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To cite this article: Benjamin Houghton (2022) China's Balancing Strategy Between Saudi Arabia and Iran: The View from Riyadh, Asian Affairs, 53:1, 124-144, DOI: [10.1080/03068374.2022.2029065](https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2022.2029065)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2022.2029065>



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Published online: 09 Feb 2022.



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SPECIAL SECTION: SINO-IRANIAN RELATIONS FROM TENTATIVE DIPLOMACY TO STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

CHINA'S BALANCING STRATEGY BETWEEN SAUDI ARABIA AND IRAN: THE VIEW FROM RIYADH

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Introduction

China's engagement in what was once a peripheral region in its international strategic calculations, the Persian Gulf, is unrecognisable compared to a few decades ago. It was only by 1990 that the People's Republic of China (PRC) had secured diplomatic recognition from all Persian Gulf states, a fact that shocks newcomers to the field given that Beijing is now several regional states' largest trading partner. In 1993, when China became a net oil importer, the attraction of the world's most energy-abundant region skyrocketed. To be precise, the Persian Gulf houses over 50 percent of the world's proven oil reserves and 40 percent of the world's proven gas reserves, making it a treasure trove for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which has staked its domestic legitimacy on economic growth, a goal reliant in the case of China on access to reliable and extensive energy supplies.¹ Since the 1990s, Beijing has cultivated wide-ranging relations with Gulf countries, carving a role for itself as an investment, infrastructure-building, and energy-importing giant. Of particular note, since 2013, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), an extensive mega-project that aims to enhance trade connectivity across Asia and beyond, has become a significant node in China-Persian Gulf relations.

However, engagement with the Persian Gulf comes with a catch. The region is rife with insecurity based predominantly on intra-regional threat perceptions and intense mutual securitisation. The Saudi Arabia-Iran rivalry has been at the centre of this regional insecurity. A culture of mutual suspicion and aggression that permeates the fabric of Middle Eastern international relations has resulted from decades of rivalry between these two states, particularly since 2003 when the US-led invasion of Iraq removed Saddam Hussein's regime as a competitor for regional hegemony. Unlike the United States, which has played a pivotal role in securitising Iran since the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and has played an even more central role in reifying the divisive nature of Saudi-Iranian relations, China has fostered wide-ranging and warm relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia. Given that Riyadh has grumbled whenever Washington has shown signs of relaxing its stance on Iran, it is reasonable to question whether China's strategy to be "the friend of all and the enemy of none" is sustainable in this highly-securitised region.²

Placing this strategy to balance relations with regional rivals in historical context, this article explores how Beijing has gone about managing relations with both Tehran and Riyadh, especially since the start of the 21st century, and whether or not Sino-Iranian relations have impacted upon Sino-Saudi relations and China's image in Saudi Arabia. To achieve this, the context of the Saudi-Iran rivalry and China's interests in the Persian Gulf are first outlined. Subsequently, China's relationship diversification strategy within the context of the Iran-Iraq War and the Kuwait crisis is traced. This provides a springboard from which to analyse how China has gone about managing relations with both Saudi Arabia and Iran, especially during recent episodes of intense tension, namely following the 2016 execution of Saudi Shi'a cleric, Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, and the storming of the Saudi embassy in Iran, and following the 2019 drone attacks on Saudi oil facilities, which Riyadh accused Tehran of orchestrating. Finally, a discussion follows of Saudi perceptions of the recently signed 25-year Iran-China agreement. Arabic and English-language opinion editorials, social media posts, and news videos in which Saudi academics, political analysts, and diplomats express their opinions about the deal are examined. The debate in Saudi Arabia about this deal generates an apposite lens to assess whether or not Sino-Iranian relations are likely to be a bone of contention in Sino-Saudi relations. Finally, it bears noting that China's attempts to balance relations between Iran and the United States have been the subject of other pieces.³ Accordingly, this article only discusses the United States when it is critical to the analysis.

The Saudi-Iran rivalry and Saudi threat perceptions

Since the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979, which substantially altered the Persian Gulf's political environment by upending the United States' twin-pillar policy of relying on Iran and Saudi Arabia to manage regional security, Saudi Arabia has been wary of Iran and its regional policies. In witnessing the Iranian monarchy's replacement with a Shi'a theocratic republic, Sunni Arab Gulf royal families were cognizant of the potential for anti-monarchical and Islamic revolutionary ideologies to spread across borders now that an example of a religiously-legitimised republic existed in the region. Saudi Arabian leaders, who partially base their legitimacy on their custodianship of the two most significant Islamic pilgrimage sites, Mecca and Medina, felt the spectre of this increased threat acutely. Most prominently, Saudi leaders feared that Shi'a communities in the oil-rich Eastern provinces of the kingdom could feel an affinity with the Iranian regime, precipitating domestic unrest and a direct threat to the staying power of the Al Saud. This anxiety was fuelled by stirrings of discontent in these regions soon after Iran's revolution. More generally, though, leaders in Riyadh were concerned that Iran's ambitions to lead all Muslims could impact upon Saudi's influence abroad and legitimacy at home. Iran, as a state seeking to export its version of governance, namely an Islamic republic, acts as a direct threat to the Saudi governance system.

