

# The Dynamics Of China's Engagement With Saudi Arabia And Iran: Implications For Pakistan's Geopolitical Landscape

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## Abstract

Within the analytical framework of the Regional Security Complex Theory, this research aims to disentangle the many facets of China's engagement with Saudi Arabia and Iran while methodically examining its consequences for Pakistan's complex geopolitical landscape. The focus is on the complex interactions among Saudi Arabia, Iran, and China, with a full analysis of the changing dynamics within the Middle East and South Asia regional security complexes. In order to understand how power dynamics, alliances, and conflicts in the region are intricately entwined, the study painstakingly dissects China's strategic goals, diplomatic moves, economic interests, and involvement in the context of the Saudi-Iranian relationship. This research elucidates a range of crucial factors, including security dangers, geopolitical

alignments, and economic linkages, drawing on in-depth case studies, notably those focused on Pakistan. The analysis carefully assesses the precise outcomes and strategic factors influencing Pakistan's interactions with China, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. This meticulous research clarifies the complex web of geopolitical relationships and deepens our knowledge of Pakistan's strategic place in the larger regional context.

Keywords: Geopolitical dynamics, alliance, security concerns, strategy, power dynamics.

### **Introduction**

The web of international relations has been considerably altered by China's resurgence as an important global actor. The return of China as a major global actor has significantly changed the web of international interactions. Understanding the reshaping of the geopolitical landscape as nations around the world, particularly in the Middle East, reevaluate their foreign policies to accommodate Beijing's strategic and economic imperatives depends on understanding the dynamics of China's engagement with key states in the region, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran. Given the complex interactions between the historical, religious, and economic rivalries between Saudi Arabia and Iran, China's shifting relations with these regional powers present a rich tapestry of diplomatic maneuver. Due to its unique geographic location and complex international interactions, Pakistan is in an intriguing situation as a result of these changes. To understand the potential geopolitical repercussions for Pakistan, a study of China's relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran on the diplomatic and commercial levels is essential.

China and Saudi Arabia have a complex and growing relationship that is fueled not just by China's insatiable need for oil but also by common ambitions for global influence and regional stability. Saudi Arabia is a crucial ally for China's plan for sustainable economic expansion due to its huge oil reserves and strong OPEC position (Al-Tamimi, 2020). Iran,

on the other hand, provides China with a priceless counterbalance in the area and a possible ally in its larger aims within the Middle East thanks to its geostrategic placement and abundance of natural resources (Xia, 2021).

China's Middle Eastern commitments, however, are not without complexity. The Beijing leadership treads a fine line while attempting to promote cordial ties with both Riyadh and Tehran. The historical Sunni-Shia division, which frequently portrays Saudi Arabia and Iran as the leaders of each sect, makes this balancing job much more difficult. China's foreign policy maneuvers are further complicated by the ramifications of these sectarian overtones for regional politics and alliances (Rashid, 2019).

For Pakistan, this is not merely an external observance. In the past, Pakistan has kept close connections with both China and Saudi Arabia. It additionally has a long-shared border and cultural ties with Iran. Given the Sunni-majority population and sizeable Shia minority, China's interactions with Saudi Arabia and Iran may potentially have an impact on Pakistan's domestic politics in addition to its foreign policy. The varied nature of China's operations in the Middle East and the implications for Pakistan are highlighted by the intricate weaving of economic, strategic, and sectarian interests (Malik & Qadir, 2022).

This paper aims to delve deeply into the complex dynamics of China's negotiations with Iran and Saudi Arabia. It aims to give academics and policymakers a thorough awareness of the complexities of these linkages and to identify the resulting changes in Pakistan's geopolitical landscape, giving researchers and decision-makers a thorough comprehension of the intertwined fates of these nations.

### **Statement of the Problem**

China's transformational revival in the modern world is dramatically changing long-standing geopolitical assumptions and alliances. The Middle East now has a complex dynamic because of China's multifaceted relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran, which increases the region's strategic importance. For Pakistan, a country balancing long-

standing relationship, security concerns, and economic imperatives, this developing nexus has significant ramifications. As the world order changes, it is important to thoroughly examine the developing relations in order to understand their complex structure and prospective effects on Pakistan's foreign policy priorities, security posture, and economic development.

