly the product of Iran's international isolation.⁷⁸

Therefore, some Iranian commentators expressed reservations on their government's Look East policy. The joint statement issued at the Russia-GCC Ministerial meeting in Moscow in July 2023, which also addressed the territorial dispute between Iran and the United Arab Emirates, reminded journalists and diplomats of China's similar joint statement.⁷⁹ For some, China and Russia's apparent lackluster support for Iranian territorial integrity is an example of why "While we work with Russia and China, we must have relationships with Europe, the West and even the US, and this is the balancing act that will make not only the GCC, but also China and Russia pay more attention to their relationship with us."⁸⁰

While criticism of the Iranian government's decision to tie itself to an allegedly ambivalent China was once confined to more reformist-minded outlets, in February the conservative newspaper *Resalat* also published an article lamenting the lack of results from the Sino-Iranian 25-year strategic cooperation agreement signed in March 2021.⁸¹ The article expressed concern over the stagnation of Chinese investments in Iran while highlighting the boom in Sino-GCC trade (see Figures 1 and 2). Although mostly blaming Beijing's "bad partner" behavior on the United States' indifference toward reviving the JCPOA nuclear deal, the authors still called on Tehran to "work more on its economic and political diplomacy." Another article in *Iran*, the Iranian government's official newspaper, instead blamed the former government and the country's political divisions for the lack of progress in economic relations with China.⁸²

⁷⁶ Ta' amol-e Iran va Cin; kelid-e amniyat-e gharb-e Asya va Khalij-e Fars [Interaction between Iran and China: the key to the security of the Middle East and Persian Gulf], *IRNA*, May 6, 2023, [link](#).

⁷⁷ Sa' ide Sadat Fahri, Tehran va Pekan dar vaz' iyat-e napaydar [Tehran and Beijing in an unstable situation], *Donya-ye Eqtesad*, January 1, 2023, [link](#).

⁷⁸ Bedun-e barjam ejra-ye tavafoq-e 25-sale ba Cin momken nist [Without the JCPOA it is impossible to implement the 25-year agreement with China], *Etemad*, January 11, 2023, [link](#).

⁷⁹ Chera saast haa Chean w Rwsah, Aaran ra ghafiqar ma kend [Why do the policies of China and Russia surprise Iran?], *Ensfafnews*, July 16, 2023, [link](#).

⁸⁰ Fatima Kalantari, Khawmaanah Cheana w mnaf'e Aaran [China's Middle East and Iran's interests], *Hammihan*, July 16, 2023, [link](#).

⁸¹ Sherakat-e eqtesadi-e nakafi-e Iran va Cin [The inadequate Iran-China economic partnership], *Resalat*, February 1, 2023, [link](#).

⁸² Huseyn Rezavipur, Negah-e dogane-ye gharbgaraha-ye Iran dar bare-ye Cin [The dual position of Iran's pro-Westerners regarding China], *Iran*, February 14, 2023, [link](#).

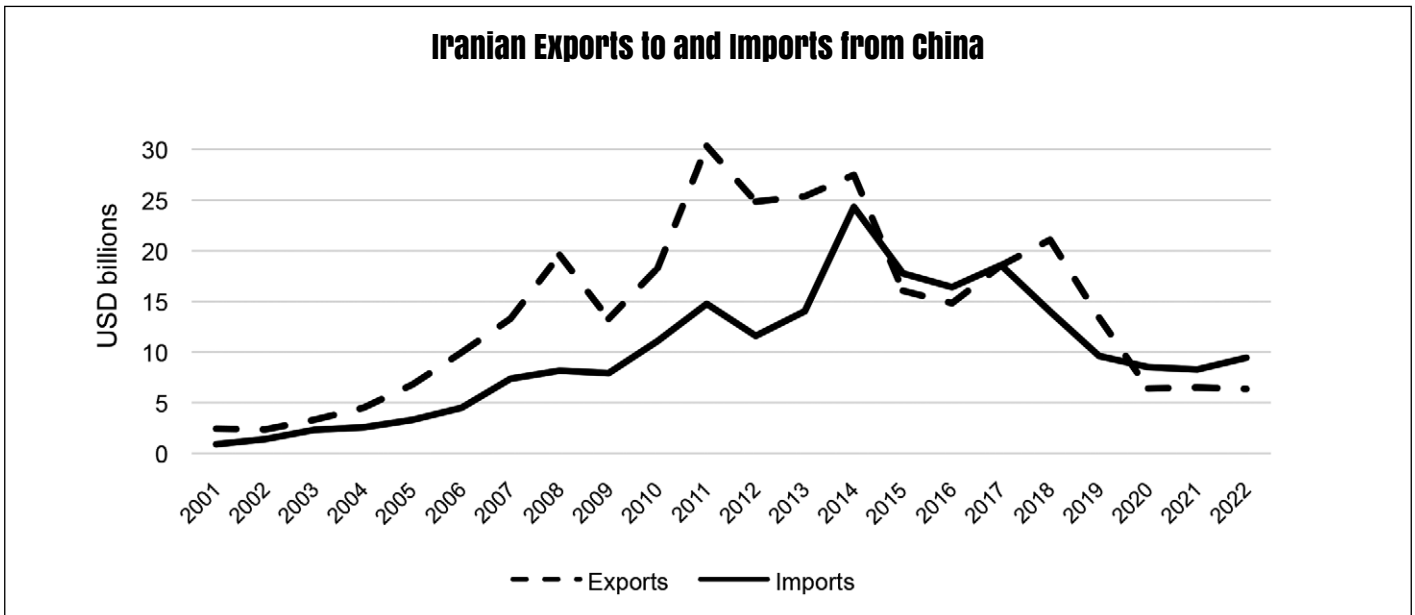


Figure 1 Prepared by the ChinaMed team. Data from: <https://www.chinamed.it/chinamed-data/middle-east/iran>.

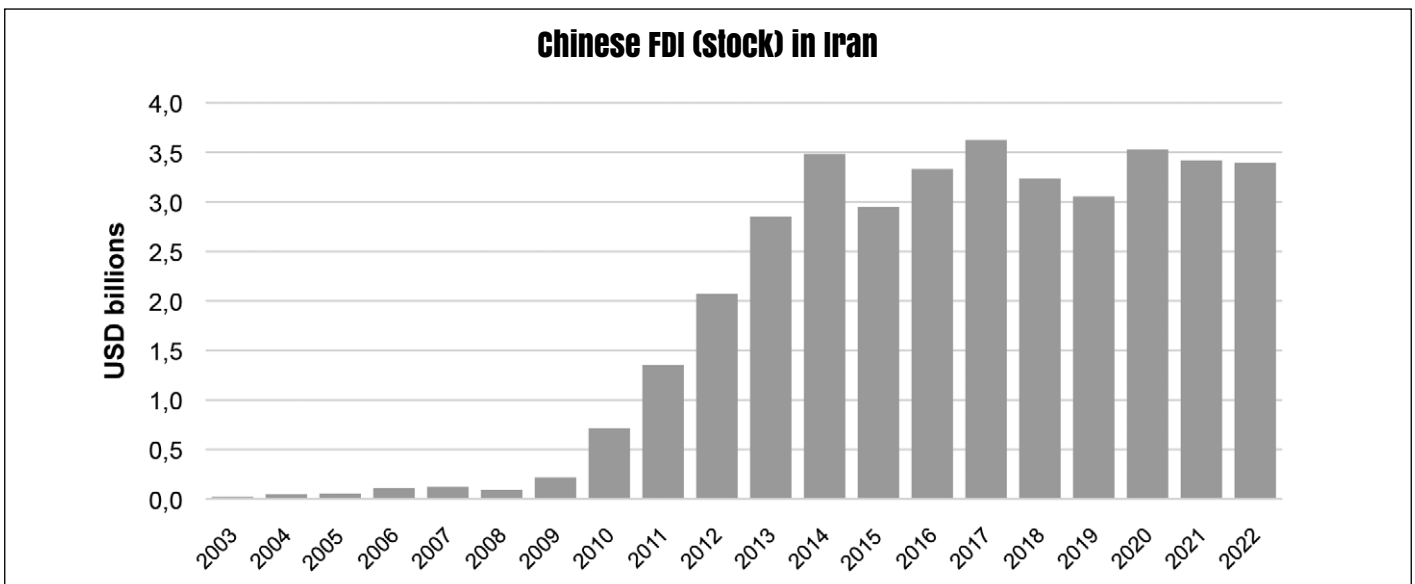


Figure 2 Prepared by the ChinaMed team. Data from: <https://www.chinamed.it/chinamed-data/middle-east/iran>.

However, the notion that Beijing was siding with Riyadh and the GCC over Tehran was dispelled when, in March 2023, China brokered the restoration of Saudi-Iranian diplomatic relations. This "Beijing Agreement" seemingly came as surprise to the Iranian press, which scrambled to understand the motivations behind the three actors involved.

Interviewed by reformist newspaper Etemad, the former ambassador to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation Mohammad Shariati-Dehaghan stated that "Iran was forced to accept China's mediation in this matter, because our only gateway to the outside world is China."⁸³ Shariati-Dehaghan pointed out that Beijing being the ruling conservative government's only powerful international partner is also why Tehran "was forced to remain silent against the harsh and anti-Iranian statements made in the China-GCC joint statement." Nevertheless, he was content with the agreement as "the step

taken in Beijing, despite all the weaknesses, shortcomings, delays, procrastination and costs, is a happy step" as it could potentially lead to resolving issues in Yemen, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.

Beyond discussions on foreign policy, the Iranian press has also sought to analyze the Beijing Agreement's potential tangible economic benefits. Kayhan Barzegar, the director of the Center for Middle East Strategic Studies, outlined that this development could offer an economic opportunity for Tehran⁸⁴. In particular, he argued that Beijing has switched to a "new model" of foreign policy in which geopolitical priorities are just as important as economic interests. As evidence, he pointed to China's approach to Ukraine: despite Russia being "a decaying and sanctioned power that has nothing to add to China," Beijing still supports Moscow due to geopolitical concerns. Given Iran's influence on Middle Eastern stability and

⁸³ Payamha-ye tavafoq-e Pekan نکب قفاوت یاه مایپ [Messages of the Beijing Agreement], Etemad, March 12, 2023, [link](#).

⁸⁴ Keyhan Bazargar, Cegune Iran-e tahrim-shode mitavanad ba Cin kar konad? [How can an Iran under sanctions work with China?], Donya-ye Eqtesad, April 4, 2023, [link](#).

its opposition to Western influence, Barzegar recommended Iranian policymakers pursue an active foreign policy aligned with Beijing's worldview that seizes the opportunities created by great power competition.

