

**Creating Peace: Can the People's Republic of China
Replace the United States as the Primary
Peace-Broker in the Middle East?**

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Research Paper

Introduction

The Middle East has long been the epicentre of great power competition between external actors, from the Greek invasion of the Levant and Persia in the 5th Century BCE to the Cold War competition between the United States of America (US) and the Soviet Union. It has historically been a “highly penetrated system” (Kamrava, 2018) where external actors have vied for influence, power advantages, and the protection of their self-interested motivation. Today, the landscape for competition reflects this long-standing tradition whilst posing new realities. The past decade has seen significant change in the region: new conflicts have spread across the region, and the region has seen the post-colonial rebirth of internal great powers such as Saudi Arabia and Iran. The Middle East is entering a new era of multipolarity.

That said, as former US President Donald Trump described, the Middle East is “one big, fat quagmire” (Benaïm, 2017), and this reality is ever-present today: hostilities with Iran and Israel have reached one of the most dangerous levels since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, Israel faces significant security challenges against the Axis of Resistance, the Palestinians are facing their worst humanitarian catastrophe since the Nakba, the Arab-Israeli normalisation process has been put on an indefinite hiatus, the region hosts the second highest concentration of fragile states (Fragile States Index, 2024), and global disturbances to the flow of trade and petrochemicals have disrupted both domestic and global economies. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared “A New Middle East” at his United Nations (UN) General Assembly speech in September 2023 (Netanyahu, 2023), but since then, profound realities present in the Middle East have become apparent. Ideological conflict, historical disputes, domestic turbulence, intransigent disputants, and excessive foreign interference have all been the core factors for such instability that is still present, and it is the role of peace brokers to resolve such disputes; at stake is the stability, predictability, and prosperity of one of the key pillars of the international system.

In light of this, this research paper examines the growing Great Power competition in the Middle East between the United States and the People’s Republic of China with a specific focus on peace brokering and conflict resolution. As the United States has seen a retrenchment in its power and influence across the region over the past decade, its ability to broker peace agreements has concomitantly been hindered. Following a brief historical background on the issue and a literature review, an in-depth analysis of the factors why China can replace the United States will be accompanied by an overview of Chinese peace-brokering efforts in the past and policy recommendations that the Chinese should progressively adopt. This research essay will focus on the Middle East Peace Process vis-à-vis the Arab-Israeli Normalisation process- the process of normalising/ establishing relations between Israel and Arab states- and conflict resolution efforts in the Israeli and Arab shadow conflict and ideological conflict with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Whilst limitations will be presented, this research paper- by employing a qualitative method of analysing academic sources- will ultimately find that China can become the primary peace broker in the region, a paradigm which may take a few decades to establish but will ultimately occur if China proceeds in accordance with the recommendations in this paper.

Historical Background

Since the end of the Second World War, as Britain’s empire collapsed along with its status as a world superpower, the United States has taken great interest in its position as the primary external power in the Middle East. As the United States emerged as one of the two superpowers in the post-war era, the United

States sought to exert its influence across the world to further assert its power. In this, the Middle East became arguably the most important region for the United States to spread its power and to try and maintain peace within the region. Such interests and motivations were- and continue not be- merely confined to the United States. Former President Truman declared that “[The Middle East] is consequently an area of great economic and strategic importance, the nations of which are not strong enough individually or collectively to withstand powerful aggression. It is easy to see, therefore, how the Near and Middle East might become an area of intense rivalry between outside powers, and how such rivalry might suddenly erupt into conflict” (Madadi, 1970). In this, Truman was referring precisely to the Soviet threat he perceived in what later would become the Truman doctrine of containment. The vital interests of the United States made the region a paramount interest for the United States to safeguard.