In the decades following Iran's revolution, Saudi-Iranian relations have become a notorious example of protracted regional rivalry, particularly after 2003 when the US-led invasion of Iraq removed Baghdad as a potential competitor for regional hegemony. Few, if any, states across the Middle East have remained untouched by the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. While all eyes were focused on Iran-Iraq relations throughout the 1980s, ties between Riyadh and Tehran were dire, with Saudi cutting diplomatic relations with Iran in 1988 due in large part to tension exacerbated by Iranian attacks on Arab Gulf states' tankers in the Strait of Hormuz and disagreements about Iran's pilgrimage quotas.⁴ Despite some semblance of warming relations in the late 1990s and early 2000s, facilitated largely by strong relations between former Iranian President Rafsanjani and the late Saudi King Abdullah, tensions spiked and predominated after the ascension of Ahmadinejad to the Iranian presidency in 2005. In particular, Saudi leaders were concerned by Iran's nuclear enrichment activities and its foreign policies in states across the Middle East, most notably in Iraq given that Saddam Hussein's ousting had created a political

environment in the country that Tehran was better prepared to engage with than Riyadh.

With the emergence of a series of uprisings and protests across the Middle East in 2011, often termed the Arab Uprisings or Arab Spring, relations between Tehran and Riyadh soured further. Saudi leaders were increasingly concerned that Iran would exploit anti-regime sentiments across the region to fuel instability and sow chaos in Arab states. In particular, fears surrounding Shi'a Arabs and their potential affinity with Iran heightened. This was made most explicit when protests erupted in Shi'a-majority Bahrain, with Riyadh swiftly sending military forces to protect the Sunni Al Khalifa regime from domestic unrest. Both states also found themselves at loggerheads over regional developments following the Arab Uprisings, with Iran supporting al-Assad in Syria and Saudi supporting the rebels. Furthermore, and closer to home for Riyadh, Tehran has aided Houthi rebels in Yemen, with Saudi Arabia vehemently opposing them. By 2016, diplomatic ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia were once again cut off following the execution of Shi'a Saudi cleric, Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, and the retaliatory storming of the Saudi embassy in Tehran by protestors. Tensions have persisted ever since, as best exemplified by missile attacks on Saudi oil facilities in late 2019 emanating from Yemen and subsequent assertions from Riyadh that Tehran was to blame. Throughout the decades, it has also been common for the two sides to argue about oil production in OPEC, though on occasions they have cooperated when their interests have converged significantly. Since Raisi's ascension to the presidency in 2021, signs of warming relations have surfaced, though time will tell whether a meaningful rapprochement will emerge.

Along with some of its Arab allies, particularly Jordan, Bahrain, and the UAE, Saudi leaders have securitised Iran, seeking to build a coalition of states to counter Iranian aggrandisement in the Middle East and beyond. This securitisation was particularly evident during the Saudi, Emirati, Bahraini, and Egyptian blockade of Qatar, which lasted from 2017 to 2021. Among the numerous demands made of Doha to end the blockade was that it cease its diplomatic engagement and cooperation with Tehran, a tall order given that Qatar and Iran share the world's largest gas field. The fact that Iran was cited as a key driver behind the diplomatic rupture between Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states underscores the extent to which the securitisation of Iran dominates the agenda in the Persian Gulf. These examples, among others, are why the Saudi-Iranian rivalry has been termed a "cold war".⁵

Chinese interests in the Persian Gulf

In the first two to three decades of the CCP's tenure, the Persian Gulf was a region of peripheral importance to Beijing. While some diplomatic achievements were made by Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai at the Bandung Conference in 1955, Beijing's concerns were predominantly focused on the presence of the Soviet Union and the United States in East Asia. Throughout this period, the CCP struggled to encourage Persian Gulf regimes to switch diplomatic recognition from the Republic of China in Taiwan to the PRC in Beijing. Diplomatic inroads were largely hampered by the CCP's support for revolutionary communist movements in the region, including the Dhofari rebels in Oman and other anti-monarchical revolutionary movements, in addition to a belief among regional elites that China was treating its Muslim citizens poorly.

By the late 1970s, following the deaths of more ardent revolutionary elements in the Chinese leadership, including General Lin Biao, Chairman Mao Zedong, and Zhou Enlai, leaders in Beijing acknowledged the need to change the trajectory of Chinese foreign and domestic policies, embracing economic modernisation and development and halting support for revolutionary groups abroad. To facilitate this, the new leadership, with Deng Xiaoping at the helm, pursued an agenda that prioritised the establishment of diplomatic and trade relations with states across the world. By the end of the 1970s, the PRC had only succeeded in establishing diplomatic relations with four Persian Gulf states, Iraq (1958), Kuwait (1971), Iran (1971, though re-asserted following the Islamic Revolution in 1979), and Oman (1978).