After October 7: Uncertainty

Following the Hamas-led attack on Israel on October 7 and the outbreak of the war in Gaza, many Iranian commentators considered whether the conflict marked the beginning of a new era for the region.⁸⁵ Meanwhile, there was much debate in the press on what should be Iran's course of action. While some advocated providing decisive support to Hamas, others instead proposed adopting a more cautious stance, arguing that Iran should limit its involvement to providing indirect support to Hamas and Hezbollah, thus avoiding a direct conflict and its repercussions.⁸⁶ In essence, Tehran should continue its policy of *jangha-ye kucak* ("small wars", i.e., proxy wars).⁸⁷

Against this background, Beijing's actions and statements were highly appreciated by both Tehran and the more pro-government media, which frequently shared and quoted official Chinese statements.⁸⁸ Similarly, China's opposition to American actions in support of Israel garnered significant attention. For example, the moderate *Khabar Online* published an article emphasizing how "when a group of high-level US senators traveled to Beijing to meet Xi, fundamental differences emerged between the two sides over whether Beijing would condemn Hamas."⁸⁹

That said, Iranian commentators, regardless of ideology, acknowledged that in reality Iranian and Chinese interests overlap only to a certain extent. For example, conservative politician Ali Motahari lamented that China and Russia should

adopt a more direct and intransigent attitude toward the Palestinian issue. According to him "Russia and China have an important role in this matter. Of course, the positions of these two countries have not been bad and they have supported the Palestinian people to some extent. Yet, considering their military power, they should have more influence."⁹⁰

However, other Iranian commentators have noted that such an outcome is improbable. According to Abdolreza Fajrad, former Iranian ambassador to Norway and professor of international politics, China remains closer to the Arab states than to Iran, largely due to their easily accessible natural resources. Consequently, China has aligned with the Arab states, preferring to keep its distance from supporting Hamas.⁹¹

A similar analysis was published by *Khabar Online*, which outlined how China could potentially benefit from the ongoing conflict because it "will have a destructive effect on the construction of the India-Middle East-Europe corridor, announced during the last G20 summit... This corridor, which is supposed to connect India to Europe via the Middle East, passes through Israel. Some observers even believe that it will be a competitor to China's Belt and Road initiative. Given recent events, it is unlikely that the plan for this corridor will be implemented."⁹²

Nevertheless, this article concluded by noting that "it is not only India, the United States and the countries of the region that are suffering due to the recent war. Rather, China, as an important and active actor in the Middle East region, will be damaged by it as well" China is one of the most important purchasers of Middle Eastern oil, so if the scope of the war in the region widens, the global oil market will also be disrupted, and this will be very costly for the Chinese economy, which is already facing significant challenges."⁹³

⁸⁵ Tars-e Āmrīkā az ehtemal vorud-e Irān be Jang-e Esrā'īl va Ghazeh [America's fear of the possibility of Iran entering the war between Israel and Gaza], *Ofoghtv*, October 21, 2023, [link](#).

⁸⁶ Jang-e Ghazeh; āyā Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Irān vāred-e meydān mishavad? [Gaza War; Will the Islamic Republic of Iran enter the field?], 8 am media, October 22, 2023, [link](#).

⁸⁷ Goftogu-ye Reuters ba 9 maqam-e Irani: Jomhuri-ye Eslami dar nahve modakhale dar Jang-e Hamas va Esra'il dachar-e sardargami ast [Reuters interview with 9 Iranian officials: The Islamic Republic is confused about how to intervene in the war between Hamas and Israel], *Euronews*, October 22, 2023, [link](#).

⁸⁸ Amirabdollahian: Amrika hadda'qal 2 baar dar jang-e Ghazah be Iran payam dadeh ast [China: We continue to strive for a just solution to the Palestinian issue], *IRNA*, October 24, 2023, [link](#); China: Isra'il dar Ghazah az mawzu'e difa' az khod tajavoz kardeh ast [China: Israel has violated the issue of self-defence in Gaza], *IRNA*, October 24, 2023, [link](#).

⁸⁹ Cherā Chīn va Amrīkā, bāzandegān-e bozorg-e Jang-e Ghazeh hastand? [Why are China and America the big losers of the Gaza war?], *Khabar Online*, October 16, 2023, [link](#).

⁹⁰ Ali Motahari: Agar Esra'il hamlah zemini kard, Iran ham niruhaye khod ra vared amal konad/ Rusiya va Chin vazifeye sangini darand/ Keshvarhaye Eslami be Filastin silah barsanand [Ali Motahari: If Israel launches a ground attack, Iran will also deploy its forces/Russia and China have a heavy duty/ Islamic countries should deliver weapons to Palestine], *Khabar Online*, October 15, 2023, [link](#).

⁹¹ Tin beh komak-e "Shi" az anza-ye beynolmelali kharaj shod [Putin got out of international isolation with the help of Xi], *Iranian News Labour Agency*, October 22, 2023, [link](#).

⁹² "Why are China and America the big losers of the Gaza war?", *Khabar Online*.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

Throughout 2023, Iranian commentators have navigated a turbulent sea of geopolitical shifts, with China's growing influence in the Middle East stirring both strategic optimism and cautious skepticism. From the Riyadh Summits in December 2022 to more recent diplomatic developments, the Iranian press has actively scrutinized Chinese maneuvers, pondering their implications for Iran's strategic posture and economic aspirations.

The media debate in the Islamic Republic reflects a nuanced understanding of international relations. Commentators viewed Beijing's engagements with Saudi Arabia and the GCC through a prism of opportunity and challenges. Some argued that China's expanding relations in the Middle East could indirectly benefit Tehran by weakening US hegemony. Others expressed concern over the potential sidelining of Iran in the face of Beijing's broader regional ambitions, cautioning against excessive reliance on China.

In conclusion, the Iranian press, despite its limited autonomy, has articulated a complex portrait of China's activities in the region, balancing strategic optimism with a critical eye toward the realities of international politics. The overarching narrative suggests a desire for a more balanced, diversified foreign policy approach that safeguards Iran's strategic interests while navigating the ever-shifting sands of Middle Eastern geopolitics.

IRAQ

Similarly to our observations in last year's ChinaMed Report, in 2023 most Iraqi commentators mainly discussed China in the context of Sino-Iraqi bilateral relations. However, unlike in previous years, the media portrayal of Beijing as a regional actor underwent a dramatic evolution, turning especially critical in reaction to Chinese actions, real or perceived, toward the conflict in Gaza.

Domestic Development and Regional Hopes

In line with their counterparts elsewhere in the Arab world, Iraqi analysts have displayed a keen interest in examining whether the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement could augur increased Chinese involvement in Middle Eastern diplomacy and security. However, most of them doubted that China could emerge as a powerful mediator. For example, an article published by the Iraqi newspaper *al-Sabaah* dismissed China's role hosting the Iranian and Saudi delegations as "another Chinese propaganda exercise."⁹⁴ This skepticism likely stems from Iraq's key role in earlier negotiations leading up to the final agreement reached in Beijing. Indeed, Mohammad Hassan al-Sa'adi underscored that it was Iraq, not China, that "served as the main sponsor that enabled Tehran and Riyadh to find common ground." He argued that Iraq rightfully deserves more credit for "making [Saudi-Iranian relations] calmer and more stable than before."⁹⁵

Nonetheless, official reports discussing Iraqi Interior Minister Abdul Amir al-Shammari's meetings with the ambassadors of Saudi Arabia and China suggest Baghdad looks favorably at Beijing's role as mediator. Discussions with the ambassadors reportedly touched upon "issues of mutual interest, in particular, security coordination and cooperation."⁹⁶

Moreover, other Iraqi commentators contended that China's diplomatic engagement in the region could also prove advantageous for Iraq's bilateral relations with Beijing. For example, economics expert Maladh al-Amin suggested that

the summits in Riyadh in December 2022 could further bolster the already flourishing Sino-Iraqi relationship, especially in the field of technology and knowledge transfer within the framework of the much-discussed "oil-for-reconstruction" agreement activated back in 2019.⁹⁷

Aliya Nassif, an MP with the State of Law Coalition, echoed similar sentiments, adding that the only path to rebuilding the country lies in implementing the aforementioned Iraqi-Chinese "oil-for-reconstruction" agreement, and by following the lead of "Arab countries, such as Saudi Arabia," that "are racing to side with China, defying American pressure."⁹⁸

That said, much of the media discussion continued to focus on the "oil-for-reconstruction" deal, reiterating many of the main themes that have been part of this debate since 2019. For instance, Fateh Abdel-Salam, editor-in-chief of *al-Zaman*, lamented that the country, regrettably, cannot "strategically benefit from China" due to widespread corruption and external pressure from the United States.⁹⁹

In this vein, Harith Hasan, a Senior Non-resident Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, writing for the independent newspaper *al-Mada*, criticized not the oil-for-reconstruction-agreement *per se*, but rather the confidence that several Iraqi political parties have placed in it.¹⁰⁰ In his opinion, since its signing, the agreement has been considered as a "certain promise to develop the country," as well as a means to reduce Baghdad's dependence on Washington. According to Hasan, this perspective is particularly prevalent among groups close to Iran, which have included upholding the deal with China as an important part of their political platform.

However, Hasan highlighted that China and Iraq already have strong economic relations (Figure 1). Baghdad ranks as Beijing's third-largest oil supplier globally, and Chinese energy companies like PetroChina and Sinopec have been active in Iraq for over a decade. As shown by ChinaMed Data (see Figure 1 in the section on Saudi Arabia), Iraq has been the region's second-largest energy supplier for the People's Republic for

⁹⁴ Hisham Dawud, *Al-Tasawwurat al-'alamiyya wa-al-'iraqiyya hawla al-wasata al-siniyya* [Global and Iraqi perceptions of Chinese mediation], *al-Sabaah*, April 19, 2023, [link](#).

⁹⁵ Mohammad Hassan al-Sa'adi, *hal istafad al-'iraq min al-istiqrar fi al-mintaqa?* [Has Iraq benefited from the stability in the region?], *al-Mada*, July 29, 2023, [link](#).

⁹⁶ Wazir al-dakhiliyya yabath ma'a safiray al-sa'udiya wa-al-sin al-tansiq wa-al-ta'awun al-'amani [Interior Minister discusses coordination and security cooperation with ambassadors of Saudi Arabia and China], *NINA News*, June 18, 2023, [link](#).

⁹⁷ *Iqtisadi li-NINA* : al-'amal bi-ittifaqiyat al-Sin al-iqtisadiya sayan 'akisu ijabiyan 'ala tabi'at al-'mal fi al-'Iraq [Economist to NINA : working through the Chinese economic agreements will reflect positively on the nature of Iraqi business], *NINA*, December 12, 2022, [link](#).

⁹⁸ 'Aliya Nasif : iradat dakhiliya wa-kharijiya tuqifu fi tariq ibram al-ittifaqiyat al-'iraqiyat al-siniyya [Aliya Nasif : domestic and foreign wills stand in the way of concluding the Sino-Iraqi agreement], *NINA*, December 9, 2022, [link](#).

⁹⁹ Fateh 'Abd al-Salam, *Al-Sin wa-l-Sa'udiya... wa-l-'Iraq* [China and Saudi Arabia... and Iraq], *al-Zaman*, December 9, 2022, [link](#).

¹⁰⁰ Harith Hassan, 'An al-ittifaqiyat al-siniyya [About the Chinese agreement], *al-Mada*, December 18, 2022, [link](#).