### **Brief Review of Literature**

Significant scholarly attention has been focused on China's growing influence in international politics, particularly in areas of strategic importance. With its complex geopolitical geography and plentiful oil resources, the Middle East is a crucial region for Chinese foreign policy. China's engagement with Saudi Arabia and Iran within this region, as examined in this study, is representative of its multidimensional foreign policy approach meant to protect economic interests, guarantee energy security, and increase its geopolitical power.

Over the last few decades, there has been a considerable evolution in the bilateral relationship between China and Saudi Arabia. Their relationships, which have historically been based on economic and energy cooperation, have grown stronger recently in a variety of areas. Saudi Arabia, a significant oil producer and the source of much of China's growing energy demands, is now an essential partner. This partnership has grown to include joint military operations, infrastructural improvement, and financial investments. China has become a prominent participant in the Saudi economic transformation as a result of Saudi Arabia's increased reliance on it for investment and technology cooperation as part of its Vision 2030 goal to diversify its economy (Alrasheed, 2021).

Additionally, this link has also been altered by geopolitical factors. China and Saudi Arabia have similar goals in promoting economic growth, combating terrorism, and maintaining regional stability. China's ambitious global infrastructure development initiative, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), fits with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and encourages cooperation on a number of levels. The strategic

appeal of Saudi Arabia for China's BRI is increased by its placement as a hub for travel to the Middle East and Africa, solidifying their strategic alliance (Khan, 2020).

China and Iran have a complex relationship that has developed in a manner akin to how China and Saudi Arabia have. This relationship is fundamentally based on energy cooperation, with China being a significant user of Iranian oil and natural gas. Beyond energy, economic ties also include trading, investing, and infrastructure development. By highlighting their common objectives in regional stability and economic growth, the two countries' Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, signed in 2016, strengthened their relationship (Zhang, 2018).

Geopolitical concerns also support the changing connection. Iran is seen by China as a key participant in its BRI, providing access to crucial ports and commercial routes. Furthermore, China's influence and strategic adaptability have increased in the Middle East due to Iran's strategic stance (Dadkhah & Mojarradi, 2018).

Pakistan is intimately involved in these dynamics because of its strategic location and historical links to China. It is situated at the center of a complicated geopolitical web due to its long-standing connection with China and close ties to Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the Middle East. Pakistan's foreign policy choices, security stance, and economic activities may be impacted by the changing dynamics between China, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. China's interactions with Saudi Arabia and Iran have strategic, economic, and geopolitical repercussions that go far beyond bilateral ties. Understanding these processes is crucial for predicting how Pakistan's geopolitical environment will develop in the years to come.

### **Contextualizing Saudi Arabia– Iran Relations: A Theoretical Framework**

An extensive theoretical framework that takes into account the Middle East's geopolitical complexity is necessary to comprehend the complicated dynamics of the Saudi Arabia-Iran relationship. Barry Buzan's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) is a potent analytical tool for understanding

the inter-state dynamics and security dynamics inside a particular region. According to RSCT, a regional security complex is made up of governments whose main security concerns are connected and who actively engage in security-related interactions. We can analyze the Saudi Arabia-Iran relationship and the different aspects that affect their perceptions of and interactions with security by applying this theory to the Middle East (Buzan, 1991).

• **Historical and Religious rivalry:**

An appreciation of long-standing historical and religious rivalry is essential to understanding the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Their contacts and power conflicts have been greatly influenced by the Sunni-Shia division, which dates back to the 7th century, and has exacerbated geopolitical tensions in the area. Gains by one are seen as losses by the other in a zero-sum game driven by the struggle for religious and ideological supremacy, aggravating their security worries and fostering a difficult regional security environment (Nasr, 2006).

