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Ripeness in the Middle East: Unpacking Iran-Saudi Arabia Rapprochement and China's New-found Role

Tayyaba Khurshid¹, Hassaan Malik²

Abstract

Since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Iran and Saudi Arabia have primarily competed for dominance, especially in the Middle East, through proxies. As a consequence, the armed conflicts in Yemen, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon have served as geostrategic battlegrounds for both the states. The diplomatic relations between the two countries were severed on 3 January 2016, following an attack on the Saudi Arabian embassy in Tehran and the Saudi consulate in Mashhad by protesters demonstrating against the execution of a prominent Saudi Arabian Shi'a cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr. The diplomatic relations remained suspended for the next seven years. However, on 10 March 2023, a trilateral peace agreement was successfully mediated by China. The paper has employed Ripeness Theory to explain various factors behind their rapprochement by using qualitative research methodology to posit that decision-makers in both Tehran and Riyadh must have perceived an Imminent Mutual Catastrophe (IMC) and a Mutually Hurting Stalemate (MHS), which could have resulted in the ripening of the conflict for resolution. The paper also explains that the primary motivation behind China's mediation could have been a multitude of individual, state-level and global factors.

Keywords: Iran, Saudi Arabia, Middle East, China, Ripeness Theory, Conflict Resolution

¹ Tayyaba Khurshid is a Research and Liaison Officer at the Center for International Strategic Studies (CISS), Azad Jammu and Kashmir.

² Hassan Malik is a School of Politics and International Relations graduate from Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad.

1. Introduction

Since the suspension of diplomatic ties on 3 January 2016, following an attack on the Saudi Arabian embassy in Tehran and the Saudi consulate in Mashhad by protesters demonstrating against the execution of a prominent Saudi Arabian Shi'a cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, the bilateral relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia has primarily defined conflict dynamics in the Middle Eastern region.³ Consequently, the armed conflicts in Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon have served as geostrategic battlegrounds for both the states.⁴ On 10 March 2023, mainly due to China's peacemaking efforts, Iran and Saudi Arabia agreed to reestablish diplomatic relations within two months, after seven years of severed ties.⁵ Notably, this was not the first attempt at mediation. Following the Houthi attacks on two oil refineries in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, which has cordial relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia, offered to mediate between the two states.⁶ Pakistan's then Prime Minister Imran Khan had visited Iran to pacify tensions but to no avail.⁷ Later, Iraq also hosted five rounds of Iran-Saudi negotiations between 2020 and 2022, but no substantial results were achieved.⁸

This paper utilizes the Ripeness Theory of conflict resolution, proposed by William Zartman (1985), to explain why China was successful in brokering a rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia and how it differed from

³ Ben Hubbard, "Iranian Protesters Ransack Saudi Embassy after Execution of Shiite Cleric," *The New York Times*, accessed January 2, 2016, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/03/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-executes-47-sheikh-nimr-shiite-cleric.html>.

⁴ Heiko Wimmen et al., "The Impact of the Saudi-Iranian Rapprochement on Middle East Conflicts," International Crisis Group, accessed April 19, 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran-saudi-arabia/impact-saudi-iranian>.

⁵ Dina Esfandiary and Anna Jacobs, "How Beijing Helped Riyadh and Tehran Reach a Detente," www.crisisgroup.org, accessed March 17, 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa-saudi-arabia-iran-china/how-beijing-helped-riyadh-and-tehran-reach-detente>.

⁶ "Two Major Saudi Oil Installations Hit by Drone Strike and U.S. Blames Iran - The New York Times," accessed January 27, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/14/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-refineries-drone-attack.html>.

⁷ "Pakistan's Imran Khan in Tehran to Facilitate Iran-Saudi Talks | Imran Khan News | *Al Jazeera*," accessed January 27, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/13/pakistans-imran-khan-in-tehran-to-facilitate-iran-saudi-talks>.

⁸ Mohammad Salami, "Saudi-Iranian Reconciliation and Its Impact on Iraq," cfri-irak.com, n.d., accessed January 27, 2025, <https://cfri-irak.com/en/article/saudi-iranian-reconciliation-and-its-impact-on-iraq-2023-05-19>.

previous endeavors by other states. The first section expands on the background of the bilateral relationship and each state's relationship with China. The second section presents the theoretical framework for analyzing and explaining the development. The Ripeness Theory seeks to identify the development of two phenomena: Imminent Mutual Catastrophe (IMC) and Mutually Hurting Stalemate (MHS). This paper argues that a regional stalemate, together with the wave of Arab states' recognition of Israel and nuclear ambitions, served as an IMC for both states to find a resolution. The discussion section offers a detailed analysis of the aforementioned threat perception by Iran and Saudi Arabia, which could have led to the realization of the MHS that might have encouraged both parties to engage in diplomacy and negotiations with China.

