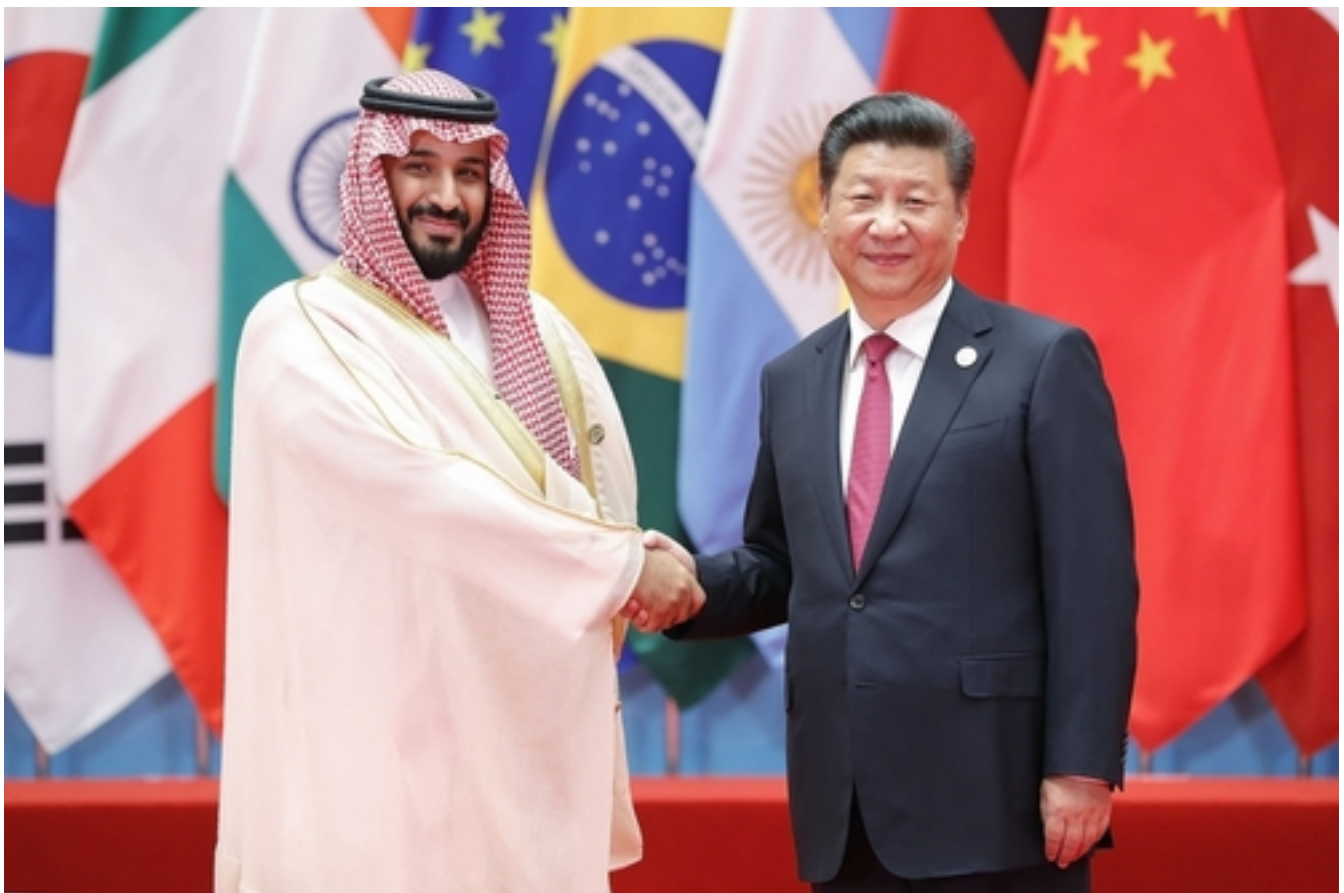




By: The Editorial Board

China's noisy diplomatic debut in the Middle East



China's diplomatic debut in the Middle East has been impressive. There was no hint that Iran and Saudi Arabia were on the verge of a major rapprochement before the deal was announced in Beijing.