With the Iran-Iraq War dominating regional events in the 1980s, Beijing saw an opportunity to advance its capabilities as an arms supplier, selling over US\$6 billion worth of weapons to the two main parties and procuring lucrative arms supply contracts with other regional states.⁶ Indeed, increasingly cognizant of the threat of either Iranian or Iraqi aggrandisement, Saudi Arabia turned to China for intermediate-range ballistic missiles, representing a substantial breakthrough in hitherto stunted Sino-Saudi ties and facilitating the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two states in 1990.⁷ This diplomatic breakthrough was particularly noteworthy as Riyadh remained the last Persian Gulf, and indeed Arab, state to extend diplomatic recognition to Beijing.

With its drive for economic development at full throttle, the CCP's domestic legitimacy increasingly became centred on economic security, and in

extension, energy security. By 1993, China's domestic energy supplies were no longer able to satisfy its burgeoning requirements. Thus, as a net importer of oil, Beijing required reliable access to foreign energy supplies. The Persian Gulf became an obvious candidate for increased Chinese interest. Ever since, energy trade has been the main focus of China-Persian Gulf relations. Far from diminishing in importance, energy acquisition has become more and more central to the CCP's domestic legitimacy with each year that passes. By 2009, China became the world's largest market for private vehicles, fuelled by its ever-growing middle class.⁸ Furthermore, in addition to manufacturing and day-to-day electricity needs, its extensive construction and infrastructure industry requires huge volumes of energy. To demonstrate this in figures, in 2000 China consumed 4.8 million barrels of oil a day.⁹ In 2019 China consumed around 14.5 million barrels a day.¹⁰ Persian Gulf states have been crucial in meeting the PRC's energy requirements. Indeed, in 2013, over half of all Chinese oil imports came from the region, and Saudi Arabia has been China's top supplier for several years, alongside Russia.¹¹ Furthermore, as the PRC's interest in energy diversification grows, it has set its sights on gas imports. The Persian Gulf similarly hosts abundant gas reserves. Iran and Qatar house two of the three largest gas reserves in the world. As such, from the perspective of energy, it is evident that the Persian Gulf will only grow in importance in China's foreign policy calculations. Additionally, the region has significant supplies of chemicals. These are crucial to China's enormous manufacturing industry, something that has rendered the Gulf even more critical to China's economic progress.

In addition to energy acquisition, the Persian Gulf has been a lucrative destination for Chinese products, investment, and infrastructure, especially within the energy sphere. With a domestically under-utilised construction industry, the Chinese government has been keen for its companies to engage in infrastructure projects abroad, with the aim of safeguarding against debt accumulation due to insufficient work in China. Chinese companies have engaged in myriad initiatives in this cash-rich region, from constructing crucial transport infrastructure in Saudi Arabian pilgrimage sites to dams and energy infrastructure in Iran. This particular interest has aligned conveniently with several national initiatives in the Gulf monarchies, such as Saudi Vision 2030, which seek to revitalise Gulf economies and prepare them for their post-rentier existence. This has further facilitated increased China-Gulf cooperation on renewable energy, satellite technology, and 5G technology, three areas that Beijing has expressed interest in enhancing connectivity. Furthermore, the Gulf

offers a lucrative market for Chinese products. In 2013, annual Chinese exports to GCC states were worth around US\$60 billion, making the six states collectively a contender for Beijing's fifth largest export destination.¹²

Closely linked to energy, investment, trade, and infrastructure building is China's BRI, Chinese President Xi Jinping's US\$1 trillion mega-project, which is designed to increase connectivity across Asia and into Europe, Africa, and beyond. Introduced in 2013 as Xi Jinping's flagship project, Chinese leaders hope that the BRI will place China at the centre of international, but especially Asian, trade.¹³ To achieve this, the PRC has placed considerable financial and political weight behind infrastructure projects across Asia. Among Gulf states, while Iran is most clearly part of the BRI, geographically sitting on the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor, other Gulf states are also considered to be part of the initiative more widely and will be crucial to the Maritime Silk Road and Digital Silk Road. As a gateway to the Red Sea, Saudi Arabia is an important part of the project. Ehteshami notes that fostering the "good-will" of participating states has become a necessity of Chinese foreign policy.¹⁴ Whilst states along the BRI could lose out on the benefits of increased trade connectivity with both China and other participating states if they withdraw their support for the project, the PRC is cognizant of the need to appear reliable and trustworthy in order to incentivise other states to invest in the project, thereby maximising the likelihood of the initiative's success. Thus, managing its own image is now very much an interest that Beijing pursues in the Gulf.¹⁵