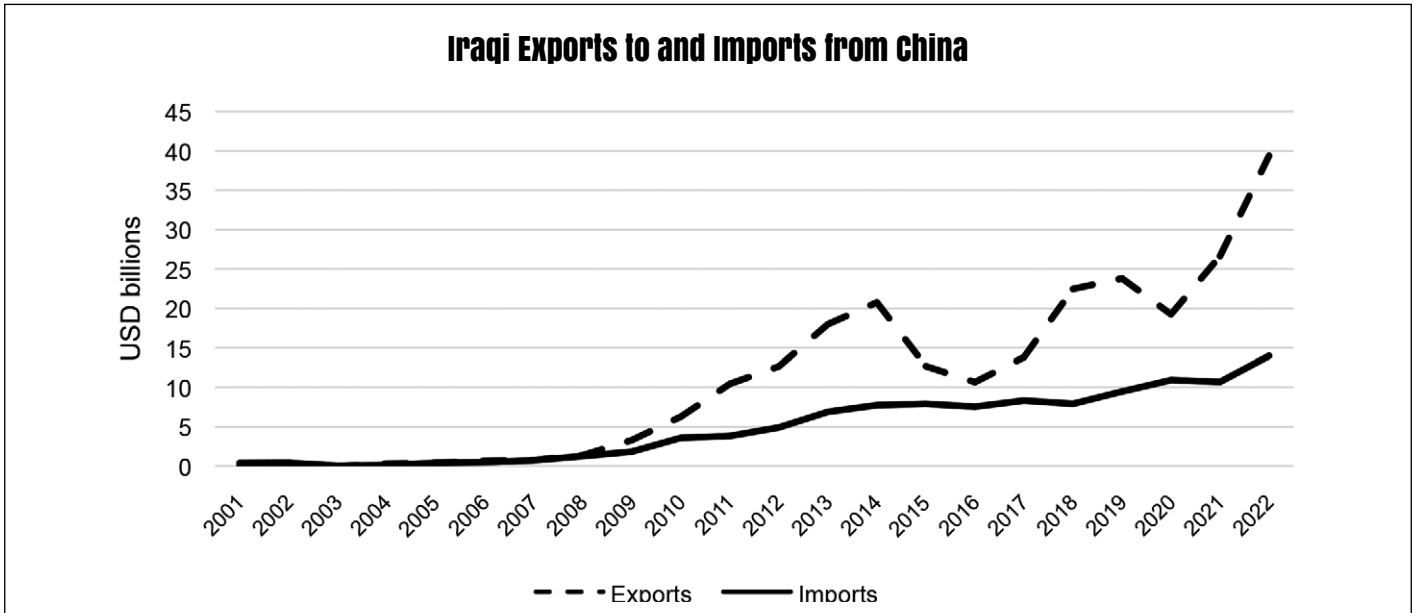


Figure 1 Prepared by the ChinaMed team. Data from: <https://www.chinamed.it/chinamed-data/middle-east/iraq>.

six consecutive years since 2017, with total exports reaching US\$39.1 billion in 2022.

Therefore, given China's weight in the Iraqi economy, with Chinese FDI in the country amounting to US\$1.9 billion in 2021 (Figure 2), the central issue for many analysts revolves around whether and how Chinese investments can genuinely contribute to Iraq's development. This question is especially crucial in the context of the withdrawal of many Western energy companies, prompting concern regarding the suitability of Iraq's political, security and economic environment. Hassan underlined in his report that this task befalls upon the Iraqi government and not the Chinese companies, concluding that the oil-for-reconstruction agreement and cooperation with China in general will only yield limited benefits without proper reforms.

This issue of "rentier culture," as raised by Hasan, can be found also in the views expressed by economist Abdul Salam Hassan, who was interviewed by *al-Hall*. Hassan also argued that new Chinese investments in Iraqi oil fields will not yield significant gains for Baghdad unless stricter regulations are implemented, including ensuring that more than 50% of the labor force in new projects is made up of Iraqis.¹⁰¹

Furthermore, there was also significant debate over the Central Bank of Iraq's decision to use the Chinese yuan instead of United States dollars in its commercial exchanges with China. In an interview for NINA, economist Raad Twigg expressed concerns that "the Chinese yuan could be manipulated to benefit the Chinese economy," potentially harming Iraqi oil and commodity exports to China.¹⁰² On the other hand, Nabil al-Marsoumi, a professor of economics at the University of

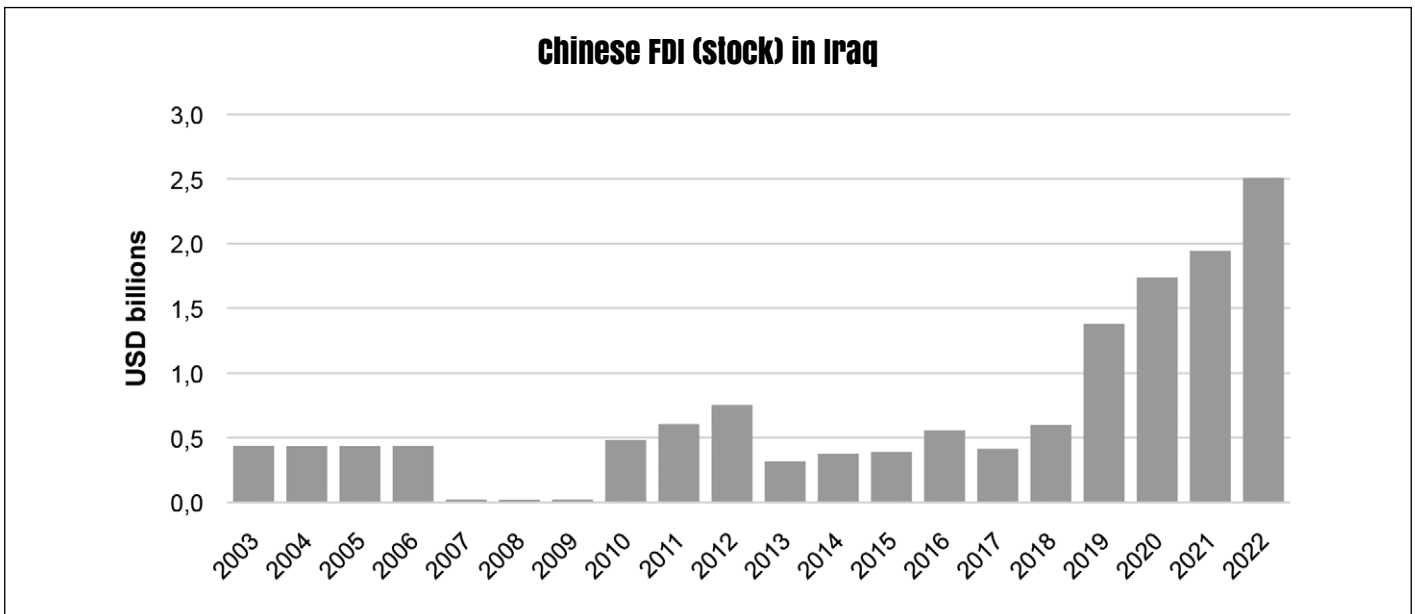


Figure 2 Prepared by the ChinaMed team. Data from: <https://www.chinamed.it/chinamed-data/middle-east/iraq>.

¹⁰¹ 'Abdallah Salam, Taharrukat al-Sin tujjah al-'Iraq... khutwa nahwa tawssi' at al-nufudh al-iqtisadi? ذوفنلا ةعسوت وحن قوطخ.. قارعل اجات نيصللا تالفرت [China's moves toward Iraq... a step toward expanding economic influence?], *al-Hall*, February 18, 2023, [link](#).

¹⁰² Iqtisadi yahdharu min istikhdam al-yuan fi al-tijarat al-'iraqiya ma'a as-Sin قارعل اجات نيصللا عم قارعل اجاتلا يف اناويل/ م ادخسترا نم رذحي يداصتقا [An economist warns against the use of yuan in Iraqi trade with China], NINA, February 27, 2023, [link](#).

Basra, offered a less alarmist take for the pan-Arab newspaper *I-Quds al-Arabi*, noting how other states, including Saudi Arabia, have already adopted similar measures.¹⁰³ However, al-Marsuomi also cautioned that using the Chinese yuan does not free Iraq from relying on the dollar, as oil, Iraq's primary export, remains priced in the American currency regardless.

After October 7: Turning Sour on China

Diverging from the reactions in other Arab countries, in Iraq the Hamas-led surprise attack against Israel on October 7 did not mark a turning point after which perceptions of China as a friendly power took even greater hold. On the contrary, Iraqi media published many articles featuring meaningful criticism of the Chinese response, citing ambiguity and a perceived self-interested stance.

Some Iraqi commentators even contended that China has an interest in seeing the war continue. According to Ammar Jallo, writing for *al-Hall*, "perhaps China is one of the most prominent countries that wishes—but does not declare—to prolong the war waged by Israel against Hamas."¹⁰⁴ For Jallo, China, as a rising power intent on reshaping the international order, benefits from how the conflict is undermining the US' global standing and is diverting attention away from Asia. Indeed, he suggested that "the repercussions of the war in Gaza have spread throughout the world, representing a political challenge to the West. This could contribute to its weakening, with many implications for the future of the international system, which China seeks to transform into a multipolar system. This is because it would allow it to emerge as a power similar to the US and establish new rules."¹⁰⁵

These suspicions are fueled by the discovery of Chinese-made weapons in use by Hamas and Hezbollah. As Muhammad al-'Isa posited in his article in *al-Hall*, "it turns out that Hamas has filled its arsenal with unconventional weapons, some of which are manufactured in countries thousands of miles away."¹⁰⁶ Al-'Isa also quoted Mustafa al-Zawati, a Palestinian researcher and reporter, on this pressing issue. According to al-Zawati, as Arab countries abandoned the Palestinian cause, "Hamas got close to Iran, Russia and, later on, China" to achieve a "qualitative improvement of its equipment, weapons, and military tactics."¹⁰⁷

However, Iraqi authors also believe that Beijing aims to contain the conflict, preventing it from escalating into a regional war. They argued that China is attempting to achieve this through its influence on Iran, as Beijing allegedly has always had a certain sway on the Iranians. Ramz al-Homsī

even titled his article on this topic "The decision on the war in Gaza is Chinese, not Iranian!" In this piece he argued that "the reduction in the support in Iranian media and among those who follow Iran for Hamas and the idea of entering into war against Israel is linked to an official request directly from the 'Eastern Alliance.'"¹⁰⁸ In particular, Al-Homsī added, Beijing fears the possible consequences of a regional conflict on its own already slowing economy.

Regarding the potential for Chinese mediation, Iraqi commentators have been just as critical. Ahmad Aboudouh characterized China's statements and declarations as just "smoke and mirrors" highlighting "the ambiguity of Chinese diplomatic language and the small amount of money provided to Gaza by a power considered the second-largest economy in the world."¹⁰⁹ Another commentator, Mustafa al-Zawati, also highlighted the lack of clarity and resoluteness in the Chinese position, arguing that "there is no active and direct Chinese role similar to that of Iran and Russia, and the actual Chinese role does not go beyond making general statements"¹¹⁰ like "advocating for calm and maintaining restraint."¹¹¹ Others made similar arguments but referred to Wang Yi's statements accusing the Israeli response of going "beyond the limits of self-defense."¹¹²

Conclusion

Reflecting on the insights of Iraqi journalists, the narrative on China's involvement in Middle Eastern affairs and its bilateral relations with Iraq presents a dichotomy in perspectives before and after the Hamas-led attack on Israel. Initially, discussions centered around the Riyadh Summits and the potential for Chinese mediation in regional disputes, revealing a blend of skepticism and acknowledgment of Iraq's crucial role in fostering regional dialogue, particularly in the case of the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement. The "oil-for-reconstruction" agreement epitomized the optimism tied to Sino-Iraqi relations, despite the challenges of corruption and external influence, highlighting a hope for leveraging international relationships to benefit Iraq's development.

Post-October 7, the discourse shifted in a more critical direction, revealing a negative stance toward China's ambiguous position on regional conflicts, particularly regarding the ongoing war in Gaza. Iraqi journalists expressed concerns over China's motivations, suggesting that it may desire a prolonged conflict to reshape the international order in its favor. Criticism extended to China's limited role in direct conflict mediation, contrasting the initial hope for more significant Chinese involvement in Middle Eastern diplomacy.

