

In this episode, we embark on a thought-provoking journey into China's involvement in conflict resolution within the region. Your host, Jonathan Fulton, is joined by the insightful voices of Helena Legarda and Dr. Sanam Vakil. Together, they dissect China's strategic approach to mediating conflicts and its consequential impact on the Middle East.

Amidst a landscape seeking fresh perspectives in conflict resolution, a pertinent question emerges: Can China wield transformative influence? As we navigate the intricate terrain, we invite you to delve into the nuances, obstacles, and potential avenues presented by China's mediation role in this dynamic region. Brace yourselves for an enlightening discourse that promises to reshape your vantage point on global politics.

## Takeaways

- China's Mediation Quest in the Middle East
- Craving China's Role: Appetite for Involvement
- China's Rise: Crafting a Responsible Power Image
- Non-Interference Story: China's Investment Narrative
- Deep Dilemma: Skepticism on Complex Involvement
- Unfolding Potential: China's Gradual Mediation Role
- Hope Amidst Doubt: China's Complex Involvement
- Geopolitical Ambitions: China's Shaping Influence
- Diplomatic Magic: China's Outreach and Persona
- Economic Drive: China's Role in Stability

## Quotes

*"Change awaits. Yet, for now, our reality is navigating these inner boundaries and encapsulated processes shapes our path forward." – Helena Legarda*

*"Bridging the ambition-action gap can reshape the region, inspiring meaningful dialogues and enduring resolutions." – Dr. Sanam Vakil*

## Featured in the Episode

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Produced by Heartcast Media

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## Transcript:

### Jonathan Fulton:

Welcome to the China-MENA Podcast. I'm your host, Jonathan Fulton, a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, and a political scientist at Zayed University in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. Most people who focus on Middle East politics were surprised to say the least this past March when Iran and Saudi Arabia announced plans to resume diplomatic relations. More shocking still was that the announcement was made in Beijing where the round of talks was hosted. China's approach to the Middle East had long been driven by economic interests with the tepid involvement in the region's fraught political environment. Since then, however, we've also seen Chinese offers to mediate in the Israeli Palestinian conflict, perhaps indicating a willingness to play a greater role in regional political disputes. To help us think through Beijing's aspirations to act as a conflict mediator and what it means from the Middle East, I am delighted to talk with Dr. Sanam Vakil and Helena Legarda. Sanam is the director of the Middle East North Africa program at UK's Chatham house. Her research focuses on Gulf Regional Security, Gulf geopolitics, and on future trends, and Iran's domestic and foreign policy. Helena is a research associate at the Mercader Institute for China Studies or Marics in Berlin. Her research focuses on China's foreign security policies, including their domestic sources and drivers and the geopolitical impact. Ladies, welcome to the show.

### Helena Legarda:

Thanks for having us, Jonathan.

### Dr. Sanam Vakil:

Thank you.

**Jonathan Fulton:**

Of course. Helena, I'll start with you. I recorded an episode earlier this week on the global security initiative or the GSI. You've recently written a report from Marics that links the GSI to Chinese ambitions to be more active in the conflict mediation space. Why is it doing so and how successful has it been?