The region is also important to China for a number of other reasons. Domestically, a core concern in Beijing is that minority Uyghur Muslims, most of whom live in the North-Western province of Xinjiang, could participate in extremist, terrorist, or separatist activities, collectively viewed by the CCP as the "three Evils". Government crackdowns, surveillance, and detainment policies have fuelled claims from Western states that Beijing is abusing the Uyghurs' human rights. The Persian Gulf is home to several influential Muslim states that all claim to be the true flag-bearers of Islam, including both Iran and Saudi Arabia. Accordingly, the PRC has sought to use its relations with these states to justify its policies in Xinjiang. In receiving their often tacit, though sometimes overt, approval for its policies in Xinjiang, the CCP has obtained a legitimacy boost of sorts. Indeed, in 2019 most Persian Gulf states signed a letter to the United Nations Human Rights Council expressing their support for China's Xinjiang policies.¹⁶

Furthermore, given the high frequency of United Nations Security Council deliberation on Persian Gulf security affairs, China has had opportunities to exercise its role as a global power and gain leverage from global governance to realise other interests. For example, following a brief period of international isolation in the wake of the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989, tacit alignment with the United States during the Kuwait crisis played a direct role in the PRC's reintroduction into the international community.¹⁷ Furthermore, Beijing's crucial diplomatic activities in the lead up to the signing of the Iran nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, in 2015, similarly granted the PRC the convenient opportunity to align its behaviour with Western expectations. This leads to one final point. In agreement with several scholars, this article contends that Beijing seeks to avoid alienating or confronting the United States in the Persian Gulf.¹⁸ Its wide-ranging interests in the region are dependent on US security architecture and, accordingly, whilst the PRC very much adopts independent policies in the region, such as relatively close engagement with Iran, it does not wish to upend the extant regional order or expose Washington to security threats.

China's relationship diversification strategy: early manifestations

During the 1980s, the PRC did everything it could to maintain positive relations with both Iran and Iraq throughout their war, whilst also fostering relations with Arab Gulf states that were both sceptical of China and fearful of either Iranian or Iraqi aggrandisement in the region. Over the course of the war, Beijing supplied both Tehran and Baghdad with a substantial quantity of weaponry. To be precise, China was Iran's top weapons supplier, exporting over US\$2 billion worth of arms to Tehran, and Iraq's third-biggest supplier, sending around US\$4 billion worth to Baghdad.¹⁹ It must be noted, though, that, unlike Iraq, Iran struggled to procure arms during the war, predominantly relying on North Korea and the PRC. Accordingly, in providing support to both Iraq and Iran, China's policy was almost unique compared to its international counterparts. Whilst other powers did supply Iran with some weapons at certain points, China's relationship diversification policy was sustained across the course of conflict, avoiding taking sides whilst benefiting from each bilateral relationship. Among the weaponry exported to these countries were Silkworm anti-ship missiles. Tehran's use of these missiles against Kuwaiti tankers threw Sino-Iranian ties under the spotlight, highlighting the potential challenges that relations with Iran could

entail for the leadership in Beijing, especially in terms of hostility from the United States.

Of particular note, Sino-Saudi relations were born in the context of China's relationship diversification strategy. Gulf states' threat perceptions spiked during the Iran-Iraq War, spurred by the regional arms race that Beijing was playing a pivotal role in fuelling. Accordingly, Saudi Arabia was keen to get its hands on intermediate-range ballistic missiles. Having been unable to procure said weaponry from Washington, due in large part to Congress' unwillingness at the time, Prince Bandar Bin Sultan reached a secret deal with the Chinese for around 50 missiles. During his trip to Beijing, Prince Bandar also attempted to discourage China from selling arms to Iran, though soon accepted that it was an impossible endeavour.²⁰ This sale was pivotal in paving the way for Sino-Saudi mutual diplomatic recognition, a milestone that Riyadh had long avoided because of its relationship with the Republic of China and residual suspicions of the PRC's revolutionary zeal. Based on this, two crucial insights emerge. First, even prior to establishing relations with Beijing, Riyadh had expressed discontent with Sino-Iranian relations, particularly regarding arms transfers. Second, Sino-Saudi ties were conceived within the context of extensive Chinese support for Iran and regional insecurity that Beijing had a hand in fomenting. From this perspective, Sino-Saudi relations have never been entirely removed from the wider context of Sino-Iranian relations.