¹⁰³ Khabir 'iraqui yuqallilu min ahmiyat i' timad al-yuan fi at-ta' amul ma'a as-Sin «ناويلنا» دامت عايمها نم للقي يقار ع ريبخ [An Iraqi expert downplays the importance of adopting the yuan in the interactions with China], *al-Quds al-Arabi*, February 23, 2023, [link](#).

¹⁰⁴ 'Ammar Ğallū, al-ḥarb 'alā Gaza: istiṣmār Ṣīnī li-iqtihāmi al-ḡanūbi al-'alālamī! «تزرغ و لدع برحلا» [The war on Gaza: a Chinese investment to break into the Global South!], *al-Hall*, February 12, 2024, [link](#).

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Muḥammad al-'Iṣā, "āḡraqahā bi-s-salām": al-Ṣīn lā turīdu linār Gaza ān tanṭifi 'i? «السلاب احتقروغ» [“Sink it with weapons”: China does not want the Gaza fire to be extinguished?], *al-Hall*, February 7, 2024, [link](#).

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Rāmz al-Ḥamṣī, qarār al-ḥarb m'a Gaza ṣīnī ua laisa irānī! «اراق رارق عم برحلا رارق» [The decision on the war in Gaza is Chinese, not Iranian!], *al-Hall*, October 18, 2023, [link](#).

¹⁰⁹ Ğallū "The war on Gaza: a Chinese investment to break into the Global South!"

¹¹⁰ Al-'Iṣā, "“Sink it with weapons”: China does not want the Gaza fire to be extinguished?”

¹¹¹ al-Ṣīn tuḥaddiru min "duwāma intiḡām" fī al-Ṣarq al- Āwsa! «مقتنا قومود» نم رذحت نيصلنا [China warns of a "spiral of revenge" in the Middle East], *al-Zamān*, January 30, 2024, [link](#).

¹¹² Wazīr al-difā'a al-Isrā'īlī: naḥtarim kiyār Hezbollah fī ḍabṭ al-nafs «اراق رارق عم برحلا رارق» [Israeli Defense Minister: We respect Hezbollah's choice to exercise restraint], *al-Zamān*, October 15, 2023, [link](#).

ISRAEL

Last year's ChinaMed Report underscored how, despite persistent pressure from the United States urging Israel to distance itself from China, the Israeli media debate in 2022 remained rather polarized. Indeed, in past years, many Israeli voices advocated for a balanced approach, aimed at preserving technology cooperation, as well as bilateral trade and investment ties with Beijing. However, in 2023, concern that Chinese diplomatic engagement in the region was endangering Israeli national security led to strong and unanimous criticism of China becoming prevalent across the entire Israeli media ecosystem, especially in the wake of the Hamas-led surprise attack by Palestinian militants on October 7.

Hedging Amid the "Wave of Reconciliation"

Throughout the first half of 2023, as bilateral trade relations continued to intensify (Figure 1), concerns emerged regarding

the risks associated with ties to China, especially connected to electric vehicle imports and collaboration in high-technology sectors—likely contributing to the Israel-China Free Trade Agreement's current state of limbo.¹¹³ Moreover, over the course of the year, there was growing apprehension of China's diplomatic efforts in the Middle East.

Nevertheless, at the outset of 2023, the Israeli press expressed little worry for Beijing's regional engagement, including the China-brokered rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran announced in March.¹¹⁴ While many analysts elsewhere in the region viewed this "Beijing Agreement" as undermining Israel's hopes of normalizing its relations with Saudi Arabia and forming an anti-Iranian coalition with the Gulf states, several Israeli commentators remained confident that Tel Aviv's budding cooperation with Riyadh was not at risk.¹¹⁵ A few even argued that in this evolving regional context Israel should go beyond its "special relationship" with the United States and strengthen its strategic relations with China.¹¹⁶

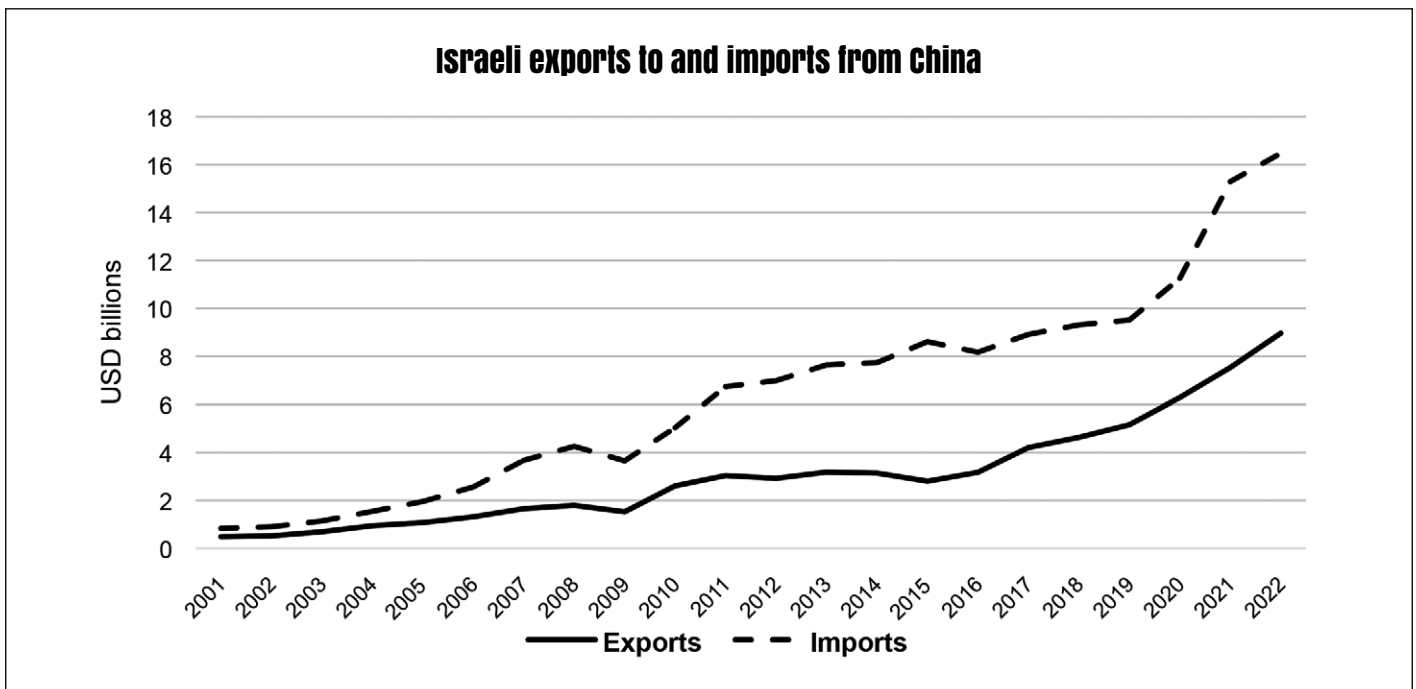


Figure 1 Prepared by the ChinaMed team. Data from: <https://www.chinamed.it/chinamed-data/middle-east/israel>.

¹¹³ Daniel Shamil, Kol Shavua Mushak Motag Hadash: Kakh Hechal Hashitafon Hasini Bashuk Harkev Hayisraeli לש קושב בכרה ילארשיה לכ עובש קשומ קשומ [Every week a new brand is launched: this is how Chinese cars flooded the Israeli market], *The Marker*, January 1, 2023, [link](#).

¹¹⁴ Zalman Shuval, היסודות של "סין" כראשית דבר [The trend of "China as top priority" should influence Israel's strategic planning], *Maariv*, January 16, 2023, [link](#).

¹¹⁵ Ron Ben-Yishai, Washington Safga Stirat Lekhi Nosefet MiSaudia הידועם [Washington received another slap in the face from Saudi Arabia], *Ynet*, March 10, 2023, [link](#).

¹¹⁶ Anat Hochberg-Marom, HaYim HaTivukh HaSini Ben Saudia LeYiran Yeshane Et HaMizrah HaTikhon יב יניסה [Will the Chinese mediation between Saudi Arabia and Iran change the Middle East?], *Maariv*, March 11, 2023, [link](#).

Indeed, most Israeli analysts concluded that China's *de facto* position of "pro-Palestinian neutrality" was not due to animosity toward Israel, but rather because of China's strategic considerations vis-à-vis the United States. Ori Sela, from Tel Aviv University's Department of East Asian Studies, posited that Beijing's actions and rhetoric are "supposed to make the Arab and Muslim world feel that China is on its side," "attack the US by presenting it as a colonialist and hegemonic power," and help the People's Republic "position itself as part, or leader of the so-called 'Global South'."¹²⁷

Furthermore, there was a prevailing consensus that Beijing harbored no love for Hamas, with many Israeli China experts taking to the press to explain what they deemed "China's shameful position."¹²⁸ For example, geopolitics analyst Anat Hochberg-Marom clarified that "China's leadership abhors Hamas, abhors radical Islam and murderous terrorism. In its geostrategic and long-term view, [Beijing] does not identify with or support Hamas."¹²⁹ Furthermore, there was a prevailing consensus that Beijing harbored no love for Hamas, with many Israeli China experts taking to the press to explain what they deemed "China's shameful position."¹²⁸ For example, geopolitics analyst Anat Hochberg-Marom clarified that

"China's leadership abhors Hamas, abhors radical Islam and murderous terrorism. In its geostrategic and long-term view, [Beijing] does not identify with or support Hamas."¹²⁹

There was much more debate on whether China could act as a mediator, with some suggesting that Beijing could play a crucial role in restraining Iran and preventing the conflict from escalating into a regional war—a move that aligns with China's strategic interests, particularly concerning energy security.¹³⁰ In this context, certain Israeli commentators proposed that Tel Aviv should actively nurture its relations with Beijing and involve China prominently in diplomatic efforts to secure the release of Israeli hostages in Gaza and end the conflict.¹³¹

However, others, including Galia Peres Bar-Nathan of Hebrew University's Department of International Relations, emphasized the limits of Beijing's mediation capacity. Despite China's regional economic interests, particularly its investments in Israel and elsewhere in the region (Figure 2), Iranian-backed groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas "can also possess a certain degree of independence" and, thus, may "not necessarily always do what the Iranians say."¹³²

