

Gain Power Through No Power: Effectiveness of China's Roles in Conflict Resolution between Saudi Arabia and Iran Long-Standing Dispute

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini akan membahas tentang peran China sebagai penyelesaian konflik antara Arab Saudi dan Iran yang baru saja terjadi pada Maret 2023. Kedua negara Teluk memutuskan untuk bekerja menyelesaikan perbedaan mereka sesuai dengan seperangkat prinsip internasional dan dua kesepakatan bilateral yang dicapai pada 1998 dan 2001 setelah tujuh tahun permusuhan militer dan diplomatik. Kesepakatan untuk memulihkan hubungan diplomatik antara Riyadh dan Teheran diumumkan dalam pernyataan bersama oleh Arab Saudi, Iran, dan China pada 10 Maret dan Beijing menjadi tempat berlangsungnya negosiasi yang intens tersebut. Hal ini menunjukkan betapa besar peran dan pengaruh Cina di Timur Tengah, sehingga membuat peneliti mempertanyakan strategi apa yang mereka gunakan. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode penelitian kualitatif dengan mengumpulkan data dari jurnal dan penelitian terdahulu. Penelitian ini menemukan bahwa tujuan China di balik pengambilan peran tersebut adalah untuk memperkuat sikap mereka melalui strategi soft balancing. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini akan menjelaskan lebih jauh tentang strategi dan penggunaan pendekatan diplomasi China yang melengkapinya, sehingga memungkinkan China untuk mendapatkan kekuasaan tanpa menggunakan kekuatan sama sekali.

Kata kunci: Arab Saudi, China, Diplomasi, Iran, Soft Balancing

ABSTRACT

This research will discuss about the role of China as a conflict resolver between Saudi Arabia and Iran that just happened in March 2023. The two Gulf states decided to work toward settling their differences in accordance with a set of international principles and two bilateral agreements reached in 1998 and 2001 after seven years of military and diplomatic animosity. A deal to restore diplomatic ties between Riyadh and Tehran was announced in a joint statement by Saudi Arabia, Iran, and China on March 10 and Beijing become the place these intense negotiations take place. This shows how big China roles and influence in the middle east, thus bringing the researcher to a question what strategy they used. This research uses qualitative research method by collecting data from former journal and research. This research found that China goal behind taking the role is to strengthen their stances through soft balancing strategy. Thus, this research will explain more about the strategy and the use of China diplomacy approach that compliment it, making it possible for China to gain power without exerting one at all.

Keywords: China, Diplomacy, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Soft Balancing.

INTRODUCTION

In relations between countries, conflict is not an unfamiliar thing that could happened, it is an inevitable everyday occurrence. If a country has different views and incompatible goals between each other that could brought up a conflict. Thus, whenever a conflict happened there will always be a third party to be the mediator of a conflict, and their resolution can result in constructive change according to which party benefit the most from the issue and

its outcome. United States of America have been a loyal patron of the Middle East. The United States left World War II as the key player in the region. Jimmy Carter transformed what had previously been mostly an economic influence into a military commitment, ensuring the security of the main oil producers in the area. After the Soviet Army entered Afghanistan, Washington feared Soviet invasion in the Persian Gulf. The Islamic Republic of Iran, which had just been established, was the focus of subsequent U.S. administrations after the tyrannical Shah of Iran was overthrown. Washington supported Saddam Hussein's Iraq in its violent conflict with Iran, which lasted over ten years and claimed a million lives (Bandow, 2023).

In 1988, a U.S. naval warship shot down an Iranian airplane; the George H.W. Bush administration paid compensation but did not provide an apology (Bandow, 2023). President George W. Bush was urged by neocons to attack Tehran after conquering Iraq. Even after that war was over, a war party in Washington still promoted striking Iran. The Islamic Republic launched a proxy war against the KSA and other Middle Eastern superpowers in response to Washington's unrelenting hostility. President Donald Trump abandoned the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), reinstated crippling sanctions on Tehran, and killed a senior Iranian official while he was on a visit to Iraq, despite the fact that the Obama administration altered course to negotiate the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and freeze Tehran's nuclear program. The Islamic regime responded forcefully with both regular and proxy forces, not by caving in as the Trump administration ostensibly anticipated, but by restarting its nuclear activities.

The United States lacks the diplomatic means to stop the escalating situation because it has no relations with Tehran and is not even in communication with it. Beijing stepped up to fill the void. Both the American administration and Middle Eastern nations should be happy with the outcome. The most important stage is the restoration of diplomatic ties between Riyadh and Tehran, which were severed in 2016 (Bandow, 2023). An event that some believed to signal the end of American hegemony in the Middle East dominated the headlines in March 2023 with China, the biggest international foe of the United States, helped negotiate a deal between Iran and Saudi Arabia, two important American allies and foes diplomatic ties were restored after years of antagonism that had caused unrest in their neighbourhood, after years of Oman and Iraqi failure, China agreed to host and mediate them (Baycar, 2023).