Following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, China positioned itself to juggle two seemingly conflicting interests. So as to manage its international image in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square crackdown the previous year, the PRC abstained on, but did not veto, United Nations Security Council Resolution 678, which allowed the use of military force to expel Iraq from Kuwaiti territory, thereby tacitly facilitating the proposition. Conversely, even though China was clear that it viewed the encroachment of Kuwaiti sovereignty as unacceptable, it continued to maintain relatively close relations with Iraq, something that led scholar Yitzhak Shichor to claim that the PRC was "trying to eat its cake and have it ... that is, to maintain good relations with all parties".²¹ Thus, whilst Beijing was unequivocal in stating its preference for a particular outcome, it continued to pursue bilateral relations with Iraq, a state that was increasingly viewed as belligerent by the international community, in addition to Kuwait and other Gulf actors opposed to Iraq. By the end of the Kuwait crisis, China's relationship diversification strategy had become a staple of its Persian Gulf strategy.

A protracted balancing strategy: between Saudi Arabia and Iran

Since the demise of Iraq as a contender for regional hegemony following the US-led invasion in 2003, the PRC's main focus in the Persian Gulf has been on Iran and Saudi Arabia. Accordingly, and unlike the United States, which has engaged in a long-term strategy to securitise Iran whilst largely siding with Saudi Arabia, Beijing has carefully cultivated relations with both Riyadh and Tehran. Crucially, though, this article asserts that this policy is far more than a risk management strategy in case of future disruption to energy supplies. Whilst that is a factor that spurs China to manage relations with the two sides, the PRC primarily seeks to foster relations with both states, in addition to all other states in the region, due to the myriad benefits offered by each relationship. Thus, before observing how China navigates points of extreme contention and tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran, in addition to sensitive issues, such as security affairs, it serves to examine briefly the PRC's relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran since the 1990s.

Sino-Iranian relations

Since the early 1990s, China's interest in the Islamic Republic was primarily fuelled by Iran's under-exploited and extensive energy resources. Chinese companies have been involved in numerous upstream and downstream projects, in addition to energy-related infrastructure building. Overall, in the first 15 years or so of the 21st century, China and Iran signed energy contracts worth hundreds of billions of dollars, though several of these ended unfruitfully as a result of Chinese hesitation to engage in Iran because of the financial and political volatility caused by international sanctions. Additionally, Beijing has played a pivotal role in wider infrastructure building in the Islamic Republic, constructing, among others, dams and transport infrastructure, such as the Tehran metro. Finally, Sino-Iranian bilateral trade has grown substantially in recent decades. Having only been worth US\$3.3 billion in 2001, annual trade has been consistently over US\$30 billion since 2010, peaking at around US\$55 billion in 2014.²² In 2007, the PRC became Iran's largest trade partner and Iran was one of China's biggest oil suppliers for several years.²³

Iran is of particular interest to China thanks to its gas reserves, the second-largest in the world, and its geostrategic vantage point. The PRC has been keen to diversify its energy supplies and the means by which energy

reaches China. First, Iran's gas reserves are perceived as a useful means to reduce dependence on oil and coal. Second, unlike other Persian Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, Iran can export energy to China via land, saving time and providing a potential mitigation strategy in the event of disruption at sea or in Sino-Russian relations. Indeed, freight trains from Tehran to Eastern China take only two weeks, representing a stark contrast to the nearly 50 days required by tanker from the region.²⁴ Additionally, Iran is part of the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor of the BRI. Both sides seem generally interested in increasing BRI connectivity, with Iran seeing the advantages in wider Asian connectivity, and China aware of the many benefits it could reap from engagement with Tehran. However, as Garlick and Havlová note, China's BRI-related investment in Iran has been muted compared to other countries, due in large part to the myriad challenges stemming from Iran's precarious position in global politics and finance.²⁵

Vitaly, though, Sino-Iranian relations have always suffered from the looming presence of Washington. Whilst China has continually fostered relations with the Islamic Republic and has been occasionally willing to resist American pressure, Beijing supported several United Nations Security Council resolutions sanctioning Tehran. In so doing, and despite Chinese efforts to water down said sanctions, circumvent them, and generate diplomatic momentum to bring an end to them at international nuclear negotiations, there is no hiding from the fact that this relationship has been strained by the PRC's attempts to balance relations with the United States.²⁶ Accordingly, levels of mistrust towards China have emerged from some parts of Iranian society, including moderate politicians, due to the PRC's role in imposing sanctions and subsequent perceived exploitation of Iranian markets.²⁷ Poignantly, in a Farsi-language research document conducted by the Research Center of the Iranian Islamic Consultative Assembly, the government candidly states that it cannot expect Beijing to relegate Sino-US relations for Iran's sake.²⁸ Thus, whilst China and Iran may have signed a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2016, the highest level partnership that the PRC offers in its foreign relations, and a roadmap in 2021 for 25 years of cooperation in a variety of fields, this relationship will always be subject to external forces and Chinese appetite for risk and pressure. Furthermore, Beijing's prolonged hesitation until September 2021 to allow full Iranian membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and concerns among some Iranians about Chinese monopolisation of Iranian markets and the quality of Chinese products and infrastructure underscore the shortcomings of this relationship.