• **Geopolitical and Strategic Competition:**

Beyond long-standing and religious animosities, geopolitical and strategic factors have strengthened Saudi Arabia and Iran's rivalry. Both countries aim to dominate their own regions, influence regional alliances, and maintain control over key choke-points like the Strait of Hormuz. Both countries engage in proxy wars and exert influence over neighboring states to raise their regional prominence as a result of these geopolitical goals, which leads to an ongoing power struggle (Kamrava, 2010).

• **Security Dilemmas and Arms Race:**

The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has taken the form of a classic security dilemma, in which the efforts taken by one state to bolster its security are seen as a threat by the other, sparking an arms race and perpetuating a cycle of insecurity. Both countries engage in military buildups and alliances with outside parties to strengthen their defenses and project power because they see each other as existential dangers. This weapons race exacerbates regional tensions

and adds to the instability of the security environment (Posen, 1993).

• **Regional Alliances and Balance of Power:**

Both Saudi Arabia and Iran build alliances and counter-alliances across the area in the pursuit of security and influence, which helps to maintain the balance of power. While Iran builds relationships with Shia-majority states and non-state entities, particularly in Lebanon and Iraq, Saudi Arabia aligns itself with the United States and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations to counterbalance Iran's influence. These regional alliances, which frequently change and develop, produce a precarious power balance that directly affects the Middle East's security system (Luciani, 2013).

• **External Interference and Global Implications:**

The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran affects not just the regional security system but also the entire world. To protect their geopolitical interests, external parties, particularly the United States and Russia, strategically interact with both countries. The dynamics of regional security are further complicated by this external meddling, which influences power struggles and exacerbates conflicts. The Saudi Arabia-Iran relationship has grown more complex and important as a result of the presence of significant international entities in the area (Dalby, 2016).

**Saudi Arabia – Iran Relations: A Historical Context**

Understanding the current dynamics of their contacts within the Middle East requires an understanding of the historical development of Saudi Arabia-Iran relations. Religious, cultural, and geopolitical influences that date back centuries have had a significant impact on these relationships. The divide between the Sunni and Shia factions, which occurred at the beginning of Islam in the 7th century, is thought to be the origin of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. In addition to defining their religious practices, this separation also paved the way for political and ideological divisions that still exist today (Nasr, 2006).

• **Religious Schism and Its Impact:**

Following the death of Prophet Muhammad, there were varying interpretations of Islamic leadership, which led to the Sunni-Shia split, which eventually resulted in a profound theological divide. Shias follow different practices and hold different beliefs than Sunnis, who primarily support the Caliphate system. This split has shaped religious practices over time, as well as political and regional dynamics, which has fueled rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

• **Ottoman and Safavid Era:**

Present-day Saudi Arabia and Iran were subject to different areas of influence during the Ottoman and Safavid eras. While Persia (modern-day Iran), under the Safavid's, accepted Twelver Shia Islam as the official religion, the Ottomans, who were predominately Sunni, exercised their dominance over the Arabian Peninsula. The basis for current conflicts was laid by these historical alignments, which reinforced religious and cultural divisions (Ansari, 2007).

• **20th Century Geopolitical Shifts:**

The Middle East's geopolitical landscape changed in the early 20th century. Regional borders were redrawn as a result of the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of nation-states. Significant world powers entered the fray as a result of the discovery of enormous oil reserves in Saudi Arabia and Iran. The traditional Sunni monarchy of Saudi Arabia was directly threatened by the rise of the Islamic Republic of Iran during the 1979 revolution with its revolutionary philosophy and anti-monarchical position (Milton-Edwards, 2005).

• **Iranian Revolution and Sectarian Struggles:**

The 1979 Iranian Revolution, which resulted in the founding of an Islamic republic led by Ayatollah Khomeini, had a significant effect on regional dynamics. Saudi Arabia and other orthodox Sunni monarchies were directly threatened by Iran's revolutionary fervor, anti-monarchical stance, and desire to disseminate its ideas. This revolution and the ensuing Iran-Iraq War intensified Saudi-Iran rivalry and



sectarian tensions, sparking proxy wars throughout the region (Karsh, 2002).