**Helena Legarda:**

Thanks so much. I mean, that's a great question. I think the first thing to say is that much like China's involvement in the Middle East, China's mediation ambitions go back launch of the Belt and Road initiative, the BRI in 2013, and they weren't initially driven mostly by economic interests. If Beijing wanted to expand its footprint, across various regions of the world and it wanted to protect its economic interest, it needed stability. And that's what drove Beijing to step up its game when it comes to conflict mediation or at least to sort of try and get more involved. And that economic rationale remains in place. If we look at many of the conflicts that Beijing is either mediating in or has offered to mediate in, in the past few weeks or months, they're mostly countries or regions, largely along the BRI where China has important economic interests. Think for example, if you brought in Iran and Saudi Arabia, they were both foreign suppliers for China. As China's sort of energy needs growth, that's its need for suppliers, sustainability, and sort of a functional relationship between the two countries is something that's in China's economic interest. But the more recent moves we've seen by Beijing in the spacing are more driven by geopolitical dynamics. And Beijing is very clear about this. If you look back to official discourse there are some narratives around its mediation push. Official sources do speak of, kind of, attempts to establish itself as a global mediator as being part of the application of the global security initiative, the GSI. This initiative was launched I think in 2022, and it's one of the now 3 global initiatives that China has put out over the last couple of years. So we have the global development initiative and the global security initiative. And the third one is the global civilization initiative. But going back to the GSI, I mean, the GSI is portrayed or presented by Beijing as being a Chinese solution to international security challenges. Right? The main idea behind it is to try and lay the foundation for an eventual alternative global security architecture. GSI, like the other initiatives, are fundamentally different pieces of the bigger puzzle, which all together show what China's alternative vision for the global order would be like. Right? Beijing sees the current global war as being dominated by the United States and Western Countries, and it's got a very clearly stated goal to reform. So I see this initiative sustaining sort of part of this push. By linking China's work in the reconciliation space, to the GSI, we see very clearly the geopolitical motivations behind these moves by Beijing in recent months. Right? So playing a more active role in conflict resolution, that doesn't only help Beijing protect its economic interests like it used to, but it helps Beijing cultivate its own image as a peacemaker and a responsible neutral power that prioritizes peace. It helps China delegitimize the US and other western countries, which unlike China are, as the official narrative goes, less invested in finding peaceful solutions to conflicts and they continue to aim, as the official narrative goes, add fuel to the fire. And third, it allows Beijing to expand its influence across the global south and continue building an alternative coalition, a coalition may be a big word, but a network of countries that will eventually allow China to contest the global order within the UN. So that this geopolitical competition background, I think, is what links the GSI to China's moves in the conflict mediation space. And very quickly on the issue of how successful has China been. I think it fundamentally depends on what exactly we are looking at. Right? So the deal between Iran and Saudi Arabia, sure. There was a deal. Right? It was signed and it was signed in Beijing. The question is what sort of role

did China play in that process? As well as China, then does China decide success here? I mean, the answer from my perspective is no. It wasn't. So if we look at Chinese communication, the isolation, I think it's fair to say that they haven't been very successful. If anything, they haven't come to success yet when looked up in isolation.

**Jonathan Fulton:**

That's a really great overview. Thanks, Helena. And you lead really great into the question I want to ask Sanam about the Saudi Iran deal. So Sanam, in this regard, China absolutely is a newcomer in the Middle East, North Africa, where the US and Europe and the UK are typically seen as the important extra regional players. Is China seen as a credible actor in this capacity in MENA?

**Dr. Sanam Vakil:**

Thanks, Jonathan. And I think that's the key question. I think China is an untested player in the region in terms of diplomacy and mediation. And for now, it is seen perhaps as a credible player. And I think it's credible because this is really the 1st time China is wading into regional waters. It's policy of, nonintervention in countries domestic affairs and zero conflict is attractive, to Middle Eastern States that have long been frustrated by western powers and particularly the United States' declining interest in the region and also inconsistent engagement in the Middle East, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the lack of sort of disciplined engagement from the US to the Arab Spring, has built up frustration across the region among traditional US partners. And, you know, in the same vein as US economic engagement in the MENA region has declined over the past few years, China has stepped up and stepped in building its economic engagement, its diplomacy, if you will, has been through the prism of its comprehensive strategic partnerships, and China is a predominant trading partner for multiple Middle Eastern States as diverse as Egypt to Iran, UAE, and Saudi Arabia just to name a few. So I think the jury is out on whether China will be credible. There is hope that China will be credible. And the Iran-Saudi deal is going to be a test of that credibility. It's unclear if China is a facilitator or a guarantor And I think, the Iranians would like the Chinese to be nothing more than a facilitator, whereas the Saudis would like the Chinese to play the role as a guarantor of that agreement. And, since we don't have the terms and we're not able see the fine print. No one's published the details to date, it remains to be seen if China is going to manage tensions or, allow us, you know, and continue its policies of nonintervention and allow both countries to test run. I mean we are also seeing I would say, since you brought up China's offer to mediate between Israel and Palestine, perhaps some ambition to try and bridge further our regional conflicts, but I agree with Helena. This is perhaps an opportunity to poke at the United States and poke at a European distraction and not really step into those waters because those are going to be choppy waters, to try to settle. And this is, you know, a very sedimented and protracted conflict that would be harder for China to easily bridge. And in the case of Iran and Saudi Arabia, you know, it's worthwhile saying that it was Iraq and Oman that did the hard work that worked, as facilitators and mediators bringing both Riyadh and Tehran together over an eighteen-month period. And one could argue that China just, you know, pushed both parties over the line, at the right time, rather than solving the key differences between both capitals.