1.1. Background

The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, which replaced the monarchy with a theocratic system, set the stage for a rivalry between Shi'a-majority Iran and Sunni-majority Saudi Arabia, both vying for regional dominance. Their strained relationship has been fueled by differences in political systems, religious beliefs, and regional interests. Furthermore, post-revolutionary Iran, under the leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, sought to export its revolutionary ideology to other countries in the region, including Saudi Arabia, which is governed by a Sunni monarchy.⁹ Tensions between the two escalated as the Saudi monarchy viewed Iran's theocratic ideology as a direct threat to its stability. Before the revolution, the two countries maintained a cold, peaceful relationship. However, their conflict deepened after the revolution, leading to a competition for leadership within the broader Muslim Ummah, specifically in the Middle East.

Throughout the 1980s, Saddam Hussein's Iraq was supported by Saudi Arabia during the Iran-Iraq war.¹⁰ The decade-long conflict, fought primarily along sectarian lines, led to more than fifty thousand deaths and affected countless lives by the prolonged effects of war.¹¹ During the final decade of the 20th century, both sides pursued diplomatic engagement to lower tension and

⁹ Joseph A. Kéchichian, "Iran-Saudi Arabia Relations," *The Middle East Journal* 64, no. 4 (2010): 537-552.

¹⁰ Husain Amin, "Iran-Saudi Arabia Relations since the Iranian Revolution," *The Middle East Journal* 47, no. 4 (1993), 617-633.

¹¹ Satgin Hamrah, "The Iran-Iraq War and Sectarianism in the Middle East," *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, accessed March 14, 2016, <https://www.fletcherforum.org/home/2016/9/13/the-iran-iraq-war-and-sectarianism-in-the-middle-east>.

enhance the relationship. The termination of the Gulf War (1991) presented an opportunity for cooperation in addressing regional issues and led to a thaw.¹² In 1997, the then Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud attended the Organization of Islamic Cooperation's (OIC) Tehran summit. A year later, in 1998, Iran's President Mohammed Khatami paid a reciprocal visit to Riyadh. However, by the time the 9/11 attacks took place, the bonhomie had cooled down. With the American entrance into the regional security apparatus, neither state's foreign policy goals allowed for friendly ties. After 9/11, Saudi Arabia blamed Iran for state-sponsored terrorism, while Iran accused Saudi Arabia of being too close to the United States.¹³ In 2003, a terrorist attack in Riyadh killed thirty-nine foreigners, mostly American trainers, working with the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG).¹⁴ Saudi and American officials claimed that the perpetrators from Al-Qaeda planned the attack in Iran and accused the state of complicity.¹⁵ Yemen's internal political conflicts further soured their relations. Historically, Iran and Saudi Arabia have supported opposite sides in the Syrian, Yemeni and Iraqi conflicts.¹⁶ Notably, the relationship between these two states is mainly characterized by mutual suspicion and distrust.¹⁷

1.2. Political Systems of Iran and Saudi Arabia

Iran is an Islamic Republic with a theocratic political system. The Supreme Leader, a religious cleric, is the highest authority in the country and influences all aspects of government. The President is elected by popular vote, but the office is limited in political authority; the President must work under the guidance of the Supreme Leader. The interpretation of the Islamic system specific to the Iranian political system grants the clerics an overarching

¹² Madawi al-Rasheed, "The Dilemma of Saudi-Iranian Relations," *The Washington Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (2016): 97-114.

¹³ Toby Jones, "Iran-Saudi Arabia Relations: A Brief History," *BBC News*, accessed March 25, 2023, www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35252834.

¹⁴ "Body Count Rises after Saudi Bombing | News | *Al Jazeera*," accessed January 27, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2003/5/13/body-count-rises-after-saudi-bombing>.

¹⁵ Seth G. Jones, "Al Qaeda in Iran," *Foreign Affairs*, accessed January 29, 2012, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2012-01-29/al-qaeda-iran>.

¹⁶ Toby Jones, "Iran-Saudi Arabia Relations: A Brief History," *BBC News*, accessed March 25, 2023, www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35252834.

¹⁷ Derika Weddington, "Rivalry in the Middle East: The History of Saudi-Iranian Relations Rivalry in the Middle East: The History of Saudi-Iranian Relations and Its Implications on American Foreign Policy and Its Implications on American Foreign Policy," accessed 2017, <https://bearworks.missouristate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4139&context=theses>.