• **Contemporary Geo-strategic Interests:**

The Saudi-Iran rivalry is still fueled by geopolitical concerns in the modern day. Both nations compete with one another for influence and dominance in the Middle East, frequently using sectarian conflicts to further their own interests. Saudi Arabia's security worries have increased as a result of Iran's growing regional influence and involvement in the crises in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon, which has also intensified the power struggle in the area (Toft, 2011).

Ideological divisions, geopolitical upheavals, and religious schisms have all played a significant role in the history of relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The dynamics of the modern Middle East are framed by these historical legacies, which also inform the complex relationships and tensions between these two regional superpowers.

**Changing Regional Dynamics & Saudi Arabia–Iran  
Convergence: The Role of China**

The evolving regional dynamics in the Middle East have been significantly impacted by China's growing presence and interactions with significant parties in the region, particularly Saudi Arabia and Iran. The geopolitical outlooks and strategic imperatives of both nations have evolved over time, resulting in subtle signs of convergence that are frequently aided or impacted by China's significant involvement.

• **Economic Inter-dependencies and Trade Initiatives:**

The Middle East, particularly Saudi Arabia and Iran, is now at the centre of China's economic ambitions due to the country's unquenchable energy needs and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The investments, trade initiatives, and energy alliances China has with both countries underline its importance to their economies. Reevaluating long-standing rivalries and taking into account common economic goals are encouraged by the economic inter-dependencies that China's engagement has produced (Zahedi, 2016).

• **Energy Collaboration and OPEC Dynamics:**

Being a significant oil user, China has a heightened interest in the stability of the global energy market. Discussions about the stability of the oil market and oil production levels are influenced by its relations with OPEC members like Saudi Arabia and Iran. China's position as an observer at OPEC meetings and its attempts to resolve disputes between members highlight its impact in promoting communication and teamwork in the management of oil output and prices (Mabon, 2018).

• **Security Concerns and Regional Stability:**

Regional stability is now of utmost importance due to China's growing involvement and investments in the Middle East. Due to its investments in important regional infrastructure projects like the Belt and Road Initiative, the region needs a stable and safe environment. China's increasing participation in regional security discussions, counter-terrorism activities, and peacekeeping operations highlights its contribution to stability promotion and encourages constructive interaction between important parties like Saudi Arabia and Iran (Hokayem, 2017).

• **Mediation Efforts and Diplomatic Initiatives:**

Due to its impartial foreign policy, China might perhaps mediate the crisis between Saudi Arabia and Iran. China can serve as a mediator in diplomatic conversations and build an environment that is conducive to conflict settlement as a powerful global actor with cordial connections with both countries. Its track record of effective international conflict mediation shows that it has the ability to support de-escalation and enable communication between Saudi Arabia and Iran (Takeyh, 2018).

• **Regional Multi-polarity and Shifting Alliances:**

Traditional power dynamics have been overturned by China's ascent, leading Saudi Arabia and Iran to reevaluate their strategic positions. Both countries are aware of China's expanding regional sway and its significant diplomatic and economic contributions. Saudi Arabia and Iran have been

compelled to negotiate the shifting alliances and interact with China as a result of China's multifaceted involvement, which is centred on economic development and geopolitical stability (Krieg, 2018). This is done in order to protect their different interests.

China's multidimensional position has a considerable impact on the shifting regional dynamics in the Middle East, with a focus on the convergence of Saudi Arabia and Iran. Reassessing old rivalries and promoting cooperation are encouraged by China's economic, energy, and security interests in the area. Analyzing the changing geopolitical landscape and the prospects for increased stability and cooperation requires an understanding of China's expanding influence in the area.

### **Saudi Arabia– Iran Cooperation for Security Balancing & Changing Security Complex**

Amid shifting regional dynamics and global realignments, Saudi Arabia and Iran have begun to explore new possibilities for cooperation, particularly in the field of security balance. In the face of shared challenges, the two countries' long-standing rivalry, which has repeatedly contributed to regional instability, is starting to adapt and become more realistic. In this changing security environment, China's multidimensional role as a significant global actor has a significant impact on the dynamics of Saudi Arabia-Iran relations.