With the mediation of China, the two major regional powers concluded an agreement in Beijing on the restoration of diplomatic relations and the reopening of embassies in their capitals.

This put a stop to great tension in the Gulf that has been ongoing for seven years, since ties were severed after the attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran in protest against the assassination of a Shiite religious leader in Saudi Arabia.

Since then, both regional powers have played an important role in the growing conflicts in the region: in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen.

The devastating war in Yemen, which is entering its eighth year, is emerging as the first peaceful result of the agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Although the Beijing agreement does not explicitly mention this or any other regional conflict, its tone opens the door to broader bilateral cooperation than the reactivation of diplomatic relations and the return of ambassadors.

Low risk and high reward

As the host, mediator, and particularly as the guarantor of this agreement, China has made a major breakthrough in its influence in the Middle East.

The agreement in Beijing was formatted as a trilateral one, so China formally took credit for its achievement. This was emphasised by highlighting the role of Chinese leader Xi Jinping as the initiator of this agreement.

“It’s a relatively low-risk and high-reward activity for China to engage in because the Chinese are not committed to any particular

outcome”, said Robert Mogielnicki, senior resident scholar at the Arab Gulf State Institute in Washington, DC to Al Jazeera.

The list of those satisfied with this agreement is much longer than those for whom the agreement was an unpleasant surprise.

China has taken advantage of the passivity that the US has been demonstrating in the region, and even more so has taken the advantage of its direct attachment and support to those parties in regional conflicts that confront pro-Iranian proxies.

With this agreement, China is diplomatically capitalising on its long economic presence in the region, where financial interest has been decisive, rather than political favouritism.

It thus became an acceptable partner and even a mediator role in concluding an important diplomatic agreement, because both sides in the conflict gained confidence in Beijing.

Beijing's peace-making motive to mediate between the two warring regional powers has a commercial background, because China, as the biggest buyer of oil from both countries, would be the biggest victim of the possible flare-up of regional conflicts.

Is Riyadh blackmailing the USA?

Riyadh can be satisfied, primarily because they have demonstrated the will to diversify their strategic partnerships, and not just stick to traditional political, economic and security ties with the US.

The agreement in Beijing may appear to some in Washington as Riyadh's "blackmail", which would be excessive.

But it is quite rational to evaluate Riyadh's move as a kind of pressure on the US to provide Saudi Arabia with greater security guarantees and support for the construction of a civilian nuclear programme.

Tehran must ultimately be satisfied with the

deal in Beijing, because they can now relax their international diplomatic isolation and provide much-needed space to devote themselves to the resolution of internal tensions.

The US is waiting for the effects of the agreement

Washington is not too happy about this agreement, primarily because China is entering the area where the US has had a kind of diplomatic and security monopoly for decades.

The first reactions are principled, followed by rhetoric that should convince close partners that the US is not backing down.

“I would stridently push back on this idea that we’re stepping back in the Middle East - far from it”, National Security Council spokesman John Kirby told reporters last Friday, after the news of the signing of the agreement in Beijing.

According to his statement, the US will wait to see the effects of the agreement, because they do not have much confidence in the strength of the promises of the regime in Tehran.

But that is probably the maximum that the administration in Washington could communicate at this time.

The agreement in Beijing opened up scope for expectations that Iran and Saudi Arabia are rapidly moving towards membership in the BRICS bloc, and as a hint for the establishment (possible dominance) of the petro-yuan as an alternative to the dollar.

However, this is the wishful thinking of anti-US oriented observers, with little prospect of ever being realised.

China's major penetration of the global political and security stage in the Persian Gulf, one of its most complex and risky zones, is evident.

It is a big challenge for Joe Biden’s administration plans, at an unfavourable moment for him, when his foreign policy strategies are increasingly adapting to his pre-election plans, where there is less room for error correction.

This timing was recognised as favourable in each of the three capitals, which concluded the agreement in Beijing.

“The Saudis see a multipolar future with China and Russia as important partners - fellow autocrats who don’t ask questions about human rights. But it’s also a real slap in the face to Biden. At a time when US-China relations are getting colder, Mohammed Bin Salman is getting cosier with Beijing”, said Aaron David Miller, a veteran US negotiator in the Middle East, to The Wall Street Journal.