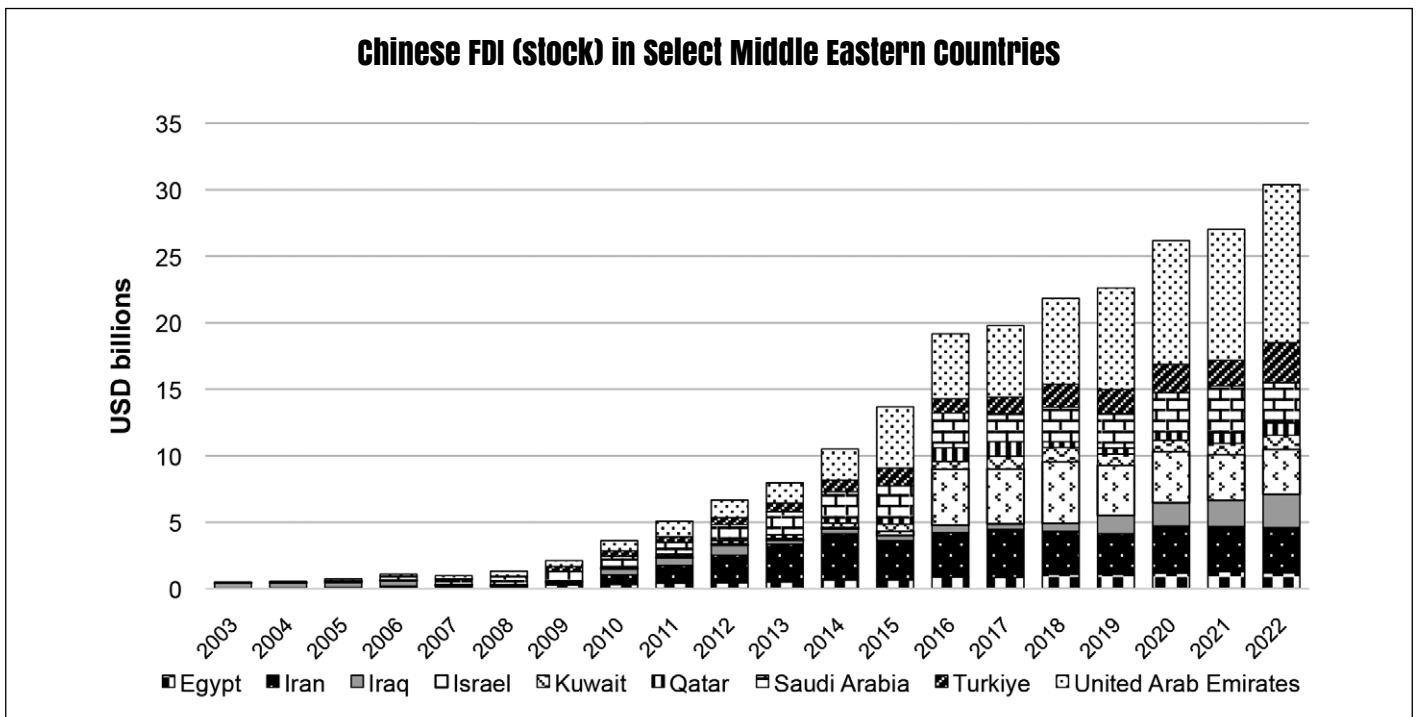


Figure 2 Prepared by the ChinaMed team. Data from: <https://www.chinamed.it/chinamed-data/middle-east/>.

¹²⁷ Ori Sela, HaMiskhak HaGeo-Astrategi Shel Sin: Tomekhet BaFalastinim Yim Mar'it Ain Shel Netraliyut ואיגה-יגטרסטא [China's geostrategic game: supporting the Palestinians with the appearance of neutrality], *Globes*, November 4, 2023, [link](#).

¹²⁸ Yoav Karni Sin Khogegat Et HaKhazon HaGlobali Shela, VeMitna'eret Melsrael תרענתמו לארשימ [China celebrates its global vision, and renounces Israel], *Globes*, October 19, 2023, [link](#).

¹²⁹ Anat Hochberg-Marom, Sin Menasa Lemanev Et HaMilkhama LeYir'ur HaHegemonia HaAmerikanit BeMizrah HaTikhon | Dr. Anat Hochberg Marom חרמב ונחיתה | ד"ר תנע גרבכוה סורמ [China is trying to leverage the war to undermine American hegemony in the Middle East – Dr. Anat Hochberg-Marom], *Maariv*, October 27, 2023, [link](#).

¹³⁰ Sakhkanit Merkazit Nosefet: Madua Sin Kol Kakh Mud'egat MeHaMilkhama Ben Israel LeHamas עודמ [Another key player: Why is China so worried about the flare-up between Israel and Hamas?], *Maariv*, October 19, 2023, [link](#).

¹³¹ Eran Nitzan, Sin Eina Me'unyenet BeMilkhama Kolelet VeAf Yakhola Limnoa Hit'arvut Yiranit תללוכ [China is not interested in an all-out war and can even prevent Iranian intervention], *The Marker*, October 17, 2023, [link](#).

¹³² Hila Weissberg, HaKhokeret SheMenasa Lehasbir: Ma HaSikui SheTifrotz Milkhemet Olam Shelishit? תמחלמ מלווע תישילש תרקווחה הסנמש ריבסהל: [The researcher who tries to explain: what is the chance that a third world war will break out?], *Globes*, November 3, 2023, [link](#).

Regardless of this debate, the Israeli press universally voiced concern over the portrayal of the conflict in Chinese media.¹³³ This apprehension was exacerbated by the prevalence of anti-Semitic content on Chinese internet platforms and a subsequently debunked rumor purporting that Israel was removed from online maps in China.¹³⁴ Tech reporter Ofir Dor hypothesized that this anti-Israeli "propaganda" might be getting disseminated with governmental approval, given the stringent monitoring of Chinese websites.¹³⁵

Conclusion

While Tel Aviv's balanced position amid the growing rivalry between China and the US was already widely discussed in the Israeli media, China's diplomatic engagement in the Middle East in 2023 became an increasingly concerning issue in Israel. Given the high importance Israelis place on national security, China helping Iran escape its pariah status sparked debate on whether it is appropriate to further strengthen ties with Beijing, especially considering the cold relations between Netanyahu and the Biden administration.

However, the October 7 attack and the subsequent war in Gaza put an end to such discussions as China's "pro-Palestinian neutrality" led to outrage across the Israeli media ecosystem. While Israeli analysts and experts took to the press to elucidate the reasons behind Beijing's stance, with some arguing that the People's Republic could play a role in at least restraining Iran, our analysis reveals that China is facing a public opinion crisis in Israel, not helped by rising cases of anti-Semitism on the Chinese internet.

Considering the growing global indignation toward Israel regarding its conduct toward civilians in Gaza, which has prompted South Africa to submit a case at the International Court of Justice accusing Tel Aviv of committing genocide, it is highly unlikely that China, which seeks to strengthen its position among Middle Eastern and Global South countries, will change its critical stance on Israel any time soon. Consequently, it is increasingly probable that Beijing's reputation in the Israeli media will continue to deteriorate in the months to come.

¹³³ Vicky Auslander, HaGeopolitica Bal'a Et Khevrot HaTekhologia היגולונטה תורב תא העלב הקיטילופואיגה [Geopolitics has engulfed the technology companies], Calcalist, November 5, 2023, [link](#); Ofir Dor, HaShem Israel Ne'elam MeSherutei HaMapot HaMovilim BeSin תופמה יתרישמ מלענ לארשי משה [The name Israel has disappeared from the leading map services in China], *The Marker*, October 31, 2023, [link](#).

¹³⁴ For clarification on the online map issue see: Wang Zichen & Jia Yuxuan, Did China recently remove Israel's name from its maps?, *Pekingology*, November 1, 2023, [link](#).

¹³⁵ Dor, "The name Israel has disappeared from the leading map services in China."

SAUDI ARABIA

Picking up from where last year's ChinaMed Report left off, Chinese President Xi Jinping's state visit to Riyadh in December 2022 was seen by Saudi analysts as underscoring the recent marked improvement in Saudi-China ties and signaling the start of a new phase in bilateral relations. This renewed and robust partnership achieved a significant diplomatic breakthrough in March 2023 when China successfully mediated the restoration of Saudi-Iranian diplomatic relations. Consequently, the narrative depicting China as an important and amicable regional player gained further prominence in the Saudi press, particularly in the aftermath of the Hamas-led surprise attack against Israel on October 7.

From the Riyadh Summits to the Beijing Agreement

Following the summits held in Riyadh during Xi's state visit in December, Saudi observers expressed widespread enthusiasm for the recent deepening of Sino-Saudi and Sino-GCC relations, predicting that stronger ties with China would enhance the Kingdom's global standing. There seemed to be consensus among commentators that these diplomatic developments hint that the Kingdom is proactively seeking to broaden its relationship with its largest trading partner beyond the economic sphere, as it strives to pursue a more independent

foreign policy vis-à-vis Washington and find alternative partners beyond its traditional American security ally.¹³⁶

For example, Faheem Al-Hamid articulated in *al-Riyadh* his view that the Riyadh Summits marked the beginning of "a new era of independence" for Saudi Arabia and the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, whose economies are now "more connected to China than ever before" through trade and the export of oil.¹³⁷ ChinaMed Data (Figure 1) reveals that in 2022, Saudi Arabia ranked as Beijing's top oil supplier in the Gulf and worldwide with energy sales reaching a record high of US\$65.8 billion. In light of China's heavy reliance on its Gulf partners to meet its domestic energy needs and the substantial economic benefits of this relationship, Al-Hamid was confident that Arab Gulf countries would be able to strike a balance between China and the United States while at the same time prioritizing their own economic and security interests.

However, lingering questions persisted regarding the credibility and viability of Beijing's aspirations to serve as an alternative security guarantor for the region. Despite American retrenchment, most Arab commentators from the Gulf concurred that both the US and China would maintain their presence in the Middle East, with Washington acting as the primary security provider and Beijing focusing on trade and investment.

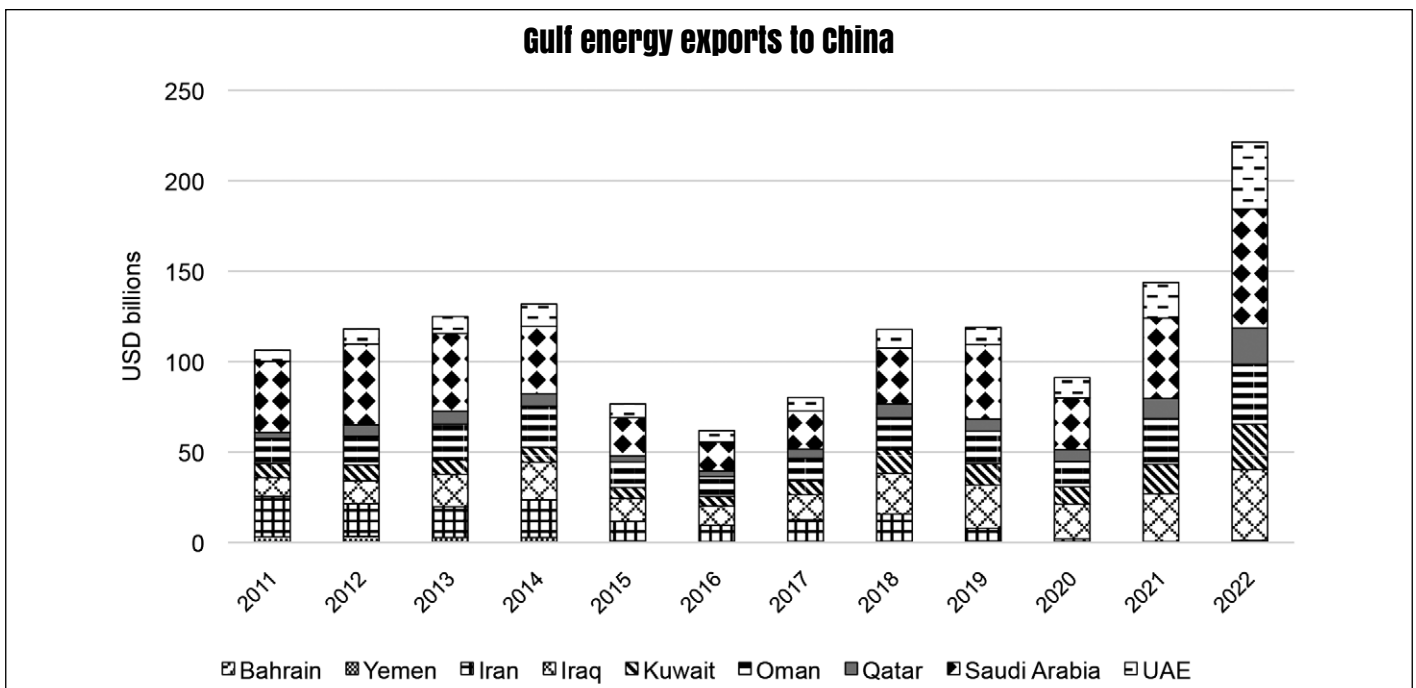


Figure 1 Prepared by the ChinaMed team. Data from: <https://www.chinamed.it/chinamed-data/middle-east>.