¹⁸ Cameron Glenn, "Iran v Saudi Arabia: Government & Ideology," *The Iran Primer*, accessed March 25, 2023, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2016/jan/04/iran-v-saudi-arabia-government-ideology>.

influence over the political decision-making process.¹⁸

Whereas Saudi Arabia is a monarchy. The King is the head of the state and has absolute power over the government. Islamic law and traditions guide governance. Although the religious establishment influences day-to-day affairs, Saudi Arabia's governance model differs significantly from Iran's. The mutual distaste for each other's source of political power adds to the many points of contention in the Saudi-Iran relationship. Its spillover effects are observed in conflicts across the Middle East. Saudi officials accuse Iran of backing Shi'a militias in Yemen, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq. In 2019, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir accused Iran of being the world's chief sponsor of terrorism.¹⁹

1.3. Religious System of Iran and Saudi Arabia

Iran and Saudi Arabia are both Muslim-majority states, but each adheres to a different branch of Islam, which adds to the conflict. Iran is the largest Shi'a-majority country in the world. The Iranian Revolution derived legitimacy from its religious identity and ties to the Shi'a religious establishment. At the same time, Saudi Arabia is predominantly a Sunni-majority state, the largest branch of Islam. The state derives its legitimacy from its guardianship of Mecca and Medina and its role as the custodian of Islam's two holiest sites.

Both states accuse each other of promoting their religious ideology and seeking to undermine the other's religious identity. Iran accuses Saudi Arabia of promoting a puritanical and ultra-orthodox form of Sunni Islam, known as Wahhabism, which Shi'a consider heretical.²⁰ Saudi Arabia accuses Iran of seeking to export its revolutionary ideology abroad through regional proxies. As a result, both sides have supported different factions in conflicts such as the Syrian Civil War and the Yemeni Civil War.²¹ Thus, the sectarian conflict spills into their struggle for regional dominance.

¹⁹ "Saudi Minister Calls out Iran for 'accusing Others' While Being 'World's Chief Sponsor of Terrorism,'" DAWN.COM, accessed March 26, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1464583>.

²⁰ Yasmine Farouk, Peter Mandaville and Stéphane Lacroix, "Wahhabism and the World: Understanding Saudi Arabia's Global Influence on Islam," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, accessed March 26, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/05/23/wahhabism-and-world-understanding-saudi-arabia-s-global-influence-on-islam-event-7875>.

²¹ Kevin Dupont, "Religion or Politics? An Analysis of Sectarian Relations Between Iran and Saudi Arabia," *Cornell Policy Review*, accessed March 26, 2023, <http://www.cornellpolicyreview.com/religion-politics-iran-saudi-arabia/?pdf=4995>.

1.4. Divergent Regional Interests

Conflicting interests and aspirations characterize the Iran-Saudi Arabia relationship. These two rivals' primary sources of contention are religious, geopolitical, and economic.

1.4.1. Geopolitical Ambitions

Geopolitical dominance plays a key role in the complex power dynamics of the Middle East. As Iran and Saudi Arabia perceive each other's ambitions as mutually exclusive, their tussle has been a source of constant air of tension across the region. Iran views itself as the preeminent Shi'a power, guiding its regional strategy, which includes supporting Shi'a groups and regimes over whom it has influence, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and the Bashar al-Assad government in Syria. Iran's nuclear program is another critical factor.

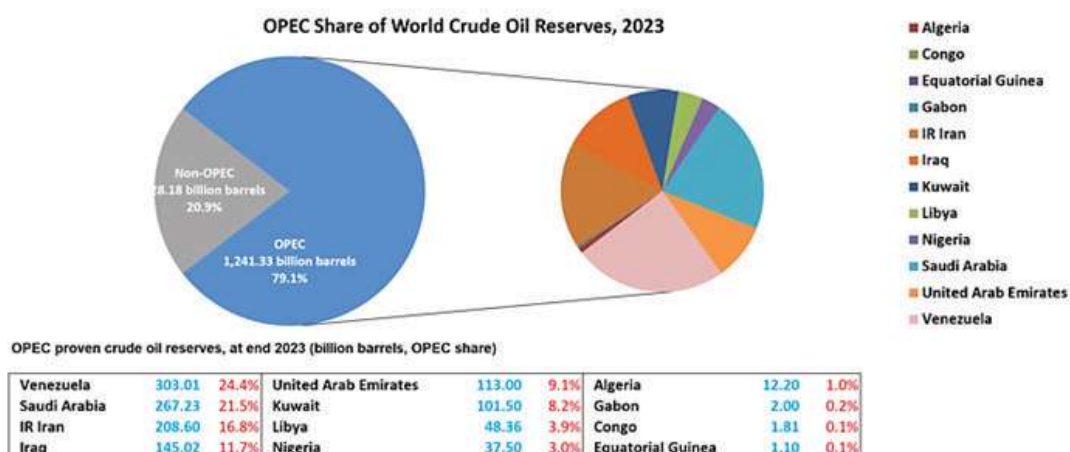
Saudi Arabia has remained the custodian of Mecca and Medina and assumed the responsibility of protecting Sunni Islam. This has led Saudi Arabia to maintain a leadership position among Muslim countries, which has posed a challenge to Iran. The competition for dominance has led two states to support and influence conflicts and alliances against each other. To counter Iran's regional influence, Saudi Arabia positioned itself with the Western allies and the United States and aligned with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). It supports Sunni groups and governments that oppose Iran, including Bahrain and the groups opposed to former Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad. On the other hand, Iran competes for influence through proxy groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and Shi'a militias in Iraq and Syria.