**Jonathan Fulton:**

Yeah. I agree. One thing that's interesting to me, it doesn't get talked about a lot, is just that when you look at the traditional big actors like the UK, like France, like the US, I mean, you've got so many great area studies programs. You've got folks in government and folks in academia

and think tanks and journalism that are really deeply engaged in the region and have been for decades - and China's just not there yet in the Middle East. I mean, they're starting from a pretty low, like, a nascent level, and I think it's interesting to see this ambition. I'm a little hesitant to read too much into it for the time being because I think, you know, we're recording this on July 21<sup>st</sup>. Nobody has seen the Chinese foreign minister for more than 3 weeks. Who do you talk to if you want to, you know, work on this stuff. Right? It seems very personality driven and, you know, very uncertain at this point. But you both brought up an interesting point. I'd like to follow-up on the difference between facilitation and actual mediation, and it's something Helena, you wrote about in your report. You know, the difference between dialogue facilitation and conflict mediation. And it kind of looks to me like, that's what China's been doing is facilitating talks. But I'm not sure. So can you kind of explain the distinction between the two?

**Helena Legarda:**

Sure, thank you. From my perspective, the key distinction here is whether a party, in this case China, focuses more simply on hosting the dialogues and in the meetings. Right? So the host diplomacy side of things or actually shows an interest and a willingness and actually follows through in terms of driving these processes and negotiations or coming up with actionable proposals for the conflict parties to find mutually acceptable agreements. And that's where China tends to fall short. We're getting to the whole issue of limitations to China's approach to mediation, and I'm sure we'll get a chance to talk about this in a bit more detail later on. But, China definitely has the ambition to do more in terms of conflict mediation. And I think what has to be acknowledged is that if China or any other actor were able to find a solution to any of these long standing intractable complexes in the Middle East, we should all celebrate. But from my perspective right now, it seems highly unlikely that China will because even though it has the ambition, it lacks the willingness to follow through on that and to accept the risks and responsibilities that come with an actual conflict mediation role. Style of facilitation, hosting the two sites in Beijing or hosting a conference elsewhere that's sort of a lower risk. Still relatively high reward activity that China can do. And for Beijing, it's more comfortable at this particular moment. So we're getting more gestures than actual content.

**Jonathan Fulton:**

Yeah. Yeah. Agreed. It's really, you know, early days. Following up on the synopsis, I mean, do you see China's role - how do you see it in the Saudi-Iran? Do you see it as, you know, fitting into this mediator facilitator position?

**Dr. Sanam Vakil:**

Well, I am not terribly hopeful that China is going to do more than facilitate. It does need to perhaps protect its image as a mediator since it's stepped into this foray, but I am a bit skeptical that it has the capacity, to manage the breadth of challenges just between Saudi Arabia and Iran, that, extend, you know, deep into history, are driven by structural competitive dynamics between the two countries, but also then translate into decades of regional competition in Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq. So, by virtue of being a sort of bridge, and a broker for this deal they might have bitten off more than they can chew in, trying to also perhaps contain tensions in all of those conflicts as well. I would imagine and I anticipate that China might be called upon should tensions emerge, let's say in the Yemen conflict where Saudi Arabia is heavily invested and is seeking to extend the ceasefire. And if that's difficult to achieve and tensions maybe escalate, I would imagine that China might be called upon, to, pressure the Iranians and the Saudis have sort of hinted as much that they are hoping that China will hold

Tehran, to its commitments and use whatever leverage, economic, or otherwise that it has over Tehran to exert pressure and contain Iran quote, unquote malign regional behavior. But I'm not terribly confident that China will play that role in a meaningful and protracted way. I think China will try to demonstrate balance but will be restrained. And I secondly expect that China will probably try to step up on its commitment of calling together a sort of regional security meeting between Iran and the GCC. That would be sort of an easy win for China that might, you know, clearly not solve the regional security dilemma, or vacuum that exists in the Persian Gulf area, but by convening and again trying to sort of one up Western powers, if not the United States, that would be a sort of important symbolic, gathering, that the US has never been able to achieve or nor has it tried to, quite frankly.