The motivations and interests of the United States were evident: (1) The United States sought to limit the Soviet Union’s sphere of influence, as was evidently through the manifestation of the 1958 Eisenhower doctrine and (2) to promote the steady flow of oil, other petrochemicals, and trade through the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea, manifested through the Carter Doctrine- the doctrine that was conceptualised by President Jimmy Carter for the US to use whatever means required to the protection of US interests in the Persian Gulf. As Former US President Ronald Reagan declared in 1983, “The Middle East is of vital concern to our nation... the area is key to the economic and political life of the West” (Reagan, 1983). The Middle East has traditionally been seen as the crossroads where Europe, the Far East, and Africa all meet, and much like the Heartland Theory for Eastern Europe, many theorists have stressed how the dominant actor in the Middle East can exert tremendous influence over the world system: “If Russia dominates the Middle East, she would be able to bring all European nations to their knees without firing a shot”, and by extension “so long as Western Europe’s strength and stability is important to the United States, the latter must accept the oil problem as its own” (Campbell, 1960). Ergo, as a result, the United States has long seen the vital necessity of

Since the end of the Cold War, these aims transformed to where oil was still considered a fundamental necessity for the United States, but other priorities took form: (1) the spreading of democracy took priority through the policy of state interventionism, from direct military intervention in Iraq, Libya, and Syria, to tacit intervention in other protests during the Arab Spring (Nixon, 2011), (2) the containment of nuclear proliferation, seen with the re-introduction of sanctions on Iran over its nuclear programme and the US’s believed involvement in the sabotage of Iran’s nuclear programme (Kushner, 2013), and (3) combatting terrorism across the region to ensure non-state actors do not harm the other important aims that the United States, namely that of economic interests and national security concerns (Byman, 2015).

In its ambitions to assert dominance in the region, the United States has transformed its position from merely considering the economic aspects of the region and concomitantly focussed a great deal on diplomacy. For much of the period after the 1967 war, the United States replaced previous attempts by the United Nations in peace-brokering efforts. It was Lyndon B. Johnson who first declared such an ambition vis-à-vis the Palestinian question, stating that “the Government of the United States will do its part for peace in every forum, at every level, at every hour” (Johnson, 1967). In this, the United States initially held the policy of establishing peace based on five key principles: the right of national life for Israelis and Palestinians; justice for the refugees; permitting maritime passage; political independence and territorial sovereignty; and limitation of the Arab-Israeli arms race (Reich, 1976). Whilst much of this period saw

the manifestation of great power rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, it soon emerged that the United States became the dominant actor in the peace process.

The first landmark agreement came with the 1978 Camp David Accords, the first agreement of what would become the Arab-Israeli normalisation process and the first major diplomatic breakthrough since the 1948 war (Telhami, 1992). Despite being deeply controversial at the time- with the Egyptian President Anwar Sadat being assassinated, Egypt's 10-year ban from the Arab League, and a significant reaction from Israeli settlers to Israel's signing of the agreement- the agreement was viewed as a hallmark of American diplomacy. From success to abysmal failure, Carter would see his failed presidential campaign end his presidency through failing to solve a now omnipresent threat in the Middle East for the United States and Israel: the rise of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Following the fall of the Shah during the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the replacement of monarchy with theocracy saw the United States plunge from being Iran's closest ally to its greatest enemy, what Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini- the first Supreme Leader of Iran- described as "the Great Satan" (Dabashi, 2015). The first primary challenge- and failure- came in the failed negotiations for the release of US hostages in Iran following the storming of the embassy in Tehran (Wolf, 2006). From failed negotiations to a botched rescue mission, from the inception of the Islamic Republic, they proved to pose a significant challenge in continuing the efforts from Camp David.