Saudi Arabia views itself as the protector of Sunni Islam and the custodian of Mecca and Medina, which shapes its geopolitical interests in maintaining leadership within the Muslim world. As a result, Iran represents a significant challenge to this role. In response, Saudi Arabia supports Sunni groups and governments that oppose Iran, such as Bahrain and the former Syrian opposition. The Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC), conceived by Saudi Arabia, includes Sunni-majority nations. Iran has consequently criticized it as an alliance aimed against Shi'a interests.

1.4.2. Economic Competition

Iran and Saudi Arabia are major oil producers and exporters. Both compete to maintain market share and influence the global oil price. Both countries have previously engaged in price wars to undercut each other's oil exports and gain a larger market share. Iran was the third-largest OPEC crude oil producer in 2023; oil exports accounted for more than 40% of Iran's total export revenue.²² Despite having the third-largest oil reserves, just behind Venezuela and Saudi Arabia, the US economic sanctions hurt Iran's ambitious expansion plans. After the US withdrawal rendered the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) ineffective in 2018, Iran has sought ways to counter the unilateral American sanctions that were reimposed.

OPEC Share of World Crude Oil Reserves, 2023



Source: OPEC Annual Statistical Bulletin 2024²³

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia is the world's second-largest oil producer and the largest exporter; its economy heavily depends on oil revenue (46%).²⁴ It shares a national interest with Iran in influencing international oil prices. The country has launched several initiatives to diversify its economy, the most ambitious being Vision 2030, which promotes non-oil sectors of the economy and attracts foreign direct investment. Despite these diverging interests in political, economic and regional realms, China's footprint in the

²² "Iran (IRN) Exports, Imports, and Trade Partners," oec.world, n.d., <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/irn>.

²³ OPEC, "OPEC: OPEC Share of World Crude Oil Reserves," Opec.org (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, 2024), https://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/data_graphs/330.html.

²⁴ "Saudi Arabia GDP Growth Oil Sector - 2022 Data - 2023 Forecast - 2011-2021 Historical," accessed March 30, 2023, <https://tradingeconomics.com/saudi-arabia/gdp-growth-oil-sector>.

Middle East has played a vital role in the relationship between these two regional rivals.

1.5. China's Footprint in the Middle East

After China overtook Japan to become the world's 2nd largest economy (2010), it has cautiously expanded beyond East Asia to play an increasingly significant international role, including in the Middle East. Although it happened simultaneously with the United States' Pivot to Asia, the evidence does not suggest that China seeks to replace the United States. However, China has grown closer to historical American allies including Iran and Saudi Arabia. Both have joined China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China's growing presence in the Middle East is primarily driven by its need to secure energy resources and expand its economic influence.

China's BRI has recently made significant inroads in the Middle East, bringing infrastructure projects, ports and oil and gas fields. Cordial relations with important regional players, including Iran and Saudi Arabia, are key for China to preserve its interests and the security of its citizens.

1.5.1 Iran-China Cooperation

China and Iran have been working to regain trade volume by circumventing the latter's unilateral sanctions. In 2020, they signed a 25-year comprehensive strategic partnership agreement that includes energy, infrastructure and industry cooperation.²⁵ Iran-China-Russia naval exercise began in 2019 and has since expanded to include Pakistan, Oman, and UAE.²⁶ Moreover, China has invested in Iran's development projects, such as a high-speed railway line connecting Tehran to Mashhad.²⁷ China has been a strong supporter of Iran in the international community, including in its opposition to United States sanctions on Iran.

²⁵ "Full Text of Joint Statement on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between I.R. Iran, P.R. China," accessed March 27, 2023, <https://www.president.ir/EN/91435>.

²⁶ "China, Russia and Iran Hold Joint Naval Drills in Gulf of Oman," accessed March 30, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/15/china-russia-iran-hold-joint-naval-drills-in-gulf-of-oman>.

²⁷ "First Freight Train from China Arrives in Iran in 'Silk Road' Boost: Media," Reuters, last modified February 16, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-iran-railway-idUSKCN0VP0W8>.

1.5.2 Saudi Arabia-China Cooperation

China and Saudi Arabia cooperate in energy and development sectors. China has also invested heavily in Saudi Arabia's infrastructure and development projects.²⁸ Beijing has remained neutral on regional conflicts such as the Yemeni civil war, but has expressed support for Saudi Arabia's efforts to maintain regional stability.