### **Jonathan Fulton:**

Yeah. I mean, how could it? Right? Like, it has zero - it doesn't have any carrots in Tehran. It's got plenty of sticks, but, I mean, that's how I've kind of looked at this from the start. There's no real great power that has you know, the incentives on both sides that they can bring them together. And, you know, certainly the US doesn't. I think you saw the US State Department spokesperson congratulating China. He said, thanks. This is nice. It's a good starting point. I think all of us can agree. I mean, Helena, you made the same point that if China's able to contribute something to a region that's really important for the whole world, then this is good. But I'd like to think it through a little more, Sanam, just on, you know, from the region, from the inside looking out. I mean, for the logic in Tehran and people in Riyadh. You know, what's the logic in getting China involved? Is it just because China's got these good offices on both sides, are they also sticking, you know, are they sticking into Washington? What are they thinking about here?

### **Dr. Sanam Vakil:**

Well, clearly, both Saudi Arabia and Iran have multiple objectives. And, you know, we can sort of talk through them. I think for the Islamic Republic, China has been a very important economic and strategic partner, and the Islamic Republic for well over almost 2 decades now has been trying to pursue a look east policy, with a conservative consolidation of power domestically. There is more consensus, in absence of a nuclear agreement, that it's relations with Eastern countries, China, Russia and anyone else, really, in the east that will trade and engage in commercial ties with Iran, urgently needed to, buffer and push back against the impact of economic sanctions coupled with the fact that, of course, Iran is, for 4 decades now been looking to reduce US influence in the region and sees it's a long term strategy and it's forward defense policy as having been effective over a longer period of time at reducing the US as a presence in the region. So, China is a partner but also helpful for Tehran's regional objectives, for less United States, ultimately. At the same time, for Riyadh, I think the motivations are slightly different. They're equally transactional. Saudi Arabia has deep economic ties, based on its sale of oil to Beijing now for almost 2 decades. And, the kingdom is trying to balance its economic interests with its strategic dependency on the United States that has really underpinned Gulf security. Also, since the Carter doctrine, if you will, in the late 1970s, but more pronounced since the first gulf war in, the 1990s, there have been significant tensions between Washington and Riyadh, over, declining US interest, perhaps less US responsiveness to Saudi security concerns. Mainly you hear all analysts, myself included, referring to the 2019 Abqaiq attacks on Saudi oil facilities as having sort of caused a rupture and an awakening of the differences between Washington and Riyadh. And the fact that the US didn't immediately sort of reassert deterrence against Iran changed the balance of power in the region. And so, you know, some people describe, the kingdom is trying to hedge. I think the kingdom is trying to protect its

interests, however, and maintain its economic ties with Beijing and secure those ties while also maintaining, it's a strategic interest with Washington. So it's a bit of a harder position to balance.

**Jonathan Fulton:**

Yeah. I - like you - am not crazy about this hedging narrative for gulf countries when they are reach out because it kind of makes it seem to me like people are saying if just they would get what they wanted from the US then they would stop. And I think it's much more than that. I mean, I think that they're looking at a lot of major extra regional powers and so saying all of them contribute something to our stability, our economic security, our development agendas, and our, you know, our regime security. And I think that's pretty important. Helena, I just want to go back beyond the Middle East and just look more globally. I mean, often when people talk about these Chinese initiatives, there's this kind of inevitability in how it's described. Like, oh, China is doing this and it's going to change the world. You know, I can see you smiling. So maybe you also feel that this is a little simplistic. What are some limitations that maybe we'll, you know, trip China up in this ambition to play a large role in engaging in conflicts?