#### **• Shared Security Concerns and Counter-Terrorism:**

The threat of terrorism and extremism has been acknowledged by both Saudi Arabia and Iran as a shared security concern. They have reevaluated their priorities in response to the growth of extremist organizations like ISIS and al-Qaeda in the Middle East. The involvement of China in counter-terrorism measures with Saudi Arabia and Iran emphasizes the value of teamwork even more. In order to promote collaboration between Saudi Arabia, Iran, and other regional actors, China's goal of stability aligns with regional security concerns (Blanchard, 2019).

#### **• Economic Stability and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI):**

Regional security is critically dependent on economic stability. China, Saudi Arabia, and Iran have converged due to the economic needs of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI addresses issues including employment, infrastructural development, and socioeconomic stability through promoting economic cooperation. Given how economic stability affects regional security, this shared goal could be the basis for security cooperation.

• **Mediation and Conflict Resolution:**

Due to its impartial foreign policy posture, China is a strong contender to mediate disputes between Saudi Arabia and Iran, especially when they arise in the region. In its interactions with other countries, China has demonstrated its expertise in promoting communication and serving as a mediator in international conflicts. Its ability to serve as a mediator in efforts to resolve the crisis between Saudi Arabia and Iran is notable. China has reduced regional tensions and advanced a sense of security through proactive diplomatic initiatives.

• **Maritime Security and the Strait of Hormuz:**

For the international commerce in energy, the Strait of Hormuz continues to be a vital marine route. They understand the need of maintaining maritime security since Saudi Arabia and Iran have an interest in securing this important route. As a significant importer of Middle Eastern oil, China's economic interests in the region highlight how important the stability of this passage is to China. The shifting security landscape is influenced by its participation in debates about maritime security and its potential contribution to maintaining security in the Strait of Hormuz (Furtado, 2020).

• **Changing Security Complex and Regional Alliances:**

A restructuring of regional alliances is necessary in light of the Middle East's shifting security situation, which is characterized by the emergence of new power centers. Saudi Arabia and Iran are readjusting their relations as a result of this shifting environment. The emergence of China as a global force upsets the established relationships, forcing

the two countries to think strategically about regional security (Krieg, 2018).

In light of shifting regional security dynamics, China's diversified involvement has a significant impact on the likelihood of collaboration between Saudi Arabia and Iran in security balancing. Common safety issues, economic stability, arbitration initiatives, maritime security, and the developing security complex all show the possibility for cooperation.

## **Results and Discussions**

### **➤ China's Engagement with Saudi Arabia and Iran:**

China has strategically strengthened its relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran, putting a special emphasis on their shared economic, diplomatic, and military interests. China's extensive interactions with Saudi Arabia and Iran are a reflection of its aspirations for the world. China wants to secure its energy demands for ongoing economic growth, which is why it is pursuing energy supplies from Saudi Arabia and Iran. China's interest in advancing diplomatic ties and investing in these nations at the same time demonstrates a strategic diplomatic approach. China's intention to safeguard its interests and safeguard its resources in the region is highlighted by the military component. China's position as a major player in the world with a substantial impact on the Middle East and South Asia is cemented by this dynamic role.

### **➤ Impact on Regional Security Complexes:**

China's engagement has had a profound impact on the security arrangements in the region, changing established power relationships and alliances. The existing security dynamics in the Middle East and South Asia are being disturbed by China's expanding influence. China is a key player in changing the regional power structures by forging strategic and economic connections with Saudi Arabia and Iran. For countries in the area, this calls for a reevaluation of security issues and a rethink of foreign policy priorities.

### **➤ Security Dangers and Concerns:**

Given the long-standing Sunni-Shia division and China's intricate balancing act, security concerns are raised by China's involvement in the Middle East and South Asia. China's diplomatic maneuvers are made more difficult by the persisting Sunni-Shia divide and its presentation of Saudi Arabia and Iran as the leaders of each group. The sectarian undertones and their implications for local politics and alliances complicate China's foreign strategy in the region even further. To advance regional stability, the region's leaders must overcome these obstacles.