The growing militarisation of American policy vis-a-vis the Middle East was first implemented in the US's intervention in the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the first such intervention in the Middle East by the US. The intervention was pertinent to protecting some of the most important motivations for the United States in the region, most notably to the Soviet Union which was accused of providing Lebanon with "direct support through a network of surrogates and terrorists" (Aruri, 1985) and hoping to one day impose a US and Israeli-backed regime in Lebanon to counter Soviet influence in Syria (ibid.). That said, whilst the 1980s saw a ramping up of US intervention in the Middle East, from the Iran-Contra affair during the Iran-Iraq war to Reagan's failed intervention in Lebanon following Israel's invasion of Lebanon, there was no significant development in the peace process. Former National Security Council member Steven Simon highlights how the dramatic shift in US policy led to "American Militarising its Middle East Policy" (Simon, 2023), an aspect this essay will draw upon later in understanding the downfall of American power and influence in the region and one of the factors why China provides a stark- and more sustainable- method towards diplomacy and peace negotiations in the region. The US's many failures in the negotiations surrounding the May 17 Agreement during the Lebanese conflict, such as refusing Syrian participation and only involving minor factions of Christian-dominated rebel groups in Lebanon, demonstrated one of the earliest US failures in diplomacy in the region: it failed to create a sustainable path to peace not because of the disputants per se but rather the failure of the US as a fair and pragmatic broker. Whilst the US's power and influence in the region were questioned, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak declared "You are going to lose the confidence of all your friends in the area" (Goshko, 1984) following this, the lack of a peer competitor to vie for influence in the peace brokering arena meant that the US could overcome such failures and maintaining the status quo as the US being the most influential external actor in the region.

The Camp David Accords have been one of merely a plethora of frameworks for determining peace in the region. The others include the Clinton parameters- manifested in the Oslo Accords and the failed Camp

David Summit negotiations in 2000-, the Arab Peace Initiative and the Roadmap for Peace plan of 2003, the Annapolis negotiations, the Kerry and Abbas peace talks, and the Trump Peace Proposal (JVL, 2020). Whilst all of these agreements have by and large maintained the two-state paradigm, deviations in plans from disputes over the amount of territory for the state of Palestine, settlement disputes, and the status of Jerusalem, to name a few- they have all failed to achieve a resolution to the Palestinian question. As will later be discussed, the current climate indicates that no progress can be made on Arab-Israeli normalisation without progress on the Palestinian question as the Arab States slowly shift back to their focus on the violations of international law committed by Israel and finally resolving the Palestinian question.

It must be noted that the United States was not the only peace-broker in the region but has the characteristics of being at the forefront of the Middle East peace process. Internal mediators, from Egypt to Qatar to Algeria, as well as alternative external mediators, have at numerous stages played pivotal roles in the peace process. Saudi Arabia, most notably, has played a pivotal role throughout the whole peace process, such as proposing the Arab Peace Initiative in 2002 and the previous Fahd Plan in the early 1980s (Kostiner, 2009). That said, the United States has been the unequivocal vanguard of the peace process throughout this time. The United States has been able to achieve this in several ways. The primary rationale is the significant hard power asymmetries that the US can exert throughout the region. Unlike other great powers, the United States has been able to establish an incredible military presence in the region and consequently has been able to offer security guarantees in exchange for support from states in the region. States such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have all greatly benefitted from this transaction. However, the United States has also been able to provide unparalleled economic incentives in exchange for peace agreements, such as the \$2.1 billion granted in military and economic aid that Egypt received by signing the 1978 agreement (Satloff & Clawson). Most recently, with the Abraham Accords, the US agreed to sell the UAE 50 F-35 fighter jets, recognised de jure the annexation of Western Sahara by Morocco, and removed Sudan from the list of terrorist states, all in an effort to incentivise peace (Whitson, 2023). Due to the United States' tremendous influence over the international system, the economic, political, and security implications that underlie good relations with the United States are actively sought by actors throughout the region.