**Helena Legarda:**

That's a great question. This is also a narrative that I encounter plenty and that I don't particularly agree with. I think overhyping the success that China will have in pursuing its ambitions is what leads to a mismatch between what China is actually doing and their responses or reactions from other countries. We need to right size our view of what China is doing, and that will allow us to come up with responses that are a bit more targeted. So when it comes to China's ambitions in conflict mediation, what are some of the limitations? The answer is there are some. I tend to put them in sort of two buckets. Some of them are sort of internal and some of them are to do with the process and China's approach to mediation itself. I mean, we were talking about internal limitations. Some of them already came up in the context of the Middle East. Right? We're talking about capacity, and we're talking about expertise. Right? Does China have that? And the answer is some but not enough. They don't have enough regional expertise and they don't have enough experience or capacity to conduct conflict mediation in a sort of long-term sustainable manner. And another internal limitation that I think we can't forget about is China's willingness to expose itself to risks. China does say that it wants to become a global conflict mediator and that it wants to play a more important role, but will it follow through? Is it willing to accept the risk that it may become involved in mediating in a conflict and the negotiations may break down. And that China may be blamed for it, right? There are certain risks here to - potential risks to China's image and reputation that Beijing simply seems unwilling to take on at the moment. And linked to this issue of accepting risks is whether Beijing is actually willing to accept the risk of being a guarantor, right, to enforce these agreements after they are made. And there again, we tend to hit a wall with Beijing. Because Beijing's ambitions when it comes to conflict mediation or when it comes to the global security initiative aren't necessarily for China to replace the United States as an economic global security provider. That's not what this is. This is much more geopolitical, and it operates much more in the normative space, rather than anywhere else. This could change in the future, but right now that's where we are. So those are where you see some of the internal limitations and then the actual process. Right? So the approach. How does China view mediation? And we mentioned some of them earlier, but I think fundamentally Beijing since it's always been one of more dialogue facilitation than it has mediation itself. So China tends to not follow what tends to be considered sort of international best practices in mediation. Right? So abiding by the concepts of consent, of impartiality, of inclusivity, of national ownership. That's something that Chinese processes don't always follow. China tends to come into certain mediation processes

at a late stage as a fit in the one between Iran and Saudi Arabia. And then of course, yes, maybe it helps push the deal over the finish line, but it didn't do all of the hard work at the start. We also have other pieces of China making right gestures, but they're not quite big and there's very little follow-up. Think, for instance, about main position papers. Right? So China's position paper on the resolution of the war in Ukraine or about China's plan for peace between Israel and Palestine. They are statements of China's positions and grand statements of ideals, but there's very few details, if any, in terms of how any of this will actually be implemented. So China's view and approach to mediation in itself I think limits the chances that Beijing may be successful as a conflict mediator.

**Jonathan Fulton:**

No. Those are all great points. I like the focus on the internal dynamics because I think a lot of what doesn't get talked about in this is, you know, China's most consequential relationships over the past couple of decades have been, you know, those countries that under Xi Jinping have been shredded over the past couple of years through wolf warrior diplomacy or other aggressive behavior. So like you said in your earlier comments, I think a lot of this is, you know, reaching out to the global south largely to say, hey, look. We're not completely isolated. We've got countries that still look up to us as a useful diplomatic partner in ways that, you know, with their support for Putin in Ukraine or for, you know, the pushback against the US, you know, the domestic audience can't look at any domestic, positive engagement with its most important partners over the past few years. So you look at things like this and think maybe they're trying to also speak not just to those countries where they have economic interests, but also speak to their own domestic constituents to say, look. We're not as bad at this as you think we are. Sunam, I'd like to bring it back to the Middle East. I mean, Helena brought up some of the limitations that China's facing. What do you see in terms of what China is able to do to other Middle East conflicts? I mean, we'll be talking about – we're doing a show about Israel and Palestine because, of course, Netanyahu's announced that he's going to visit China pretty soon. Abbas was just there. So, you know, there's gonna be lots of raw meat for everybody soon enough. But, you know, what do you think of Beijing's offer to get involved in this?