¹³⁶ Al-Sa'udiya wa-l-Sin... hudud al-shiraka fi 'alam mudtarab [Saudi and China... limits of partnership in a turbulent world], *al-Jazeera and Asbab*, December 23, 2022, [link](#).

¹³⁷ Faheem Al-Hamid, Qimam al-Riyadh asasat li-haqbat istiqlaliya [The Riyadh Summits established an era of independence], *al-Riyadh*, December 15, 2022, [link](#).

Nonetheless, following the reconciliation between Riyadh and Tehran—an apparent diplomatic victory for China over the traditional conflict mediator in the region, the United States—intense discussions erupted in Saudi media. Analysts sought to understand China's motivations for inserting itself in Middle Eastern politics in a manner previously unseen and this development's potential implications for the region.

In Okaz, Ahmad al-Jumay'a posited that China's intervention stems from its perception of "the countries of the Middle East—Saudi Arabia and Iran in particular—not only as oil suppliers, but also as important allies participating in the New Silk Road, which was and will be China's economic and cultural objective in the region and the world."¹³⁸ He suggested that Beijing aims to expand its diplomatic influence in the region beyond the just the economic sphere and gain a greater geopolitical role. This shift would allow China to foster a stable regional environment conducive to safeguarding its economic interests along the Belt and Road Initiative, of which both Riyadh and Tehran are signatories.

Other commentators from the Kingdom and the rest of the GCC writing for *al-Riyadh*, such as the Emirati political analyst Salem Al Ketbi, instead emphasized the political symbolism of the Beijing-hosted agreement. They contrasted China's diplomatic success with the rapid decline of America's popularity and influence in the region in the wake of the 2011 Arab Spring.¹³⁹ In particular, Saudi columnist Ali al-Khashibani observed China's "political speed and flexibility" and assurance not to interfere in other countries' internal affairs as formidable comparative advantages *vis-à-vis* the US.¹⁴⁰ These factors also allegedly enable Beijing to better provide the development opportunities the region needs.

In her analysis, Bina al-Mulhim portrayed the so-called "Beijing Agreement" as a Saudi diplomatic achievement first and foremost. While still acknowledging China's expanding global and regional influence, al-Mulhim emphasized how the China-brokered rapprochement "revealed that Saudi decisions are based on Saudi interests only and did not take into consideration the position of any other country."¹⁴¹ Such assertions lend credence to the thesis that Beijing was "selected" as mediator by the Kingdom to send a message to Washington in the attempt to receive greater US security concessions.

It is worth noting that these perspectives were published in *al-Riyadh*, which has emerged as the most active Saudi news outlet discussing the impact of US-China tensions on the region. Given that this newspaper is purportedly under the control of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, it suggests

a willingness within the Saudi establishment to present a positive narrative surrounding its relations with China, while bolstering their country's own international status. Other commentators in the Middle East, observing the development of Sino-Saudi relations, have expressed even greater certainty regarding future cooperation between Beijing and Riyadh, and have similarly adopted the notion that China's rise in the region is detrimental to the interests of the United States.

For example, one can easily come across articles with dramatic titles like "Has the end of the American century in the Middle East started?" penned by Mohammed Kharrub for the Jordanian government-owned newspaper *Al Ra'i*,¹⁴² or "A new Saudi slap to Washington" the American era in the Middle East ends?" written by journalist Jad Fayyad for the Lebanese *al-Nahar*.¹⁴³ In line with his article's title, Fayyad argued that "the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement and the supposed military calm in the Gulf region under Chinese guarantee will force Washington's retirement from its security role... thus making the US lose its political, economic and security influence."

Following the same trend, Israeli media also displayed increased interest in the rise of Chinese influence. Journalist Udi Etsion hypothesized that Saudi Arabia's interest in acquiring Chinese fighter jets and advanced weapons systems indicate that the Kingdom is attempting to reduce its technical and political dependence on the US, with the possible goal of obtaining American approval for purchasing F-35 stealth fighter jets and for the ability to enrich uranium.¹⁴⁴

After October 7: A Just Power

China's response to the Hamas-led attack on Israel on October 7 appears to have enhanced its appeal as a partner in the Kingdom. Indeed, Saudi journalists, who have been closely monitoring the statements from Chinese and Western officials, have increasingly adopted a critical stance toward the so-called "colonial" West and international organizations like the UN, accused of being ineffective. Conversely, there has been a positive perception of Chinese (and Russian) mediation efforts. Consequently, Saudi media have highlighted China as a crucial actor to involve in order to find a solution to the war raging in Gaza.

Indeed, Saudi analysts enthusiastically reported on Beijing's position, quoting various official statements. One that garnered significant traction in Saudi media was from Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi, who described

¹³⁸ Ahmad al-Jumay'a, Tariq al-harir fi itifaq al-sa'udi al-irani «ريرحل قيرط» [The Silk Road in the Saudi-Iranian agreement], *Okaz*, March 15, 2023, [link](#).

¹³⁹ Salem al-Katabi, Rihlat al-su'ud al-sini [The rise of China], *al-Riyadh*, April 4, 2023, [link](#).

¹⁴⁰ 'Ali al-Khashibani, Al-tanafus al-amiriki al-sini wa-l-furas al-siyasiya fi al-sharq al-awsat [The Sino-American rivalry and political opportunities in the Middle East], *al-Riyadh*, January 16, 2023, [link](#).

¹⁴¹ Bina al-Mulhim, Iran fi zhil itifaqiyat al-taqat al-sa'udiyyat al-siniya [Iran in light of confidence agreement between Saudi Arabia and China], *al-Riyadh*, March 15, 2023, [link](#).

¹⁴² Muhammad Kharrub, Hal bada't nihayat al-qarn al-'amriki min al-sharq al-awsat? [Has the end of the American century in the Middle East started?], *Al Ra'i*, May 14, 2023, [link](#).

¹⁴³ Jad Fayyad, "Safha" sa'udiyya jadida li-washington... al-'asr al-amriki fi al-sharq al-awsat yantahi? [A new Saudi slap to Washington... the American era in the Middle East ends?], *al-Nahar*, April 10, 2023, [link](#).

¹⁴⁴ Udi Etsion, Divuakh: Mitsraim Menahelit Mum LeRehishat HaLavi HaSini [Report: Egypt is conducting negotiations for the purchase of the Chinese "Lavi"], *Walla!* May 31, 2023, [link](#).

the Israeli military response as "collective punishment" going "far beyond the limits of self-defense."¹⁴⁵ The same holds true for the statements of a Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs' spokesperson according to which "China always stands on the side of justice and truth, denouncing and opposing all actions that harm civilians and violate international law. China is committed to working with the international community to help stop the fighting and ensure the safety of civilians, expand humanitarian work to prevent the catastrophe from worsening, and fight to reach a just and lasting settlement of the Palestinian issue."¹⁴⁶

Considering the importance Arab states have recently been giving the Palestinian cause in their international relations, Saudi analysts viewed the approach adopted by Chinese government as functional in resolving hostilities. For instance, Sadaqa Fadil characterized China's position toward the Gulf region as a "friendly policy" that is "conscious of the just Palestinian cause."¹⁴⁷ Similar considerations were expressed by Samir Atallah, who defined Chinese actions in response to the war in Gaza as "right and fair."¹⁴⁸

Those expressing these views often also emphasized that China was "the first non-Arab to recognize the Palestine Liberation Organization" and has consistently offered robust "support for Arab issues, particularly the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people."¹⁴⁹ Referring to more recent events, Saudi authors also highlighted the importance of 2016, when Beijing issued its Arab Policy Paper, declaring its support for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state based on 1967 borders. Additional declarations reinforced this narrative as they affirmed that "the Palestinian cause is considered at the core of the Middle East issue and concerns long-term peace and stability in the region, and concerns equity and international justice."¹⁵⁰

Against this background, analysts noted a significant shift in Chinese policy toward the Gulf region. As underscored by Fouad Matar in an article published in the Saudi-owned newspaper *Asharq Al-Awsat*, China's "soft intervention stabilizes relations between major and secondary stakeholders, rather than relying on military bases and blunt actions."¹⁵¹ Similarly Samir Atallah suggested that "the world will see China in a new role" as a new "just mediator" in the region.¹⁵²

Indeed, Saudi newspapers have lauded Beijing's stance and its efforts, particularly in achieving the temporary ceasefire

of November 2023. Additionally, Saudi media reported on the statement issued by the Permanent Representative of China to in the UN, expressing concerns about a potential regional escalation and urging the members of the UN Security Council to "take a more urgent approach by sending a message calling for a ceasefire."¹⁵³ Similarly, they covered Xi Jinping's remarks during the BRICS extraordinary virtual summit on the Palestinian-Israeli issue, emphasizing the importance of a ceasefire and a "just solution to the Palestinian cause" to achieving "lasting peace and stability in the Middle East."¹⁵⁴

In response to Xi's statements, some Saudi authors expressed support for the Chinese President's vision, suggesting that "the international orderly shift to the multipolar system is in the interest of Arabs as a nation... this could facilitate the dissolution of the dominance of hostile poles by creating the possibility of cautiously seeking help from other poles."¹⁵⁵

Conclusion

The deepening diplomatic ties between Saudi Arabia and China, underscored by the landmark mediation that led to the restoration of Saudi-Iran relations, marked a significant shift in the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. This development reflects Saudi Arabia's strategic pivot toward diversifying its international partnerships and asserting a more independent foreign policy, moving beyond traditional economic ties and seeking a balanced approach amidst great power competition.

The Saudi media's enthusiastic response to the Beijing Agreement underscores how analysts within the Kingdom perceive to benefit from this realignment, through both economic integration with China's global ambitions, as well as through Beijing's nuanced approach to regional security dynamics. Furthermore, the role of China as a mediator in the Middle East is seen as introducing a new dimension to regional diplomacy, with Saudi analysts highlighting Beijing's expanding influence and the potential for a multipolar world order. This realignment is seen not only as a diplomatic achievement for Saudi Arabia but also as a possible broader recalibration of alliances and interests within a rapidly changing global context.

¹⁴⁵ al-Şīn: Isra'īl tamārisu «al-'uqābu al-ġamā'ī» fī Ġaza [China: Israel exerts «collective punishment» in Gaza], *Okaz*, October 15, 2023, [link](#).

¹⁴⁶ Samir Atallah, al-uasīf al-nazīhu [The Fair Mediator], *Asharq Al-Awsat*, November 3, 2023, [link](#).

¹⁴⁷ Sadaqa Fadil, hal satad'amu al-Şīn fī lan qaḍātan al-umma al-'arabīa al-'adīla?! [Will China really support the just causes of the Arab nation?!], *Okaz*, January 28, 2024, [link](#).

¹⁴⁸ Atallah, "The Fair Mediator."

¹⁴⁹ Fadil, "Will China really support the just causes of the Arab nation?!"

¹⁵⁰ Wang Zhimin, al-musāhimatu bi-l-ḥulūli al-Şīniyati li-taḥqīq al-āmin al-istiqrār fī minṭaqati al-Şarq al-Āusaṭ [Contributing with Chinese solutions to achieve security and stability in the Middle East region], *Okaz*, December 26, 2023, [link](#).