The decline of the United States' influence in the Middle East has been seen to be unfolding over the past decade, and this has concomitantly led to its growing inability to act as a broker throughout the region. In recent decades, Israeli settlement expansion has only hindered resolution attempts on the Palestinian question, Iran is ever closer to developing sufficient levels of highly enriched uranium to develop a nuclear weapon, and the United States' efforts of spreading democracy across the region as a means of securing peace and stability in the region has failed on every front. As was written in *Foreign Affairs*, "Washington's Middle East strategy has been... 'delusional', fabricated in the continual 'superimposition of grand ideas' by policymakers convinced of their own virtuous intentions towards a region about which they knew little and cared less" (Anderson, 2023). This has been apparent in both the Israel-Arab normalisation process and with the US's dealing with Iran. In the case of Iran, this has frequently been seen in the demands for the democratisation and secularisation of the Islamic Republic and allegations of interference in the country's domestic affairs, a view the ruling Ayatollahs and the senior clerics have maintained since the 1979 revolution.

The current Biden administration has failed to make meaningful progress in a ceasefire or peace agreement in the Israel-Gaza conflict, hopes of renewing the Iranian nuclear deal and reintegrating Iran back into the international system fell completely mute, and the administration has failed to establish diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel; what would have been the most significant step in the Arab-Israeli normalisation process has instead been a fruitless exercise in diplomatic efforts. Instead, the Biden administration has once again had to rely on its military prowess in the region to ensure peace and stability. For example, when the Houthis started to attack commercial seas in the Red Sea, the United States led the coalition “Operation Prosperity Guardian” as the only means to ensure stability in the region (Sabbagh, 2023), and the United States was once again militarily involved in the region.

Furthermore, the United States’ biased stance favouring Israel has greatly weakened the credibility of the US. Despite Washington’s official position of supporting a two-state solution, the US has vetoed resolutions condemning and prohibiting Israeli settlement expansion in the UN Security Councils, Washington now recognises the occupied territories of the Golan Heights and Jerusalem- notably East Jerusalem- as officially part of Israel, turns a blind eye to continued settlement expansion, the frequent undermining of the Palestinian Authority, and continues to be the primary military backer of Israel, unwavering in its resolute support regardless of claims of war crimes committed by Israel or their numerous violations of international law. Whilst the Arab states have largely moved from their traditional position of “no peace, no recognition, and no negotiation” with Israel as established in the 1967 Arab League Summit (ibid.), it is clear that further progress towards peace can only be achieved with a meaningful resolution to the Palestinian question, an issue the United States has long ignored in support of Israel.

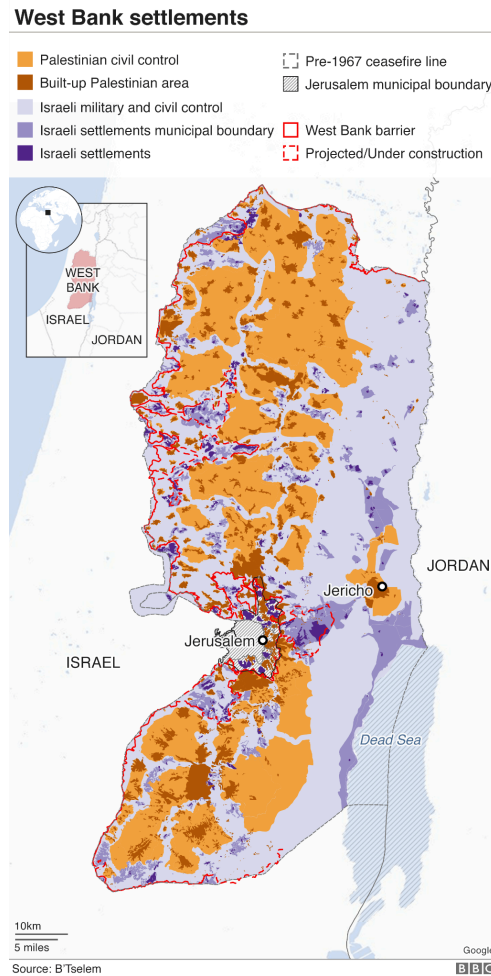


Figure 1: Israeli Settlement Expansion in the West Bank (BBC, 2019)