China's unique relationship with Middle Eastern states has placed it in a favorable position as a trustworthy mediator. Its commitment to sovereignty and non-interference makes it an attractive third party.

2. Theorizing the Puzzle

The historical roots of the protracted conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia goes deep. However, the recent dynamism of the international system has opened windows of opportunity for reconciliation. Both sides met the Iraqi mediation with cautious optimism, as they recognized the benefits of de-escalating tensions, finding common ground in addressing regional security challenges and paving a way out of the Yemen War.²⁹

In 2020, Pakistan's proposal for mediation received a lackadaisical response. However, starting in April 2021, Iraq's mediation efforts led to multiple rounds of talks and showed promising results. Despite the absence of concrete commitments, the Baghdad Talks led to the perception of a non-violent way out. The peace agreement resulted on 10 March 2023, mediated by China this time.

Taking a cue from the Ripeness Theory put forward by William Zartman, it may be argued that both sides recognized the existence of a stalemate in their bilateral engagements and demonstrated a willingness to negotiate. Additionally, the paper employed the IMC model to posit that decision-makers on both sides and the systemic factors contributed to recognizing the urgent need for conflict resolution and reconciliation.

²⁸ Lama Alhamawi, "Strength in Numbers: Saudi Arabia and China Seal 35 Deals Worth \$30bn during Xi Jinping's Visit," *Arab News*, accessed December 8, 2022, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2213196/business-economy>.

²⁹ Maziar Motamedi, "Iran, Saudi Arabia Hold Fifth Round of Talks in Baghdad," accessed March 23, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/23/iran-and-saudi-arabia-hold-stalled-5th-round-of-talks-in-baghdad>.

2.1. Ripeness of Conflict

Conflict Management (CM) theorist William Zartman proposed and developed the concept of ‘ripeness’ of conflict. He conceives it as an indicator of a most favorable time for the commencement of peace process. According to Zartman, ripeness is that point on the conflict arc at which conflicting parties mutually perceive it most probable—and highly desired—to find a “way out” of the violent conflict.³⁰ They may then engage in negotiations themselves or be employed by a mediator. However, Ripeness Theory does not claim that a successful settlement will be reached. It lacks predictive power; one cannot extend its analytical powers beyond identifying already ripened conflicts—indicated by specific circumstances—and predicting ripeness accurately. Nevertheless, while acknowledging this limitation, Zartman claimed the predictability of two key elements, which favor the “inauguration of negotiations.”³¹ These included a clear-cut military stalemate and a potential way out of conflicts.

Zartman argued that ripeness may be identifiable by objective (ground realities indicating a military stalemate) and subjective (perceptual) conditions. However, ripeness is a mutual perception that must arise in all or most conflict parties to initiate a search for a way out. At this point, the costs are assumed to have climbed to an unbearable level, whereas perceived benefits are not commensurable, and therefore unwanted.

Ripeness theorists have developed multiple analytical models of ripeness, ranging from rational actor decision-making assessments to irrational events that may lead conflicting parties to seek a way out. The paper has explored two models: Mutually Hurting Stalemate (MHS) and Imminent Mutual Catastrophe (IMC). Although Zartman developed both models separately, critiques have pointed towards the mutually reinforcing nature of MHS and IMC. Theorists have since questioned whether these can be separated from each other when analyzing a conflict for ripeness.³² The authors have defined them separately and combined them into their theoretical framework to improve upon their explanatory power.

³⁰ Conflict management scholarship identifies conflict as manifestation of violence, whereas other approaches, including conflict transformation conceptualize ‘conflict’ and ‘violence’ separately and discourage using the two concepts interchangeably (see Johan Galtung, “Peace by peaceful conflict transformation – the TRANSCEND approach”, in *Handbook of Peace and Conflict Studies*, ed. C. Weibel and J. Galtung (London: Routledge, 2007)

³¹ William Zartman, “The Timing of Peace Initiatives: Hurting Stalemates and Ripe Moments”, *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics* 1, no. 1 (September 2001): 8.

³² Christopher Mitchell, “The right moment: Notes on four models of “ripeness”, *Paradigms* 9, no. 2, 38-52, DOI: 10.1080/13600829508443085

2.1.1. Mutually Hurting Stalemate (MHS)

The MHS model was the first such model developed by the pioneer of the Ripeness theory himself. Zartman identified a stalemate as the point whereby costs outrun objective and/or perceived benefits and all (or most) parties realize their inability to achieve victory. To conceptualize what ripeness looks like, Zartman visualized a conflict like a terrain characterized by its highs and lows, equated to escalation and dormancy, respectively, whereas ripeness is an unending flat plateau. This realization must be mutual, with no hope for a complete victory for either side or attainment of one's goals by the continuance of violent effort.