¹⁵¹ Fouad Matar, Şīn al-qalqi al-dā'im... ua al-tadaḫul al-nā'im [China of constant concern... and the soft intervention], *Asharq Al-Awsat*, January 21, 2023, [link](#).

¹⁵² Atallah, "The Fair Mediator."

¹⁵³ al-Şīn taḥaḍḍiru min imtidād al-şirā'ī... Guterres: Ġaza maqbara li-l-ātfāl [China warns of prolonged conflict... Guterres: Gaza Children's Cemetery], *Okaz*, November 6, 2023, [link](#).

¹⁵⁴ al-ra'īsāni al-rūsī ua al-şīnī iad'uāni liuaqīf faūrī li-iṭlāq al-nār fī Ġaza [Russian and Chinese Presidents call for immediate ceasefire in Gaza], *Okaz*, November 21, 2023, [link](#).

¹⁵⁵ Sadaqa Fadil, mulahḥaş 'aām limā iagūrī bi-l-minṭaqa min taşāra'a duwalī [General summary of the region's ongoing international conflict], *Okaz*, December 17, 2023, [link](#).

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

In 2023, the media in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) closely followed several significant regional developments, notably the implications of the December 2022 Riyadh Summits and the restoration of Saudi-Iranian diplomatic relations. These events, characterized by China's active involvement, sparked discussions among Emirati analysts regarding their implications for regional stability, international alliances, and Abu Dhabi's multifaceted relations with Beijing and Washington. While China's role in the region was viewed mostly positively, especially in light of Beijing's perceived pro-Arab response to the Hamas-led attack on Israel on October 7 and the ensuing war in the Gaza Strip, concerns lingered regarding whether Chinese rhetoric could translate into concrete action.

Reflecting on China's Role in the Gulf

The UAE have significant reason to pay close attention to Beijing's increased involvement in Middle Eastern affairs. The Emirates are China's third-largest energy supplier from the region (after Saudi Arabia and Iraq) with their energy exports to the People's Republic amounting to a record US\$36.9 billion in

2022—an 88% increase with respect to 2021 (Figure 1). Moreover, the country has become the region's foremost destination for Chinese foreign direct investment, with a recorded stock of US\$11.9 billion in 2022, more than double any other country in the Middle East (Figure 2).

In addition, China's budding partnership with Iran may impact the ongoing dispute over the islands of Abu Musa, Greater Tunb and Lesser Tunb in the Strait of Hormuz, which Abu Dhabi regards as part of its sovereign territory under illegal Iranian occupation. During the first China-GCC Summit held in December 2022, the final joint statement called for "bilateral negotiations" to resolve this territorial issue. While Tehran and the Iranian press were outraged by Beijing apparently challenging Iran's territorial integrity, media in the UAE seemingly did not pay much attention to this specific issue.

Indeed, when discussing the Riyadh Summits, Emirati analysts tended to approach issues from a broader perspective, emphasizing the importance of multilateralism and diversifying alliances for the region. Ahmad Mustafa, writing for the Emirati newspaper *Al Khaleej*, pointed out that policies of diversification are only natural for countries that are trying to

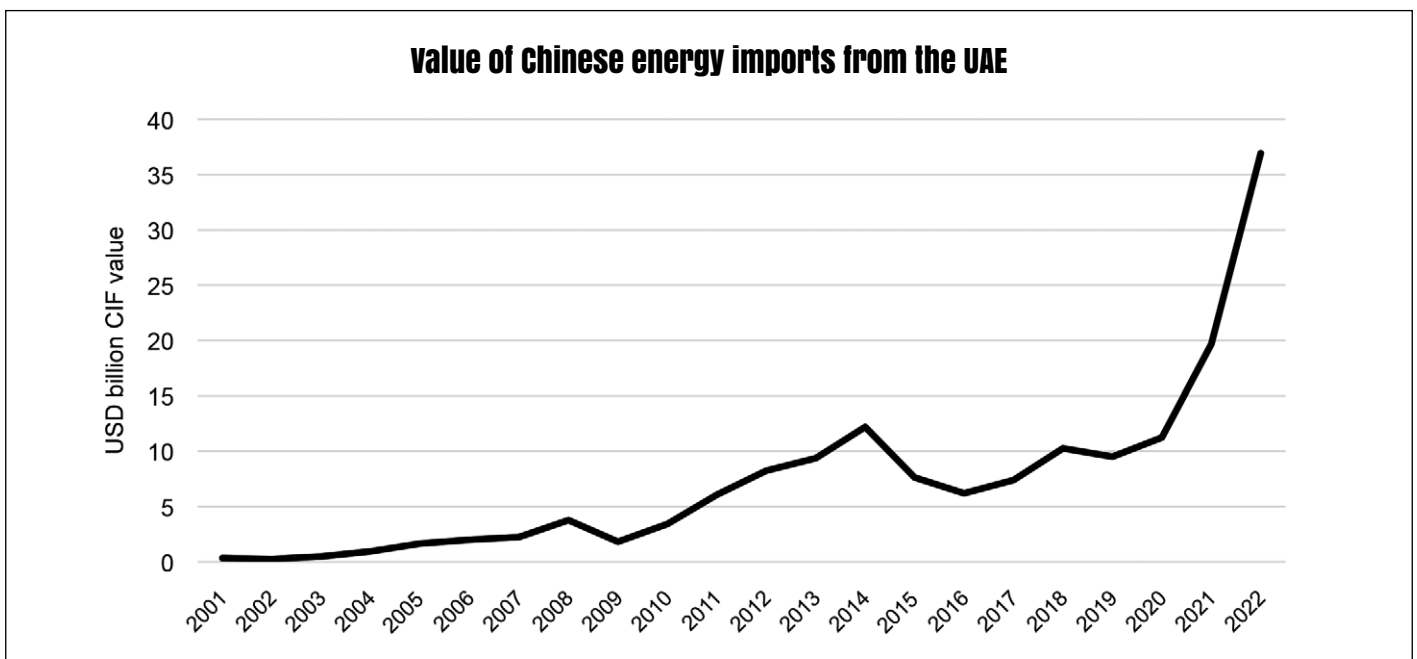


Figure 1 Prepared by the ChinaMed team. Data from: <https://www.chinamed.it/chinamed-data/middle-east/ united-arab-emirates>.

Chinese FDI (stock) in select Middle Eastern countries

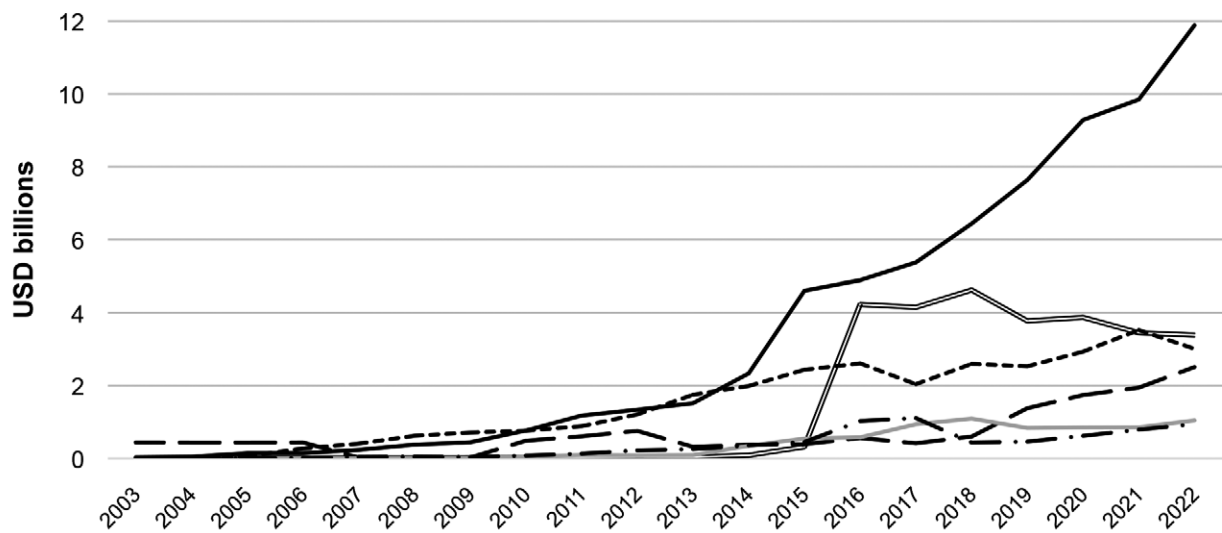


Figure 2 Prepared by the ChinaMed team. Data from: <https://www.chinamed.it/chinamed-data/middle-east>.

secure their national interests.¹⁵⁶ Similarly, Naji Sadeq Sharab noted that strengthening ties with China does not imply a downgrade in Arab countries' traditional partnerships. After all, he added, Arab states have no alternative but to bolster cooperation with all superpowers, as each relationship serves distinct interests.¹⁵⁷

Further elaborating on the rationale behind Gulf states' strategic hedging policies, a report published by the Abu Dhabi-based think tank Emirati Policy Center (EPC) in late March, following the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement, analyzed the potential risks connected to deepening the country's technological partnership with Beijing. The authors argued that cooperating with China could exacerbate the rivalry between Washington and Beijing, thereby possibly jeopardizing any gains derived from working with the People's Republic. Therefore, according to the report, although GCC states "represent an ideal fertile land for the implementation of some components of China's digital strategy" due to their political stability and attractive financial environment, it is imperative that they craft a balanced approach toward the two powers and embrace a policy of diversification of international partnerships.¹⁵⁸

However, despite cautioning against overreliance, Emirati commentators concurred that strengthening relations with China is a must. For example, in an article for the Kuwaiti newspaper *Al-Seyassah* analyzing Beijing's close ties with Tehran and their implications for GCC countries, Emirati analyst Salim al-Kitbi concluded that there is little cause for excessive concern. He emphasized that "it is indispensable for

a major rising power like China to build relationships with all sides" and underscored the importance of building a diverse network of partnerships.¹⁵⁹

Despite the generally favorable perception of China's foreign policy in the Middle East, there were also commentators who cautioned Arab governments not to be naïve in their dealings with Beijing. Reflecting on the Iranian-Saudi rapprochement in *Al Khaleej*, Salah al-Ghul warned that growing Chinese engagement in Arab and Middle Eastern affairs will neither yield the desired fruit nor fulfill the expectations of Arab governments unless they "learn the art and science of coordinating their positions."¹⁶⁰ Likewise, Atif al-Ghamri emphasized that only an integrated regional system will allow its members to develop critical mass and enhanced influence, making them globally competitive.¹⁶¹

Undeniably, the most contentious discussion that arose in Emirati media after the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement revolved around China's potential to serve as an effective mediator in other regional hotspots and possibly replicate the diplomatic success of the so-called Beijing Agreement. This debate gained further prominence after then Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang reached out to the Israeli and Palestinian foreign ministers, offering them China's availability to assist with resuming peace talks. However, as outlined in another report published by the EPC in May, any expectation for China to play a more active role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was dashed when Beijing opted not to directly intervene in the de-escalation negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad following the clashes from May 9 to 13, 2023.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁶ Ahmad Mustafa, Inzi' aj ghayr mubarrar ربيع غير مبرر [Unjustified annoyance], *Al Khaleej*, December 16, 2022, [link](#).

¹⁵⁷ Naji Sadeq Sharab, La badil 'an al-'alaqat al-dawliyat al-'arabiya ال [There is no alternative for Arab international relations], *Al Khaleej*, December 28, 2022, [link](#).