The negotiation talks between the three nations declare that the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have reached an agreement, which includes a commitment to resume diplomatic relations and reopen their embassies and missions within a two-month window. They also affirm their commitment to respecting each other's sovereignties and refraining from meddling in one another's internal affairs. They also agreed that the foreign ministers of both nations should get together to put this into action, arrange for the return of their ambassadors, and talk about ways to improve bilateral relations. Both the Security Cooperation Agreement and the General Agreement for Cooperation in the Fields of Economy, Trade, Investment, Technology, Science, Culture, Sports, and Youth, both of which were signed on 2/2/1419 (H), corresponding to 27/5/1998, were also agreed to be put into effect (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023). Based on the background, the researcher believes that as a rising power, China tries to shift US hegemonies in the Middle East by taking Iran and Saudi Arabia under its wing, starting from economic side. Nevertheless, is China capable on shifting power in the middle east or they have a much bigger plan, the question that came up in analysing this issue is *"What Strategy Does China Use in Achieving Its Goals behind The Role of a Peace Negotiator Between Iran and Saudi?"*

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The researcher uses power balancing theory as a framework to analyse this case. Since this "state of affairs" must be achieved in some way, the concept of a balance of power only offers a partial answer to the issue of anarchy in the international system. The establishment of a stable system results from states moving to match the efforts of rivals because each state's primary goal is survival. This stability must, however, be continually restored. States' capacities frequently alter, inevitably causing instability in a stable system (Sheehan, 1996). According to Waltz, this kind of conduct is natural and unconscious, and anarchic systems tend to reach the right form of equilibrium for the way power is distributed. In light of this, it may be preferable to think about a balancing of power rather than a balance of power, as Lasswell notes (Lasswell, 1965). The two types of balancing behaviour are efforts to increase one's own power and attempts to undermine or diminish the adversary. If a state is powerful, authorities will take action to prevent the state from becoming weaker as a result of other states' efforts to strike a balance. Policymakers will suggest actions that will lessen the

likelihood of being taken advantage of if the state is weak. In this case the researcher will specify the framework into soft balancing.

States must nonetheless be aware that US dominance poses at least a possible threat in this soft balancing unipolar system, and they should respond appropriately. According to certain theories, governments have indeed been balancing, but this conduct has taken the form of "soft balancing" as opposed to traditional "hard balancing," which entails activities that do not explicitly threaten military supremacy but instead aim to restrain power. Soft balancing techniques are "non-military tools to frustrate, delay, and undermine aggressive US military policies." States can employ a variety of strategies in a soft balancing plan. Territorial denial can, in the first place, limit a state's capacity for forceful action. Second, involving global institutions in diplomacy can weaken its legitimacy both domestically and internationally. Third, since future military capabilities typically stem from economic strength, excluding a state from regional economic frameworks may have a negative impact on such capabilities. Finally, by interacting with other states in certain ways, the balancer conveys its determination to thwart the goals of the big power and suggests that potential future collaboration may include more hard balancing (Gill, n.d.).

METHODS

The researcher will conduct this research through qualitative method. This type of research contains details about the primary phenomenon being studied, research participants, and the study's setting. By analysing a symptom, facts, and events in the field; developing a hypothesis related to the concepts and principles of education based on information and data that occur in the study case. The researcher will analyse this issue by collecting and comparing with data from precedent journal, books, articles, and events.

DISCUSSION

As a rising power, especially in economy, China starts to expand their scope of influence. Iran and Saudi Arabia are likely the two most important regional powers in the Persian Gulf, where there are many complex opposing interests. The United States, which favours Saudi Arabia over Iran, dominates militarily. Most of the world's oil, including that imported by the People's Republic of China (PRC), comes from the Gulf; in 2014, 17% of China's oil imports came from Saudi Arabia and 9% from Iran. More than half of China's oil imports arrive at its ports via the Straits of Hormuz, the Straits of Malacca, and the South China Sea (EIA, 2015). China is a major consumer of Iranian oil and signed a 25-year economic

cooperation agreement with Tehran in March 2021 (International Crisis Group, 2023). Saudi Arabia's main trading partner is China. China is the only nation in a position to exert pressure on Iran after the agreement was made and to reassure Saudi Arabia. Because of this, it would be a big loss for China if they didn't successfully navigate Saudi and Iran rivalry to expand their importance in middle east.

According to a recent Policy Alert by Institute Goldberger Fellow Grant Rumley and Institute Senior Fellow Henry Rome, "Beijing has been dabbling in Middle East diplomacy for years—most recently via President Xi Jinping's December trip to chair regional summits in Saudi Arabia—but with little to show for its efforts." (Rome & Rumley, 2023). As it is known that the current US president and Saudi leader does not have the best relations. owing to the paternalistic attitude of the United States, which believes that regional nations should adopt the American way even if it does not serve their national interests. It is also crucial to keep in mind that, due to its close ties to Israel and its hostility toward Iran, the United States has never been regarded as an impartial and fair mediator in Middle Eastern disputes. Furthermore, due to the United States' bungled withdrawal from Afghanistan and its abandoning of the JCPOA, its actions are now called to as "flip-flop" diplomacy because of its self-serving, reactionary nature and disregard for friends (Baycar, 2023). This shows that by making China into their peace negotiator, the middle east countries gave signal that US role in the middle east could be replaced and also how China influence have grown in the middle east for them to take China side.