Finally, as stated in the literature review, a key quality of mediators using Directive Strategies is the importance of trustworthiness and maintaining commitments. There have been many instances throughout the period where the United States has failed to maintain its commitments, leading to subsequent periods of declining influence in the region. Here will be noted two examples: Lebanon in 1984, and Saudi Arabia in 2019. The first, Lebanon, saw the Reagan administration withdraw Marines from the country following months of growing escalation and attacks on US troops and assets in the conflict despite the ardent and defiant proclamations that the United States would stay firm. The United States has often offered security guarantees for its partners in the region in exchange for protecting US interests (ibid.), and the retreat from Lebanon served as a crucial hindrance to this strategy. The second notable case is in the example of Saudi Arabia. In 2019, after the Houthis launched drone strikes that targeted and damaged Saudi oil facilities, the US refused to help the Saudi government in retaliatory strikes, hindering the credibility of the United States to stand with its allies in the region (ibid.). Overall, therefore, the United States saw an unprecedented rise and fall as a dominant actor in the region, and as such has left a vacuum for other state actors to intervene in hopes of making peace.

Literature Review and Definitions

The current literature vis-à-vis the role of Chinese diplomacy in the Middle East is lacking in several dimensions relative to the vast literature available on US peace-brokering efforts in the region, predominantly due to the novelty of Chinese diplomatic efforts in the region. This literature review will, however, explore the theoretical underpinnings of international diplomacy and mediation in conflict resolution, exploring in detail the specificities of the research question at hand- such as what is a peace broker, what factors make a mediator successful, and how mediators gain primacy in negotiations- with issues relating to the United States and China's mediation efforts being further explored throughout the rest of the paper. Additionally, whilst techniques of mediation will further be explored, this will only apply to the relevant application of such techniques in the practice of peace-brokering. Whilst disputes within the literature remain over the conceptual framework for mediation, this paper does not seek to answer such a question from a theoretical standpoint, but rather the most effective strategies and policies specifically in the Middle East that China can use to advance its diplomatic initiatives.

With regards to the term 'peace broker', a peace broker will be defined as a non-belligerent state that enables, encourages, and ultimately mediates peace negotiations between opposing parties. In this, peace can either be considered in the form of a cessation of violence, a formal peace treaty, the reestablishment of diplomatic relations, or the ending of disputes e.g. territorial or diplomatic. Unlike intermediaries, the functions of mediators or peace brokers go beyond facilitating communication channels between opposing parties and instead require a more active approach to diplomacy. Touval comments that mediators are differentiated from mere intermediaries in that they "also make suggestions pertaining to the substance of the conflict, and seek to influence the parties to make concessions by exerting pressures and offering parties incentives" (Touval, 1982). A peace broker therefore refers to a mediator who facilitates peace between two or more states either in active military conflict or an ideological conflict, resolving disputes in non-military forms whilst having a significant role in providing incentives and materially influencing aspects of negotiation.

Furthermore, this research paper will additionally explore the effectiveness of peace brokers through the outlook further provided by Touval, who lists important questions regarding the "effectiveness of the mediators' contributions to the resolution or reduction of the conflict" (ibid.), such as whether the agreements can be credited to the efforts of mediators, what techniques were used by the mediators, and whether mediation led to lasting peace. These questions will be further explored in the theoretical sense in the literature review and the practical sense in the subsequent sections.

An important feature of mediation is the techniques that mediators use, and the strategies that mediators can adopt. This will become highly relevant when discussing policy recommendations that China can adopt. The specific literature explored will focus on the work of Bercovitch and Lee (Bercovitch & Lee, 2003), who conceptualised three broad forms of mediator intervention, the operationalisation of these being looked at throughout the rest of the paper. The first and lowest level of involvement explores communication and facilitation strategies. Whilst at the lower levels of mediator influence, this strategy is nonetheless incredibly important to mediation discussions. More often than not, barriers that exist lay in the lack of communication lines that exist, and permitting third-party mediators to facilitate these discussions acts as a sufficient amount of mediation. The second-tier level is considered the "procedural-formulative strategies", where mediators control the procedural elements of mediation such as the location of mediation, the frequency of negotiations, and aiding slightly in the more substantive