In addition to MHS, Zartman identified the requirement of a realistic and acceptable "way out" to accompany MHS. Conflict parties may identify it themselves, or be facilitated by a third party. Without such a possibility, no side would have a justifiable reason to move past the violence and seek non-violent, mutually satisfactory pathways towards their goals. He acknowledged the presence of a "valid spokesman" for all parties as a third element. Still, he classified it as a structural component separate from the perceptual aspects mentioned earlier and of secondary importance.³³

2.1.2. Imminent Mutual Catastrophe (IMC)

Zartman visualized IMC using the terrain model described earlier. According to him, "an imminent catastrophe resembles a 'precipice,' a sudden and unexpected rise in costs borne by parties to the conflict." As for MHS, this approaching catastrophic event is also perceptual. The perception of an IMC may befall adversaries that may or may not be stalemated. Moreover, 'Mutual' does not imply that all parties would perceive a catastrophe concerning the same events.³⁴ Comparable sets of unexpected and dreadful developments can trigger the perception that the sudden rise in costs of conflict observed at any point is merely a precursor of a catastrophe of unimaginable proportions, hence the urgency to act before crossing the perceived point-of-no-return.

MHS and IMC can exist side by side. Christopher Mitchell painted a potential picture of this coexistence in the following order of developments: "[There is] a low perceived probability of achieving their goals and a looming disaster that abruptly threatens to increase still further the costs of continuing coercive strategies."³⁵ At other times, MHS or IMC may singlehandedly influence a conflict's ripeness, making the latter a plausible indicator

³³ Zartman, "The Timing of Peace Initiatives: Hurting Stalemates and Ripe Moments", 11.

³⁴ Mitchell, "The right moment: Notes on four models of "ripeness", 40.

³⁵ Mitchell, "The right moment: Notes on four models of "ripeness", 39.

irrespective of a perceived stalemate.

3. Discussion

The Iran-Saudi Arabia détente had come as a surprise to the world. The four-day, “undisclosed” discussions in Beijing between the top security officials of the two sides were not the first such effort by third-party mediators.³⁶ As previously discussed, Iraq hosted five mediatory sessions from April 2021 to April 2022 without any substantial breakthroughs. Iran and Saudi Arabia’s extensive geopolitical footprint, fueled by ideological tussle, security concerns and foreign policy goals, has simultaneously posed challenges for mediators.³⁷ Whereas Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi (May 2020-October 2022) enjoyed the trust of both sides, the change of government resulted in a loss of confidence in Iraq’s mediation.³⁸

Arguably, both the states had experienced MHS for several years, yet they did not exhibit any such sign. Therefore, the March 2023 tripartite agreement was an unexpected breakthrough. In the succeeding section, we argue that Iran and Saudi Arabia perceived an IMC, which increased their appetite for a rapprochement and resulted in enthusiastic diplomatic efforts leading up to the agreement.

3.1. Complex Stalemate

The regional competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia has led to a multi-layered conflict, the symptoms of which can be observed both within and around them in the Middle East. The Yemen conflict, for instance, is a civil war exacerbated by Iranian and Saudi support to Houthis—a Zaidi revivalist group in opposition—and the erstwhile government of Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, respectively. After nine years of fighting, the country is far from a sustainable political solution and faces “one of the world’s largest humanitarian crises.”³⁹

³⁶ Parisa Hafezi, Nayera Abdallah and Aziz El Yaakoubi, “Iran and Saudi Arabia Agree to Resume Ties in Talks Brokered by China,” *Reuters*, accessed March 19, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-saudi-arabia-agree-resume-ties-re-open-embassies-iranian-state-media-2023-03-10/>.

³⁷ “Timeline: Iran and Saudi Arabia, from Rivalry to Rapprochement,” accessed March 23, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/10/iran-and-saudi-arabia-from-rivalry-to-mending-ties-a-timeline>.

³⁸ Saeed Azimi, “The Story Behind China’s Role in the Iran-Saudi Deal • Stimson Center,” *Stimson Center*, accessed March 13, 2023, <https://www.stimson.org/2023/the-story-behind-chinas-role-in-the-iran-saudi-deal/>.

³⁹ “Yemen: A Crisis for Women and Girls,” United Nations Population Fund, accessed March 31, 2023, <https://www.unfpa.org/yemen>.

In 2017, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Egypt, the Maldives and Yemen severed ties with Qatar for allegedly sponsoring terrorism and maintaining ties with Iran. The rift ended in 2021, with Qatar-Iran relations remaining intact. The two states also supported opposite sides in the Syrian civil war.⁴⁰ Given the diplomatic breakdown between Tehran and Riyadh in 2016, ending the stalemate seemed a near impossibility, until recently, when the Chinese-mediated rapprochement showed a ray of hope.