**Dr. Sanam Vakil:**

Well, when I heard it, I laughed. And I thought to myself, go for it. If the Chinese can solve this protracted conflict, I think it would be fantastic and the international community would probably welcome it. But, you know, all jokes aside, the conflict is deeply protracted, and I'm not sure what incentives China could provide Israelis, Palestinians, as well as the sort of broader community that has stakes and invested interests in the Israeli Palestinian conflict, in order to unlock the challenges. So I'm a bit skeptical. Call me a cynic, but I think it would take a huge amount of diplomatic capital. And of course, China has indicated in the past that the Israeli Palestinian conflict is an area that it has shown interest in mediation. This isn't the sort of 1st time they put it out there, but they haven't made any progress even from a few years ago. I think this is just another sort of opportunity, to perhaps, poke at the United States, poke at the Biden administration, the European efforts. I mean, there is now a European - Israel Palestinian envoy, Middle East peace process envoy. So, you know, without much progress, coming from European capitals or Washington and in the context of Netanyahu's offer to go to Beijing, and now, of course, he's also going to go to Washington, you know, it's clear that China sees the region and its regional conflicts, as part of perhaps its tensions - lower level tensions and, you know, opportunity to embarrass or weaken the US in the region further.

**Helena Legarda:**



Jonathan, can I quickly add just a quick point, this point that Sanam made about how this is not new. Right? China has been sort of offering to mediate between Israel and Palestine for some time. I want to underscore that. I think it's very important. And China has put out, I think, at least 4 proposals for peace between Israel and Palestine with very little variation between each of them, and with little progress. And the first one, if I remember correctly dates back to 2003.

That was the 1st 5 point proposal for peace between Israel and Palestine. And then I think there were successive ones around 2013 and then maybe around in 2020 or 2021 another one. I know we have yet another one. Right? And with some extent to be very, very similar. And this is very much the reason why I made the point earlier that something that we get from Beijing a lot is random missions and grand gestures, but very little follow-up. It's been 20 years of various 4 to 5 point plans, in terms of the solution that China proposes to the Israel Palestine conflict, then nothing has moved.

### **Jonathan Fulton:**

And that's exactly why I would never call you cynical, Sanam, because we've all been watching this show for quite a while, and we know the parts. Right? I think China looks at Israel and Palestine as, as you know, a bit of political theater where they can perform. They can talk to the Arab League and say nice things about Palestine without really doing much and get a lot of votes for other things in the UNSC or whatever they're trying to do. But maybe somebody would call me a cynic. Looking at Middle Eastern politics Sanam, that's a threat. That's like an occupational hazard, I think. Just kind of the last thing I'm wondering about with this Sanam is, I mean, you or Sanam, Helena, you mentioned in your 1st comments about the normative side of this and, you know, how there's not really a lot of flesh on the bone right now. A lot of it seems to be ambitions of what China's doing with the GSI and its mediation role. It's trying - it sounds like the way you describe it, it sounds like China's presenting itself as an alternative, saying we have a different way of doing things. And I think that's certainly – that makes it interesting. But how real is it at this point, or do you think in the next couple of years we're going to see this fleshed out more and will it present a credible alternative? And do you think this will be something that people or countries are hungry for?

### **Helena Legarda:**

I mean, in terms of whether countries in the Middle East are hungry or not hungry for more Chinese involvement I mean, Sanam already mentioned it, and then she's much more of an expert in the region than I am. I think there is some theoretical appetite, right? Again, as I said earlier, if China were to change the way it does things and then were to really get involved in conflict mediation, I think it would be welcome. And when it comes to the narratives underpinning this push by China. Right? Again, that China is a responsible power. The US and the West as irresponsible forces for instability, the linkages that China pushes through the GSI and the GDI between security and development. Right? So security is a precondition for development. These are points that tend to find the receptive audience across much of the region, together, of course, with the old narrative of China doesn't interfere in the internal affairs of other countries and there are no strings attached when China sort of feels like investing in countries to the region. I think that's true or not. My take is it's not a party. But these are narratives that find an audience. Right? Understandably so. So in that case, I think countries in the region are because of that, rather than in that case. I think that you're reaching a point where countries will be willing to at least give the China the benefit of the doubt, to engage with Beijing if it comes up with these offers, and to see where that takes stuff. Fundamentally, I think

