

CHINESE EFFORTS IN THE MIDDLE EASTERN CONFLICTS

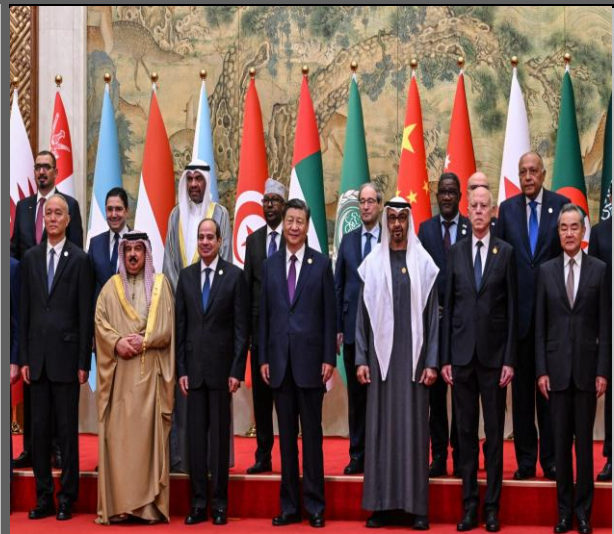
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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Source: Getty Images

A rising global power with substantial economic interests in the region, China seeks to position itself as a mediator given its recent history of increasing arbitration efforts in the Middle East. A prominent example of Beijing's efforts is its mediation in key conflicts, most notably the 2023 Saudi-Iran deal. China has successfully facilitated to help normalize relations between the two rival states. This agreement has marked a paradigm shift in regional diplomacy that signaled China's will to become an alternative mediator to Western powers, particularly to the United States.¹

Apart from this historical deal, China has pursued other mediation efforts, including providing good offices for dialogue between Hamas, Fatah and other Palestinian factions. China offers a contrasting model of strategy it focuses more on economic collaboration and diplomacy, which aligns with its broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) ambitions. While Middle Eastern countries are trying to diversify their partnerships, China's positioning during these escalations presents an interesting shift in the global geopolitical landscape.

The latest escalation between Iran and Israel can be considered as a significant turning point in Middle Eastern geopolitics. On October 1, 2024, Iran launched missiles into Israel, which it claimed

¹ United States Institute of Peace. "What You Need to Know About China's Saudi-Iran Deal." March 2023. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/03/what-you-need-know-about-chinas-saudi-iran-deal>.

was a response to Israeli airstrikes that killed key Iranian and Hezbollah military leaders.² This missile offense raised concerns of a total war, prompting strong responses from Israeli officials who vowed unimaginable consequences against Iran's actions. ³ Meanwhile, the U.S has long been the primary external power brokering peace including Israel and Saudi Arabia. During the present escalations, the U.S. has stationed at least six navy ships including USS Lincoln and USS Georgia, in Persian Gulf along with stationing of THAAD (Terminally High-Altitude Area Defense) in Israel, intended to deter the Iranian and other potential threats in the region.⁴ China's response to this crisis has been moderate but clear.

China's diplomatic balancing act is even more complicated because of its relationships with both Iran, Israel and important GCC members. Beijing has a robust economic relationship with Israel in technology such as AI and cybersecurity. Of quintessence of this is Chinese conglomerate Huawei partnership with Israeli firms.⁵ But at the same time, it has Iran as a strategic ally through initiatives like Iran-China 25-year Cooperation Program, with includes enormous investments of \$400 billion in energy sector and infrastructure enabling China to secure energy resources and providing Iran with economic support.⁶ Saudi-Arabia's trading volume with China was approximately \$87 billion in 2021, making China its largest trading partner with majority of agreements related to oil exports and investments in renewable energy. ⁷ This dual nature policy of balancing allows China to extend its influence across the region without getting entangled in conflicts.⁸ However, as this conflict is engulfing other states as well, China's stance on a ceasefire and two state solution remains firm.

China has expressed serious concern over the situation while reiterating that conflict in Gaza is the root cause of regional hostilities. This statement emphasizes on its stance that resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is necessary for overall stability in the Middle East.