3.2. Imminent Mutual Catastrophe (IMC)

3.2.1. Nature of the IMC

In this section, the authors have argued that a multiplicity of events of proportional magnitude constituted the IMC for Iran and Saudi Arabia to come to terms before crossing a perceived point of no return. The intertwined security-related concerns and regional ambitions may explain this complex yet compelling course of events.

3.2.2. Systemic Level

Between August and December 2020, four Arab states, United Arab Emirates, Sudan, Bahrain, and Morocco, normalized relations with Israel, in a personal initiative led by American President Donald Trump and his Middle East envoy, Jared Kushner.⁴¹ On 9 March 2023, a *New York Times* article claimed that Saudi Arabia had “offered its price” to the United States for normalizing relations with Israel.⁴² Although, an official confirmation or denial has not followed, such an eventuality would be a significant blow to Iran’s regional ambitions. Israel had been pitted against Iran after the former fought Hezbollah and Hamas, internationally recognized Iranian proxies in 2006 and 2008, respectively.

Whereas Iran overtly cooperated with Israel against Iraq’s Saddam Hussein and Israel reciprocated under its Periphery Doctrine—Israeli Prime

⁴⁰ Mona Yacoubian, “Syria’s Stalemate Has Only Benefitted Assad and His Backers,” United States Institute of Peace, accessed March 31, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/03/syrias-stalemate-has-only-benefitted-assad-and-his-backers>.

⁴¹ Dan Efron, “How Arab Ties With Israel Became the Middle East’s New Normal,” *Foreign Policy* (blog), accessed December 21, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/12/21/arab-ties-israel-diplomacy-normalization-middle-east/>.

⁴² Michael Crowley, Vivian Nereim and Patrick Kingsley, “Saudi Arabia Offers Its Price to Normalize Relations With Israel,” *The New York Times*, March 10, 2023, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/09/us/politics/saudi-arabia-israel-united-states.html>.

Minister David Ben-Gurion's brainchild to counter hostile Arab states through close relations with non-Arab states, this common denominator fell after Saddam Hussein was overthrown. Iran, under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-13) upped the ante by diverting the funds to Shi'a proxies.⁴³

Why would a potential Saudi-Israel rapprochement create a nightmare scenario for Iranian decision-makers, possibly compelling Tehran to enter into negotiations with Saudi Arabia? The paper outlines two scenarios in this regard.

Firstly, Saudi Arabia is influential in the Muslim and Arab world. In addition to the religious ties with Sunni-majority countries, Saudi Arabia speaks for its Arab allies' security concerns in any revival of the JCPOA.⁴⁴ It shares this endeavor with Israel, which may serve as a common denominator for the two states to join forces.⁴⁵ The Saudi recognition of Israel, broadly contextualized with the 2020 wave of recognition of Israel by Arab states and the 2022 opening up of Saudi air space to Israel, only becomes more plausible.⁴⁶ It may even trigger a domino effect, i.e., Muslim states following the Saudis in normalizing relations with Israel, a long shot, indeed, but enough to exacerbate the perception of an imminent catastrophe in Tehran.

Secondly, while Iran has not yet weaponized its nuclear capability, it uses the potential to do so as a bargaining chip. Nevertheless, Saudi officials have hinted at the possibility of starting their own peaceful nuclear program with the US assistance. In case this scenario materializes, Iran could find itself in a complex strategic situation, with its nuclear bargaining power weakened. While such a development would require the Kingdom to sign 123

⁴³ Dalia Dassa Kaye, Alireza Nader and Parisa Roshan, "A Brief History of Israeli-Iranian Cooperation and Confrontation," in *Israel and Iran, A Dangerous Rivalry* (RAND Corporation, 2011), 9–18, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg1143osd.7>.

⁴⁴ Emma Graham, "Saudi Arabia Should Be a 'partner' on Any Future Nuclear Deal with Iran, Foreign Minister Says," CNBC, accessed November 22, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/11/22/saudi-arabia-says-it-should-be-a-partner-on-any-future-iran-deal.html>.

⁴⁵ *Al Jazeera*, "Why Saudi Arabia and Israel Oppose Iran Nuclear Deal," accessed March 26, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/4/14/why-saudi-arabia-and-israel-oppose-iran-nuclear-deal>.

⁴⁶ "Saudi Arabia Opens up Airspace to All Airlines, Including Israeli | Aviation News | *Al Jazeera*," accessed March 26, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/7/15/saudi-arabia-opens-airspace-including-airlines-from-israel>.

Agreement—a legal prerequisite for the US government’s international peaceful nuclear cooperation.⁴⁷ The normalization of Saudi relations with Israel in exchange, inter alia, for a peaceful nuclear program could neutralize Iran’s advantage in this field.