every country in the world looks after its own national interests first and foremost, and that shouldn't surprise anybody. I mean, many cases in the region that are likely to do both meetings, as you were discussing earlier, with both the US and China. So I don't see the Middle East suddenly turning against Beijing in its sort of ambitions to become an influence here or important to players in terms of public mediation. I think we'll get Beijing the benefit of that. What I am a bit more skeptical about, however, in the short to medium term is whether Beijing will change the approach. I don't see any appetite in Beijing for the degree of risk and of nitty gritty involvement in highly complicated conflicts that becoming a true key player in conflict mediation or in the Middle East at large would require. So I think we're going to continue to see Beijing expressing grand ambitions, gradually expanding its footprint, but I wouldn't expect a sudden shift in terms of approach. Normally speaking, we're going to see much more. In terms of actual facts on the ground, I am much more skeptical.

**Jonathan Fulton:**

Yeah. Well, Sanam, I will just bring it to you to wrap it up. I mean, I think Helena's last point is interesting just thinking about the gulf in general because the way people often portray it is, you know, the GCC versus Iran. And this week, there was a report in the Wall Street Journal about just tensions within the GCC itself, you know, and that's something that living in Abu Dhabi, we constantly are looking at is you know, this idea of these six countries getting along fabulously is really not the case. Do you think China gets the challenges or the complexities?

**Dr. Sanam Vakil:**

Thanks, Jonathan. I think it's a mistake, obviously, you and I, and we all know that the GCC is not a monolithic block. Each country has its own particular worldview and national interests and unique history. And, you know, sometimes China doesn't necessarily get it right. I think the recent visit of Xi Jinping to the gulf to Riyadh in particular in December raised some maybe not so obvious missteps, if you will. There was clear frustration, I think, between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, in terms of, prioritization of the relationship with Xi Jinping having 1st, you know, stopped in Riyadh and then going to Abu Dhabi. And, I think that wrestled a few feathers. The Wall Street Journal article, of course, raises important tensions between both countries, but for gulf watchers, of course, we've been watching these tensions for a while, and that article wasn't particularly new or novel, but, of course, it added a bit of color and drama to the tensions between both capitals. But I would say that also another sort of interesting outcome of that trip was that China in a way compromised its principle of nonintervention right then and there because in the final communique mentioned the GCC sort of sovereignty over its territorial dispute with Iran, the territorial dispute going back to the 1970s when Tehran seized 3 islands from the UAE and this is a huge contentious issue between both countries. And mind you, it's important to note that this wasn't the Islamic Republic of Iran, it was the Pahlavi monarchy that engaged in that seizure. So anyway, that was a little sidebar. But important to note that China took a side in that, and that raised, I think a lot of eyebrows of course, deep concern in Tehran, and the Russians actually also did the same thing. All of this to suggest that, you know, perhaps their prioritization in Beijing's or hierarchy in Beijing's relationships in the region, maybe Riyadh 1<sup>st</sup>, UAE 2<sup>nd</sup>, Iran 3<sup>rd</sup> and so, you know, there are competitive dynamics, not just in the GCC, but, of course, across the Persian Gulf. And, you know, maybe China doesn't always get it right and this sort of foreshadows some nuances and dynamics that the Chinese have to sort of digest and there was a bit of criticism about China's posture there.

**Jonathan Fulton:**

Yeah. I remember after that summit, there was commentary in Iran where somebody, I think a former member of parliament said, you know, if China keeps up in this direction, they will be a bigger threat to us than America within five years. So, yeah, I don't think it's a coincidence that president Raisi was in Beijing, not too not too long after that. Well, look, thank you both so much. This has been really, to me, really interesting. I've really enjoyed, you know, this conversation. I hope our listeners have learned a lot. I would highly encourage everybody to go to MERICS and get a subscription because they do consistently great stuff in the China space, especially if you're watching from a European perspective. And, of course, the China house landing page is full of great stuff on the Middle East, and sometimes China and the Middle East as well. Thanks, ladies. Really enjoyed this. Thank you for joining us today.

**Dr. Sanam Vakil:**

Thank you, Jonathan.

**Helena Legarda:**

Thank you. It's been a pleasure.

**Jonathan Fulton:**

Okay. And to our listeners, thanks for joining us. And you know what to do? Follow us on social media and like and review and rate and subscribe all that good stuff, and we'll see you all in our next episode. Thank you very much.

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