Sino-Saudi relations

As the country with the greatest oil-producing capabilities in the region, Saudi Arabia is a critical partner to China. In 1999, Chinese President Jiang Zemin became the first Chinese head of state to visit Saudi Arabia, marking the deepening significance of Riyadh to Beijing. In 2006, breaking with tradition, the newly-crowned King Abdullah made China his first foreign destination, displaying the reciprocated value attached to Sino-Saudi relations in Riyadh, no doubt thanks to the immense oil revenue coming from China. Indeed, by 2011, Sino-Saudi trade had exceeded US-Saudi trade, rendering the PRC Saudi's top trade partner. Considering that Sino-Saudi trade was 154 times smaller in 1990, this development must not be understated.²⁹ Between 2012 and 2016, Sino-Saudi trade totalled between US\$44 billion and US\$73 billion annually, with oil representing the most commonly traded product.³⁰ For several years, Saudi Arabia has been either China's first or second (to Russia) largest oil supplier, making the kingdom a crucial partner given the Chinese Communist Party's reliance on oil for its domestic legitimacy, and making Beijing an important partner to Riyadh given the latter economy's reliance on energy exports. It is important to note, however, that Saudi Arabia has a more protectionist stance than Iran over foreign ownership of domestic energy companies and infrastructure. This being so, the Iranian market potentially carries more benefits for future Chinese engagement if the sanctions issue can be resolved.

Additionally, Sino-Saudi relations have matured further thanks to China's BRI. While infrastructure building was already a significant factor in their relations, typified by the prominent role played by Chinese companies in constructing train lines key to Islamic pilgrimage sites, its importance has grown in the BRI age. Of particular note, Jazan will act as a hub for Chinese companies to enhance wider connectivity. Straddling the Red Sea, Jazan will be critical to increasing links between African states and the Gulf, in addition to wider Asian maritime connectivity.³¹ Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's 2021 visit to the Saudi smart city project, Neom, underscores the salience attached to digital and infrastructural cooperation in Sino-Saudi relations. Both sides have been keen to tie the fates of the BRI, especially the Digital Silk Road, and Saudi Vision 2030, thereby cementing their future collaboration.

Finally, following the hierarchical rubric that China adopts in its relations with states across the region, Beijing and Riyadh signed a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2016. Alongside the UAE and Iran, Saudi Arabia is

the only other Persian Gulf state to enjoy this status. Recently, Sino-Saudi relations have centred on the 1 + 2+3 framework, emphasising: (1) energy cooperation; (2) trade and investment, in addition to infrastructure building; and (3) cooperation in the fields of space satellites, nuclear energy, and renewable energy.³²

Balancing between Riyadh and Tehran

As a perceived necessary by-product of pursuing relations with both Riyadh and Tehran, Chinese leaders have cautiously sought to avoid privileging relations with one state at the expense of alienating the other. In recent years, especially since the unveiling of the BRI, clear examples of this cautiousness have emerged, with China somewhat painstakingly insisting on avoiding alienating one state at the expense of the other during periods of intense tension in Iran-Saudi relations. This fact has led several scholars to claim that China is engaging in “strategic hedging” between the two sides.³³ Two prominent examples serve to solidify this point.

In 2016, during Xi Jinping's tour of several Middle Eastern states, the PRC signed a strategic comprehensive partnership with both Saudi Arabia and Iran within days of each other, elevating the status of China's diplomatic relations with each state to the highest level allowed in China's international relations. It should be viewed as no coincidence that Xi made sure to sign the partnership with *both* Saudi Arabia and Iran during the same visit, as it fits into a wider pattern of Chinese behaviour to balance relations with the two regional powers. President Xi's visit came within weeks of one of the tensest periods in Saudi-Iranian relations, the Saudi execution of Shi'a cleric, Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, and the subsequent storming of the Saudi embassy in Tehran. With diplomatic relations between Riyadh and Tehran in tatters and a heightened sense of insecurity felt in both capitals, Beijing was careful to expand relations with both states at the same time and avoid becoming embroiled in their rivalry. Indeed, when questioned by the press about how the PRC would respond to the tension between the two states, the Chinese leadership made clear that it would not pick sides.³⁴ The signing of the comprehensive strategic partnership with both states in the same trip is testament to this strategy.

Similarly, in late 2019, China conducted military naval exercises separately with both Saudi Arabia and Iran within weeks of each other. No doubt aware that holding military exercises with one state could send the

wrong signal to the other during a period of heightened tension, China orchestrated events to provide like-for-like engagement with each country. This particular episode of careful balancing came only two months after Saudi oil facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais had been targeted by drone attacks, something that Riyadh had accused Tehran of orchestrating via proxies in Yemen. It is evident, once again, that during periods of acute tension Beijing is unwilling to risk alienating either side, entailing a painstakingly-orchestrated diplomatic choreography. Following the drone attacks in Abqaiq and Khurais, Beijing refrained from picking sides. Whilst the Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Hua Chunying, condemned the attack, she also asserted that there was no clear evidence to point fingers at any individual state, thereby standing at odds with the United States, which had condemned Iran for the attack. Making no direct reference to Iran, Hua merely called for “relevant parties to avoid taking actions that bring about an escalation in regional tensions”.³⁵ Once again, Beijing was unwilling to become embroiled in the rivalry, choosing instead to expand relations with each side, attempting thereby to showcase concerted neutrality.