2 "Iran says missiles fired at Israel in response to assassinations," *Al Jazeera*, October 01, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/10/1/israel-says-iran-launches-missile-attack-warns-residents-to-shelter>.

3 Newsweek. "China's Reaction to the Iran-Israel Conflict." October 2024. <https://www.newsweek.com/china-reaction-iran-israel-conflict-1963155>.

4 Stimson Center. "China's Strategic Facilitation in the Persian Gulf Security Crisis." Last modified 2024. <https://www.stimson.org/2024/chinas-strategic-facilitation-in-the-persian-gulf-security-crisis/>.

5 "The Broader Context Behind China's Mediation Between Iran and Saudi Arabia." *The Diplomat*, March 2023. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/03/the-broader-context-behind-chinas-mediation-between-iran-and-saudi-arabia/>.

6 "The Story Behind China's Role in the Iran-Saudi Deal." Stimson Center, June 2023. <https://www.stimson.org/2023/the-story-behind-chinas-role-in-the-iran-saudi-deal/>.

7 "Saudi-Iran Deal: A Test Case of China's Role as an International Mediator." *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, June 23, 2023. <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2023/06/23/saudi-iran-deal-a-test-case-of-chinas-role-as-an-international-mediator/>

8 "For China, War in Gaza a Chance to Flex Diplomatic Muscle at Little Risk." *Al Jazeera*, October 2, 2024. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/10/2/for-china-war-in-gaza-a-chance-to-flex-diplomatic-muscle-at-little-risk>.

Ambassador Fu Cong at a UN Security Council meeting “Right now, the situation in the Middle East is hanging by a thread. Israel’s military operations in Gaza are still ongoing, which have already claimed more than 46000 lives as of January 2025.⁹ Meanwhile, Israel is also heightening the tensions around its border with Lebanon. We are deeply concerned by the possibility of further escalation of the tensions between Lebanon and Israel. We call on the parties to exercise maximum restraint, and call on Israel, in particular, to forego its obsession with the use of force and to halt without delay its military operations in Gaza, its violations of Lebanon’s sovereignty and security, and its adventurism that risks dragging the region into yet another devastating catastrophe.”¹⁰

During BRICS summit on 23 October, 2024 (Kazan, Russia) China’s President Xi Jinping stated that early ceasefire and end to war in Gaza are key to easing regional tensions. These remarks were made when meeting with Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian. He also added that China will unswervingly develop a friendly cooperation with Iran despite international and regional situation changes.¹¹ It is evident from the statements that China is pushing for dialogue and ceasefire. In the meantime, it is also maintaining its support for Iran’s sovereignty and right of action in the region. In addition to its diplomatic efforts, it can also use its economic leverage by negotiating trade agreement among the Middle Eastern states forming economic interconnectedness ensuring a lasting peace in the region quintessence of this is expansion of BRI in the Middle East and Beijing wants conducive environment for these investments.

China thus seems to be positioning itself in the middle of increasing tensions between Iran and Israel which reflects its larger role through diplomacy. It has set the stage for future endeavours in conflict resolution in as much as it seeks to bring together parties in a conflict.

While China’s approach emphasizes non-interference and neutrality, it faces significant challenges that could hinder its effectiveness as a mediator amid rising hostilities. The complexities of Middle Eastern politics require nuanced understanding and commitment beyond mere facilitation. As China continues to assert itself on the global stage, particularly in light of recent developments, it will be closely scrutinized by both regional actors and international observers alike. So, the success or failure of these mediation efforts will significantly impact China’s reputation as a responsible global actor and serious mediator who is committed to global peace and stability.

⁹ “Israel pushes Gaza death toll to 46,000 as US boosts truce efforts,” *Daily Sabah*, January 08, 2024, <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/mid-east/israel-pushes-gaza-death-toll-to-46000-as-us-boosts-truce-efforts>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ “China’s Xi Says Early Ceasefire in Gaza Key to Easing Regional Tensions, Xinhua Reports.” Reuters, October 23, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/chinas-xi-says-early-ceasefire-gaza-key-easing-regional-tensions-xinhua-reports-2024-10-23/>.