Soft-Balancing as China Weapon

China, in strengthening their position used soft balancing strategy rather than hard balancing. China's soft balancing strategy has been successful in two ways: by promoting multilateral institutions that do not include the US and by fortifying bilateral ties with nations that either have weak ties to the US at the moment or are seen by China as having the potential or desire to turn away from US influence (Gill, n.d.). Both of these strategies are closely related to China's plan for securing resource access. Middle Eastern nations have a non-US revenue source in China. Most of the Middle East has a significant domestic anti-American sentiment, and most of those who live in Muslim-majority nations worry that US influence will eventually be used against them. In addition to being smart business, forging closer connections with China can help Middle Eastern regimes gain more domestic support by weakening their ties to the US. Middle Eastern nations will be less likely to collaborate with

the US as Chinese influence increases, limiting the US's capacity to take unilateral action. Which makes the first China soft balancing way a successful thing, since they succeed in promoting institutions that exclude US.

The second way of forging bilateral ties with nations that have weak ties with US recently is exactly what China been doing as peacemaker between Iran and Saudi. As both countries currently have a shaky relation with US, China came in to act as a new flexible mediator that makes US credibility as a mediator started being questioned as unreliable and often take sides in conflicts. Thus, in taking the role as peace negotiator between Iran and Saudi China was able to play this role because, despite American sanctions on Iran, it has continued to maintain relations with both nations and buys oil from both OPEC members. The president of Iran recently travelled to China. Saudi Arabia, which is China's primary oil supplier, and Saudi Arabia have good relations. During a high-profile visit to the kingdom in December, Chinese President Xi Jinping was warmly welcomed and demonstrated Beijing's ambitions to increase its influence in the Gulf, a region that has historically been closely allied with the United States in terms of security. Senior research fellow Yu Jie at the London-based think tank Chatham House called the declaration a significant diplomatic victory for China (Batrawy, 2023). China's soft balancing approach has two final objectives that are linked to one another. China is in desperate need of both allies and access to resources which explain they active participation as a peacemaker in the middle east region. In addition to having \$1.95 trillion in foreign exchange reserves, it also needs resources and wants to gain influence (Gill, n.d.).

Saudi Arabia and Iran each have strong arguments for making China the mediator of their conflict. Tehran can show that it is not as isolated or reliant on Moscow as the Western politicians who are supporting sanctions would have it to be by having Beijing mediate a deal. Iran is proud of its business ties with China. Tehran is eager to highlight its remaining alliances, particularly with Beijing, the main superpower rival of the United States. As international pressure on Iran grows, negotiations to revive the 2015 nuclear deal have stalled, anti-regime protests have continued, and the economic crisis is getting worse (International Crisis Group, 2023). From Saudi Arabia side, the agreement enables Riyadh to demonstrate that it is not only dependent on Washington. Diversifying its connections is crucial given recent tensions with the United States. Riyadh thinks that because the United States is gradually leaving the Middle East, it is no longer as reliable of a security guarantee as it once was. It dislikes when the United States tries to control what it does, as it did in late

2022 when the Biden administration pushed it to increase crude production to lower oil prices (International Crisis Group, 2023).

Joshua Kurlantzick claims that China's leadership has three main goals: to keep its borders peaceful and stable; to gather enough resources to sustain its economy; and to forge a network of allies who share Beijing's concerns about foreign meddling in domestic matters (Kurlantzick, 2007). China soft balancing effectiveness also boosted by their Non-alignment and Non-intervention (NANI) principle on their approach. NANI aids China in establishing a reputation for neutrality and impartiality among regional governments unlike Washington's alliance links with local actors may not help to convince other countries that it is an honest broker. For instance, Washington's compliance with Israel's harsh policy in mediating between the Israelis and Palestinians has prolonged rather than eased the peace process. NANI also assists China in building up significant soft power so that it may act as a mediator in the area. In addition to hard power factors like alliance networks and military presence, soft power factors like the presentation of a moral image also contribute to an intermediary's leverage and credibility.

CONCLUSION

In expanding its influence in the middle east, China active role as the new peacemaker have the interest in aiming US spot in the middle east region. As a rising hegemonies the researcher believe with the current US bad relations with the middle east if they didn't fix it in by 2050 probably China could fully replaced US power. Securing their spot by the opportunities of the weakening US ties with the middle east countries, China uses soft balancing strategy to gain more power. The researcher believes China use this strategy fully knowing if they use hard balancing immediately in the middle east, China won't be successful since US still have their military stationed spread in the middle east. This strategy is really the best and most effective strategy that suit China interest. With NANI as their principle to complement their soft balancing strategy increased their effectiveness in succeeding expanding their influence, not only to one actor, the county, but also gain support from individuals' actor that have anti-American sentiment in the gulf region. Countries in the middle east also benefit more with China as their mediator, since US start becoming 'weaker' and US also deemed unfair when solving issue in the middle east, US credibility as a peacemaker become questioned which once again boosted China influence. By having

their ‘reconciliation’ in Beijing shows that without exerting their power, China already successfully gains power in the middle east with no power.

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