forms of negotiation (ibid.). The most powerful strategy is that of Directive Strategies. These strategies seek for the mediator to assert a dominant and proactive position in peace negotiations, affecting the substance of negotiations and providing incentives for the parties involved. As noted by Bercovitch and Lee, “the tactics associated with this strategy include changing the parties’ expectations, taking expectations, taking responsibility for concessions, making the parties aware of the costs of non-agreement, supplying and filtering information, suggesting concessions parties can make, helping the negotiators to undo a commitment, rewarding party concession... Helping devise a framework for acceptable outcomes, changing perceptions, pressing the parties to show flexibility, promising resources or threatening withdrawal, and offering to verify compliance with an agreement” (ibid.). The totality of this presents “the highest level of mediator involvement”, and as will be shown in the historical background and the subsequent sections help assert mediators as powerful peace brokers. It was the combination of the aforementioned strategies which will explain both the rise and the fall of US peace-brokering efforts in the Middle East hitherto, and the correct application of these strategies will enable China to rise as the primary peace broker in the region.

Notably, Bercovitch and Lee further highlight the importance of the fact that mediation leads to non-binding outcomes (ibid.). The non-binding nature highlights the uncertain conditions that remain following an agreement, and this has been seen throughout the Middle East, such as the US’s unilateral withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal. There are aspects which could enable outcomes of mediation agreements to be binding, introduced by the mediator in the form of treaty obligations or security guarantees. As has been highlighted by other theorists, namely of the realist branch of international relations, such treaties can also not be considered legally binding, especially by Great Powers who have the ability to negate the implementation of international law. Nonetheless, the fact that mediation is non-binding allows for flexibility, an incredibly important feature determining the longevity and sustainability of peace agreements. This non-binding nature lies at the heart of both the solution and the limitations of mediation as a whole, an recurring theme in the Middle East peace process. As will be discussed in further sections, ceasefire agreements resolved through mediation without longer-term visions for peaceful reconciliation will lead to an exacerbation of previously existing tensions, and as a consequence, this paper will recommend longer-term visions for peace that Chinese negotiators should pursue.

Various researchers have attempted to define mediation success across an incredibly broad spectrum. A frequently used definition which will be partially used in this essay is that “by successful outcomes, we mean producing a cease-fire, a partial settlement or a full settlement” (Bercovitch, Anagnoson, and Wille, 1991). While this is relevant to the case of the Israeli-Palestinian disputes, this is not sufficient to cover the wider contexts of the Middle East. For example, as will be assessed, China’s diplomacy vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia and Iran did not follow any of the following criteria per se- apart from the conditions surrounding the conflict in Yemen- but instead led to the resumption of relations between the two states. This essay will therefore develop the measures of success to include the basis of improved relations relative to relations prior.

China’s Motivations in the Middle East

China’s earliest interactions with the Middle East stem back to the Ancient Silk Road, where a plethora of goods traversed across the middle of the Eurasian plate, leading not only to economic exchanges but

cultural exchanges as well. However, over two centuries since the decline of the Silk Road, China has only recently started to play a critical role in the Middle East and the Middle Eastern peace process. As a whole, Chinese foreign policy aims are an extension of its grand visions domestically, that of what is known as the Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation; to overcome the Century of Humiliation bestowed by external forces on China from the First Opium War until the establishment of the People's Republic of China, and to assert China on the world stage as a superpower (Kaufman, 2011). The so-called "Chinese Dream" maintains the importance of re-establishing the credibility of China's foreign policy ambitions through peaceful and mutually beneficial means (Xi Jinping, 2023), and as will be shown China has maintained this ideological stance vis-a-vis its interactions with the Middle East.