3.3. China as Mediator

China’s mediation between Iran and Saudi Arabia cannot be fully understood from a traditional, realpolitik-based perspective in international relations. As Henry Kissinger noted: “The American approach to policy is pragmatic; China’s is conceptual.”⁴⁸ In this section, we take Kenneth Waltz’s level-of-analysis approach to briefly analyze individual, state and systemic factors that may have contributed to China’s successful mediation.⁴⁹ At the individual level, the paper has assessed President Xi Jinping’s “worldviews”. The factors contributing to Chinese efforts to regain its historical greatness have been analyzed at the state level. Lastly, at the systemic level, it is argued that China’s “going to the world” is not centered on challenging the American primacy in the Middle East or elsewhere but on its pursuit of peaceful rise.⁵⁰

President Xi Jinping, in his inaugural speech after his appointment as President and General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), outlined his vision of a new win-win-based international system that characterizes a “community of common future”. Since then, it has repeatedly been reflected in China’s foreign policy and UN documents.⁵¹ He stated, “China’s pursuit of peaceful development is not an act of expediency, but still less diplomatic rhetoric. As peaceful development benefits both China and the world, we cannot think of any reason why we should not pursue this approach

⁴⁷ Jayita Sarkar, “India’s Nuclear Limbo and the Fatalism of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Regime, 1974–1983,” *Strategic Analysis* 37, no. 3 (May 2013): 322–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2013.782662>.

⁴⁸ Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014), 226.

⁴⁹ See Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959).

⁵⁰ Shuhe Zhong, *Going to the world: a history of modern Chinese intellectual investigations of the West* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1985) cited in Wang Mingming, “All under Heaven (Tianxia): Cosmological Perspectives and Political Ontologies in Pre-Modern China,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2, no. 1 (March 2012): 337–83, <https://doi.org/10.14318/hau2.1.015>.

⁵¹ Charlotte Gao, “‘A Community of Shared Future’: One Short Phrase for UN, One Big Victory for China?,” accessed March 30, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/a-community-of-shared-future-one-short-phrase-for-un-one-big-victory-for-china/>.

that has proven so effective.”⁵² As Iran and Saudi Arabia are part of BRI, peace among them would benefit all three states.

At the state level, the Confucian “familial obligation” is one of the narratives CCP employs to bind the nation together and help uplift one another.⁵³ The same obligation reflects China’s self-image as a responsible leader in Asia and beyond. While the Western IR theories may explain China’s mediation as an intervention to undercut the United States, it could be underscored that Beijing was trying to fill the vacuum created by the US Pivot to Asia and responding to the “Indo-Pacific Strategy.” Two supporting arguments can be made in this regard. First, China’s mediation lacked the interference undertones of conflict management strategies usually employed by the United States (arming Israel during the 1973 war) or Western states (arming Ukraine against Russia), whereby “the mediator...[acts] as a manipulator to bring about a stalemate.”⁵⁴ Second, Saudi Arabia invited China to mediate.⁵⁵ An alternative explanation for mediation may be China’s building economic partnerships as the preferred strategy for going to the world. China is already the biggest trade partner of both Iran (24.85%) and Saudi Arabia (20.19%).⁵⁶ Therefore, a rapprochement among them may pave the way for resolving the Middle East’s pressing issues that hinder intra-regional trade with China.

4. Conclusion

Iran and Saudi Arabia benefitted from China’s new-found role in international mediation whereby the two states agreed to restore diplomatic ties and seek a way out of their protracted conflict. In this paper, the authors employed the IMC model of the Ripeness Theory of conflict resolution to explain the thaw in the Iran-Saudi Arabia relationship. By analyzing the systemic context, and the decision-making patterns in Tehran and Riyadh, the authors showed how the conflict ripened due to subjectivities perceived in the

⁵² “Speech by H.E. Xi Jinping President of the People’s Republic of China At the Körber Foundation,” accessed March 30, 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/gjhdq_665435/3265_665445/3296_664550/3298_664554/201404/t20140421_575629.html.

⁵³ “Chinese Worldviews and China’s Foreign Policy | Lowy Institute,” accessed March 30, 2023, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/chinese-worldviews-china-s-foreign-policy>.

⁵⁴ Zartman, “The Timing of Peace Initiatives: Hurting Stalemates and Ripe Moments”, 15.

⁵⁵ Azimi, “The Story Behind China’s Role in the Iran-Saudi Deal • Stimson Center.”

⁵⁶ “China trade balance exports, imports by country 2020 | WITS Data”, World Bank, accessed March 30, 2023, <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/CHN/Year/2020/TradeFlow/EXPI MP/Partner/by-country>.

two capitals. Lastly, China's role as a mediator does not necessarily pose a challenge to the US influence in the region as its policy of "going to the world" is centered around re-gaining China's lost primacy rather than replacing the US in the Middle East.