¹⁵⁸ Istratijiya al-Sin al-raqamiya: khatwa nahwa tashkil qawa'id al-nizham al-tiknuluji al-'alami ال [China's digital strategy: a step toward shaping the rules of the global technological order], EPC, March 31, 2023, [link](#).

¹⁵⁹ Salim al-Kitbi, Hal tuwazinu al-Sin bayna Iran wa-duwal 'majlis al-ta'awun'? ال [Is China balancing between Iran and the GCC countries?], *al-Seyassah*, February 27, 2023, [link](#).

¹⁶⁰ Salah al-Ghul, al-Ru'ya al-'arabiyya al-mushtaraka... darura mulihha ال [A shared Arabic vision... an urgent need], *Al Khaleej*, April 20, 2023, [link](#).

¹⁶¹ 'Atif al-Ghamri, al-'alam al-'arabi... wa-mizan al-quwa al-duwaliyya, ال [The Arab world and the balance of international powers], *Al Khaleej*, June 14, 2023, [link](#).

¹⁶² China Studies Unit, Wasata kamila 'am Shubb wasata? Hudud al-tadakhul al-sini fi al-sira' al-falastini al-'isra'ili wa afaquhu ال [Full mediation or semi-mediation? Limits and prospects of Chinese intervention in the Palestinian-Israelian conflict], *Emirates Policy Center*, May 23, 2023, [link](#).

Although the EPC report acknowledged China's past mediation experiences and its positive relations with both sides as possible advantages, it also highlighted the numerous obstacles that Beijing faces, along with its diplomatic limitations. Specifically, the authors noted that China lacks the ability to offer Israel significant enough incentives for it to reduce its reliance on the United States and dismantle its settlements in the West Bank. Additionally, the fragmented nature of the Palestinian leadership complicates any mediation effort. Therefore, the authors concluded that China's offer of mediation seemed more aimed at "building its image as a responsible great power and to challenge American influence, rather than creating realistic solutions to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict."¹⁶³ It is against this background Hamas attacked Israel on October 7, 2023.

After October 7: A Useful Partner, Maybe

Following the outbreak of war in and around the Gaza Strip, Emirati commentators have been impressed by the official declarations issued by the Chinese government and its representatives aimed at finding a solution to the Palestinian issue. For example, Waleed Uthman in an article for *Al Khaleej*, lauded Chinese diplomatic efforts and described Beijing's position as "commendable, efficient and neutral."¹⁶⁴ Similarly, Nasser Zaidan, in his opinion piece, referred to Chinese diplomacy in the Middle East as "pragmatic and flexible," and keen to "avoid conflict" in order to keep "good and constructive relationship with everyone."¹⁶⁵

Western actions, often criticized as stemming from a racist and colonial mindset, have undoubtedly contributed to enhancing the favorable perceptions of Chinese efforts in the eyes of Emirati commentators. Indeed, as Jameel Matar highlighted in *Al Khaleej*, "both Russia and China have become very popular among Arab and Muslim populations" while the perceived behavior of the West is deemed "shameful."¹⁶⁶

Interestingly, these juxtapositions have occasionally prompted comparisons to the issue of Taiwan. For example, Walid Uthman remarked that "the United States defends [in Taiwan] those same rights that they deny in other regions, especially in our region."¹⁶⁷ This addition of a geopolitical layer to critiques of Western double standards was often featured in articles reporting on statements made by Chinese President Xi Jinping and Arab leaders.

When covering the BRICS extraordinary virtual summit on the Palestinian-Israeli issue, the Emirati press expressed hope that this format could help find a solution. They showed significant interest in Xi Jinping's speech advocating for a

"global, just and last" solution to the Palestinian cause, as well as Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's statement affirming solidarity with Arabs in "working to bring back peace" and "alleviate the humanitarian crisis."¹⁶⁸

However, some Emirati commentators underscored the urgency of turning words into action, with China not exempt from such criticism. Nasser Zaidan claimed that "Chinese pragmatism when dealing with pressing regional issues is not welcomed by several states in the region." In particular, many governments are looking forward to "more active support from Beijing for the cause of the Palestinian people" to achieve an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and "begin the political process" to find long-lasting stability.¹⁶⁹

Kamal Bilhadi criticized China's (and Russia's) track record, writing that "when we examine the history of the crises occurring in our Arab region, most notably the Palestinian issue, we find that the positions of Russia and China, two great powers, do not affect the international political scene in a way that prevents harm to the Arabs." He further argued that nothing has been accomplished so far because "they do not go beyond condemnation, calls for calm, and discussions about diplomatic efforts, and these are all 'cold' positions in a very hot conflict."¹⁷⁰

Conclusion

The China-brokered Saudi-Iranian rapprochement sparked discussions in the UAE on the broader implications of Beijing's role in the region. The overarching narrative found in the Emirati press is one of cautious optimism mixed with a clear-eyed recognition of the need for substantive action.

While some viewed China's diplomatic engagement positively, noting its potential to act as a mediator in conflicts such as the Israeli-Palestinian issue, others cautioned against naivety. There is a rather clear awareness about the limits of Chinese actions, and this has not changed after the Hamas-led attack on Israel and the ensuing war in Gaza.

In general, the discourse in Emirati media reflects a sophisticated understanding of the shifting landscape of Middle Eastern geopolitics, recognizing both the opportunities and challenges posed by new diplomatic alignments. As the UAE and its GCC partners navigate these turbulent waters, the emphasis on strategic diversification, cautious engagement with global powers, and a clear call for action over rhetoric, outlines a clear path forward in pursuit of regional stability and prosperity.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Waleed Uthman, *Walaw fi al-Sin... .. نين صرلا يف ولو* [Even in China...], *Al Khaleej*, November 21, 2024, [link](#).

¹⁶⁵ Nasser Zaidan, *Ghubaar 'ala al-thawb al-Sini رابغ رابغ بوئلا لىع رابغ* [Dust on Chinese dress], *Al Khaleej*, January 22, 2024, [link](#).

¹⁶⁶ Jameel Matar, *ab'ad 'addaton li-l-harbi did Filasṭīn ددع داعبا* [Several dimensions of the war against Palestine], *Al Khaleej*, November 30, 2023, [link](#).

¹⁶⁷ Waleed Uthman, *al-hāḡatu 'ilā nizāmi 'aalamī ةعاجلا ةعاجلا* [The need for a global system], *Al Khaleej*, January 16, 2024, [link](#).

¹⁶⁸ *Rā'is al-Ṣīn iad'u li-mu'tamar dawī li-l-salām liḡalli 'aādil li-l-qaḡiyati al-Filasṭīniyati نين صرلا سىر* [The President of China calls for an international peace conference for a just solution to the Palestinian issue], *Al Khaleej*, November 21, 2023, [link](#); *Ūzīr kārīgiya al-Ṣīniya: 'alā al'aālmī al-taḡarruki 'aāgilan liwaqfi al-ma'sati il-insāniyati fī Gaza ةعاجلا ةعاجلا لىع رابغ رابغ رابغ* [Chinese Foreign Minister: The world must act urgently to stop the humanitarian tragedy in Gaza], *Al Khaleej*, November 20, 2023, [link](#).

¹⁶⁹ Zaidan, "Dust on Chinese dress."

¹⁷⁰ Kamal Bilhadi, *China wa Rusiya wa Qadiyat Filistin نين صرلا* [China and Russia and the Palestinian issue], *Al Khaleej*, November 12, 2023, [link](#).

CONCLUSION

The intricate dynamics of Sino-Gulf relations, elucidated through the media narratives of Iran, Iraq, Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and China, paint a multifaceted picture of evolving strategic, economic, and geopolitical interests. This conclusion aims to further dissect these interactions, offering a detailed analysis of each country's perspective alongside China's ambitions and strategies in the Gulf. By doing so, it seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the shifting contours of regional power dynamics and diplomacy.

China perceives the Gulf region as pivotal to its global strategy. Its strategic location and oil wealth make the Gulf an indispensable partner in realizing Beijing's geopolitical and geoeconomic objectives. Chinese state media and government narratives emphasized peace, cooperation, and mutual economic benefits, projecting China as a benign alternative to the more interventionist approaches historically associated with Western powers. China's role in brokering the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement is portrayed as a testament to its constructive role in global affairs. However, the Hamas-led attack against Israel has somewhat tempered Chinese commentators' celebratory and optimistic assessments of Beijing's influence and the future of regional politics as they acknowledge that this event will have dramatic and long-lasting implications for regional politics, especially with regard to Israeli-Arab ties. Moreover, they are likely aware of the extremely negative perception of China within Israel.

Regarding Iranian media, they continue to reflect on their country's strategic dependence on and wariness toward China. While Beijing is viewed as an essential economic lifeline, particularly amidst Western sanctions, there remains an underlying concern regarding the depth of this partnership. Iran's narratives oscillate between appreciating Chinese support and fearing marginalization as China strengthens its ties with Arab Gulf states. This ambivalence underscores Iran's precarious position in both the regional and global order, as it seeks to balance its strategic autonomy with its need to engage with powerful allies like China.

In Iraq, the relationship with China continues to revolve around economic development, notably through the "oil-for-reconstruction" agreement established in 2019. However, Iraqi narratives also allude to frustrations over the perceived limitations of this partnership, especially regarding its impact on domestic politics and governance. These discussions suggest a desire for a more empowering relationship with China that can contribute to Iraq's long-term stability and development, extending beyond mere immediate economic benefits.

Initially, Israel viewed its engagement with China pragmatically, prioritizing economic and technological cooperation. However, the narrative underwent a significant shift following China's perceived pro-Palestine neutrality in the context of the Hamas-led attack on Israel and the subsequent Israeli invasion of the Gaza Strip. This led to a drastic reassessment of the strategic wisdom of further deepening ties with Beijing. This shift underscores the paramount importance of security

concerns in Israel's foreign policy and the limits of economic engagement in the absence of aligned security interests. This development also does not bode well for the future of Sino-Israeli relations.

When it comes to examining the media narrative from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, two critical regional players, there is a strategic shift toward China. The narratives surrounding this pivot, driven by the goals of economic diversification and greater autonomy in foreign policy, highlight the benefits of engaging with China, such as infrastructure development, technology transfer, and increased investment. Of particular note is the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement, facilitated by China, which is celebrated as a diplomatic victory and a step toward a more balanced and multipolar regional order. Despite recognizing the limits of Chinese diplomacy regarding support for Palestine, both countries seem content with China's current actions, thereby providing a solid foundation for further developing their relations with Beijing.

Integrating China's perspective with those of the regional powers that we have considered paints a complex picture of a region navigating the intricacies of a new era in international relations. The Gulf states are actively pursuing engagement with China to diversify their economic and strategic partnerships, driven by both opportunity and necessity. China, for its part, seeks to solidify its role as a key global player, offering, despite its limits, an alternative model of international engagement based on economic cooperation and non-interference.

However, the media narratives also reveal underlying tensions and challenges. Security concerns, geopolitical rivalries, and the inherent limitations of economic partnerships in addressing deeper political and strategic issues are recurrent themes. As China deepens its involvement in the Gulf and the Middle East, striking a balance between economic interests and geopolitical realities will become increasingly delicate, demanding nuanced diplomacy and strategic foresight.

In conclusion, the evolving Sino-Gulf relationship, characterized by a blend of cautious optimism and strategic hedging, reflects broader shifts toward a multipolar world order. The interplay between regional ambitions and China's global strategies will continue to shape the geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East, with implications for regional stability, economic development, and international diplomacy. A comprehensive understanding of these dynamics, through the prism of media narratives and beyond, is imperative for policymakers, scholars, and observers seeking to navigate the complexities of contemporary international relations.

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