Sino-Iranian relations and the China–Iran 25-Year agreement: the debate in Saudi Arabia

Given the extent to which leaders in Riyadh perceive Iran as a threat, both to their domestic staying power and regional stability, it is unsurprising that they voice their discontent when they perceive warming relations between global powers and the Islamic Republic. Despite former US President Barack Obama’s central role in sanctioning Iran, for example, Saudi leaders were greatly concerned that the signing of the Iran nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, underscored a softer American stance on Iran and the possibility of a meaningful rapprochement between Washington and Tehran.³⁶

In keeping with this apprehension surrounding Iran’s relations with global powers, leaders in Riyadh have shown a propensity over several decades to attempt to coax Beijing away from supporting Iran. As early as the 1980s, prior to the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Saudi Arabia and during his surreptitious trip to the PRC to acquire missiles, Prince Bandar bin Sultan tried to encourage Chinese leaders to cease weapons transfers to Iran during the Iran–Iraq War.³⁷ Given that Riyadh had made few attempts to develop ties with Beijing prior to this hitherto unparalleled visit, it is unsurprising that this tactic failed, particularly as Iran

had become a prominent customer for Chinese weaponry. Nonetheless, this request proves that Sino-Iranian relations were viewed as far from benign by leaders in Saudi Arabia. Similarly, in the lead up to United Nations Security Council Resolution 1929 in June 2010, which escalated sanctions on Iran's military and nuclear programme, Saudi officials tried to encourage China to support sanctions against Iran without circumventing or softening them. To meet this end, Saudi officials offered to guarantee oil supplies to China to ensure that Beijing could leave the Iranian energy market without any concerns about meeting its energy needs. The fact that this was a topic of conversation in a high-level meeting between King Abdullah and Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi underscores the significance attached in Saudi Arabia to the Iran factor in its foreign relations.³⁸ Much like its attempt in the 1980s, this meeting did not end as Riyadh had hoped, with the PRC still working to water down sanctions and enhance trade connectivity with Iran. Indeed, Sino-Iranian annual trade grew in subsequent years, increasing from around US\$21 billion in 2009 to an average of US\$41 billion between 2010 and 2014.³⁹ What is evident from this, though, is that Riyadh ultimately hopes to discourage the advancement of Sino-Iranian relations.

With the signing in March 2021 of the Iran–China 25-Year Cooperation Programme, which outlines a loose roadmap for increased economic, military, and political collaboration between Beijing and Tehran over the next two and a half decades and can largely be considered a more fleshed-out, but still vague, version of the comprehensive strategic partnership signed in 2016, it serves to examine the debate in Saudi media about the agreement. In so doing, an up-to-date window into Saudi perceptions of Sino-Iranian relations can be gleaned. It should be noted that some commentaries are from 2020, as a draft of the agreement was leaked during the summer of 2020.

By far the most prominent and ubiquitous view among Saudi commentators is that Sino-Iranian relations, especially in the context of the new agreement, are a cause for Saudi concern. Several commentators fear that the deal could embolden Iran to behave antagonistically in the region by providing credibility and legitimacy to Tehran.⁴⁰ The former head of al-Arabiya, a Saudi news network, Abd al-Rahman al-Rashid, even claims that the China–Iran agreement “could upend the regional order that has prevailed since the second world war”, going on to question whether the deal marks Beijing's willingness to act as an international sponsor for Iran.⁴¹ Linked to this point, concerns expressed by Saudi commentators do not solely address the potential regional implications, but

rather whether China can be considered a trustworthy partner. Al-Jalal, a Saudi political analyst, takes a relatively cautious stance, stating that the US and Gulf states will want to examine how the deal could challenge their regional and global endeavours, particularly if China uses Iranian soil for military purposes.⁴² Writing more candidly, al-Ghamidi, a Saudi political commentator, states "China's intentions in getting closer to Iran are suspicious. Arab states, particularly Arab Gulf states, should ... get to the bottom of China's future intentions vis-à-vis its rapprochement with Iran".⁴³ Similarly, firing a warning shot, al-Ateebi, another Saudi political commentator, warns that great powers risk losing everything if they are viewed as unreliable. He concludes his article with a final cautionary statement, "here is China entering [the region] directly via Iran. History can only watch and judge".⁴⁴ Whilst it is not possible to be certain that these voices perfectly mirror the opinions of elites at the highest levels of decision-making in Riyadh, what they do display is that China must continue to consider its relations with Gulf states and its image in the Arab world when pursuing relations with the Islamic Republic. When considered alongside the aforementioned examples of Saudi elite attempts to encourage Beijing away from Tehran, it is clear that these opinions are not far removed from those of the Saudi political elite. As Beijing increasingly seeks to foment a positive image of itself in the region, particularly in service of the BRI, being perceived as reliable is key. These perceptions of the China–Iran agreement highlight that Sino–Iranian ties could, one day if not now, be a source of tension in Sino–Saudi relations.