➤ **Geopolitical Alignments:**

Changes in regional geopolitical alliances are being driven by China's interactions with Saudi Arabia and Iran. A reevaluation of conventional power arrangements is facilitated by China's impact on regional politics. It has the capacity to alter alliances and the balance of power in the region by promoting economic growth and stability. Its strategic appeal to both countries is highlighted by its participation in Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and its congruence with Iran's strategic goals.

➤ **Economic Linkages:**

Particularly in the energy sector, China has created significant economic ties with Saudi Arabia and Iran. These economic linkages support the stability and expansion of these nations' economies in addition to China's need for energy resources. These countries' economies have benefited from China's investments, trade initiatives, and infrastructure construction. China's position as a significant global player has been cemented by its role as an economic partner.

➤ **Case Studies, notably Pakistan:**

The geopolitical environment in Pakistan is affected by China's relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran. Pakistan is a crucial actor in this developing situation because of its position, historical links to China, and close relationships to Saudi Arabia and Iran. The effects of China's contacts on Pakistan's foreign policy choices, security considerations,

and economic activity go beyond only diplomacy and economics. For Pakistan to handle its particular role in the larger regional environment, it is essential to comprehend these intricate relationships.

The findings of this study offer insight on the complex dynamics of China's interactions with Saudi Arabia and Iran, as well as its consequences for geopolitics and regional security. China's diverse participation reflects its stature as a major player on the world stage as well as its pursuit of energy resources, diplomatic ties, and economic development. Additionally, China's influence is disrupting conventional geopolitical alliances and changing regional power systems. Given the historical Sunni-Shia division, the security issues presented by its presence highlight the importance of deft diplomatic maneuvering. The stability and expansion of the economies of Saudi Arabia and Iran are also dependent on the strong economic ties that China has built up in the area. These connections are fueled not only by China's energy needs but also by its involvement in the economic growth of these nations. Given Pakistan's particular circumstances, it is important to carefully evaluate the effects of China's interactions with Saudi Arabia and Iran maneuvering. For academics, politicians, and decision-makers in the region, it is crucial to comprehend how China's varied involvement affects the region. These findings shed light on the complex web of geopolitical ties and the significant consequences of China's contribution to regional security and stability.

### **Conclusion**

The rise of China as a global superpower has altered international dynamics and had a significant impact on regional security systems, particularly those in the Middle East and South Asia. This study methodically dissected China's interaction with Saudi Arabia and Iran, two major regional players distinguished by intricate historical, religious, and economic rivalry. In the framework of the Saudi-Iranian relationship, the study carefully investigated China's strategic goals, diplomatic efforts, economic interests, and military engagements, exposing a convoluted geopolitical web.

The research produced important discoveries through many case studies, including a close examination of Pakistan. China's growing ties with Saudi Arabia and Iran are a reflection of its desire for economic growth, energy security, and influence on the world stage. China's status as a significant global player is cemented by this participation, which is supported by the necessity of securing energy supplies, establishing diplomatic ties, and accelerating economic progress.

China's position in this complicated regional environment is not without its challenges, though. China's diplomatic maneuvers are made more challenging by the negotiation of the deeply ingrained Sunni-Shia division in the Middle East, which adds layers of complexity to an already unstable region. The report also emphasizes Pakistan's distinct status, which is characterized by its long-standing ties to China and close links to Saudi Arabia and Iran. The way Pakistan has responded to China's activities in the Middle East demonstrates how sectarian, strategic, and economic interests interact to shape the geopolitical landscape.

The world scene is being radically changed by China's revival. Beyond the bilateral sphere, its interactions with Saudi Arabia and Iran influence the destiny of the entire region. It is crucial for academics, politicians, and decision-makers to understand these changing dynamics and their implications for regional security and stability as China exerts its economic and strategic influence in the Middle East and South Asia. The research's conclusions shed light on the complex geopolitical web in this fast-moving region of the world and shed light on the intertwined fates of these countries.

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