Importantly, though, several Saudi commentators offer a different, and more balanced, perspective, arguing that the PRC will not relegate its relations with Saudi Arabia in favour of Iran. Whilst noting his concern that the China–Iran deal could encourage Tehran to foment further volatility in the Middle East, Fahad Araeshi, a Saudi renewable energy specialist and emissary to China, claims that "the agreement will not impact upon China's future relations with the Arab Gulf states, unless Beijing supports Iran militarily against the Gulf states, which is an unlikely outcome given China's extensive interests there".⁴⁵ Similarly, Saudi academic, Bin Kassib, and Saudi political analyst, al-Zaatar, both believe that the importance of the agreement is overstated. Bin Kassib declares that "Iran is like a sinking ship. China's relations with states in the region will not be affected by its cooperation with Tehran".⁴⁶ Al-Zaatar furthers this, asserting that Beijing is not offering the Iranian regime political support and that the PRC will never place its ties with other Middle Eastern states in peril in order to provide the Islamic Republic with political support and legitimacy.⁴⁷ In keeping with these comments, al-Abeed, a Saudi political analyst, states

unequivocally that Beijing's interests in the Arab Gulf outweigh its interests in Iran, something that leads Saudi columnist, al-Khashiban, to question whether the PRC "is only pursuing relations with Iran to worry the US".⁴⁸ The above commentaries suggest a more cool-headed view of the matter, namely the belief that Sino-Saudi relations will prosper despite recent developments in Sino-Iranian relations. When viewed in historical perspective, this claim is likely accurate. Whilst Saudi officials have attempted to lobby the PRC to cease its support for Iran, Sino-Saudi relations have continually developed and matured despite relatively similar progress in Sino-Iranian relations.

Observing the analysis from Saudi commentators as a whole, though, facilitates a more balanced view. Sino-Iranian relations trigger apprehension in Saudi Arabia that Iran may gain legitimacy from its relationship with China, thereby emboldening it to pursue foreign policies that Riyadh opposes. Furthermore, Beijing's relationship with Tehran may act as a thorn in Sino-Saudi relations, particularly if extensive military ties develop that directly threaten Arab Gulf states. This could damage China's image in the region, hampering its pursuit of myriad interests in the Persian Gulf. However, at present, it appears that China has not overstepped its mark. Whilst concerns about Sino-Iranian relations may be widespread among Saudi analysts, they largely believe that the Arab Gulf states are more important to China than the Islamic Republic is. Accordingly, it is unlikely that any immediate issues in Sino-Saudi relations will result from Beijing's relationship with Tehran.

Conclusions and perspectives

Balancing relations with regional rivals and seeking to remain above the fray in security disputes between regional actors has become a consistent pattern in China's approach to the Persian Gulf, and indeed the wider Middle East. Keen to maximise its gains in the region without alienating any partners, the PRC has engaged in a concerted strategy to manage relations with regional adversaries, especially Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Ever since the inception of Sino-Saudi relations, and indeed even prior, Saudi Arabia has attempted to encourage China away from the Islamic Republic. Largely, Riyadh has asserted that it can make up for any losses incurred by the PRC cutting relations with Iran. For several reasons, including Iran's abundant gas supplies, untapped markets, under-exploited energy opportunities, geographic vantage point, and

political willingness to align with China in case of tension in Sino-US relations, China has been sure to maintain and enhance its relationship with Tehran.

Analysis of the debate in Saudi Arabia surrounding the recent 25-year agreement between Iran and China highlights some important themes. First, there is widespread concern among Saudi commentators that the agreement could further encourage perceived Iranian aggression in the region. Second, several commentators note their concern about China's intentions, questioning whether the PRC is, and will continue to be, a reliable partner to Arab Gulf states. However, a similarly common theme is embodied in the belief that China's interests in Arab Gulf states will ultimately trump its interests in Iran, meaning that Saudi Arabia has little to fear in the long-term from Sino-Iranian relations. What is clear from all of the commentaries, though, is that uncertainty is building in Sino-Saudi relations. Cracks are emerging in China's strategy and questions are being posed about Beijing's intentions and reliability. Whilst these queries may pass without heralding any significant turbulence in Sino-Saudi relations, particularly as Saudis remind themselves of the extensive economic benefits that relations with China yield, Sino-Iranian relations are very much a topic of conversation in Riyadh.

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