For the majority of the Maoist period, predominantly since the 1955 Bandung Conference, China was a staunch ally of the Palestinian cause (Harris, 1978). It was said by Yasir Arafat, the former chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, that China was "the biggest influence in supporting our revolution and strengthening its perseverance" (Young, 2024). However, as China's economy expanded following Deng Xiaoping's Opening and Reform policies in the 1980s, and further economic liberalisation under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, China's trade expanded rapidly within the region. For example, between China and the Gulf Cooperation Council- six of the prominent Gulf countries- trade expanded from \$10 billion in 2000 to \$286.9 billion in 2023 (Raffoul & Keller, 2024). China's trade with the region stands at over \$500 billion, with China being the number one trade partner for the majority of the Arab World. Whilst oil accounts for a significant proportion of trade, other raw materials, renewable energy, financial investment, and tourism are also rapidly expanding (ibid.). China has increasingly played a critical role in Middle Eastern stock markets, startup venture capital, and overall development. Development has also been a major part. As will be shown, the Middle East has been a great beneficiary of China's global initiatives, most notably the Belt and Road Initiative and various infrastructure initiatives that have helped China rapidly expand its influence.

As stated, international mediators require sufficient motivation to get involved in peace negotiations. The broad range of motivations has already been laid out for the United States, and whilst China's are broadly similar in nature, they are different in their essence with regards to the grand strategies of both Great Powers. One of the landmarks of the historical nature of China's foreign policy is its periphery policy. Historically, in previous dynastical periods, Chinese leaders have sought to maintain peace and stability with their regional neighbours to ensure a harmonious region permitting the safe passage of trade and to ensure the borders of the "Central Kingdom" were protected; the concept of harmony has been central to Chinese philosophy for millennia, and the concept of harmony is manifested its regional policy. Whilst historically ingrained in a sense of sinocentrism, the periphery policy has continued in an iterated form. As China has expanded internally with its miraculous economic expansion since the 1980s, so has the periphery expanded. The Middle East now acts as a crucial region for the Chinese economy, and for China's ambitions to achieve the "Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation" (ibid.), it must ensure that its priorities in the Middle East are not jeopardised by instability; this is one of the primary reasons why China brokered the Saudi-Iranian reconciliation agreement- to ensure that aspects to China's domestic agenda, notably that of developing its economic power, is not hindered by external facts. As such, the Chinese and the US both share a similar motivation in that they both tremendously benefit from a peaceful and stable region.

The expansion of China's economic interests has spread across the region, too. Saudi Arabia notably has aligned its Vision 2030 project for the country's diversification from oil with China's BRI, with a great focus on Saudi Arabia's tourism, healthcare, and renewable energy sectors to name a few (Pathak, 2023). The BRI expansion into the Middle East has led to a tremendous rise in Sino-Middle Eastern relations and hence has meant that China has been able to weigh in tremendously on the politics and diplomacy of the Middle East. China's economic interests are notably vast throughout the region, one of the pressing catalysts for its recent involvement in the Middle East. China has sought to expand its economic influence throughout the Middle East. At the end of 2022, the Chinese government signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Palestinian Authority to expand the BRI into Palestine (ibid.). Further research into the BRI has also shown the growing ties between China and Israel, demonstrating China's use of "techno-nationalism... to mobilise private enterprises to invest in Israeli technology, promoting the growth of Chinese investments alongside Chinese state-affiliated investments in Israel since 2014" (Wu & Yarrow, 2022).

Alongside the BRI, the Chinese government has recently announced the development of three concomitant initiatives to enhance its strategy for achieving the Chinese Dream: the Global Security Initiative, the Global Development Initiative, and the Global Civilisation Initiative. These three initiatives aim to ensure security for China by ensuring peace and security throughout its periphery, viewing "peace through development" as a necessary pillar of China's foreign policy and implementing the "Community of Common Destiny" in an attempt to counter the Western international rules-based order (Chen, 2018). In this, China's aspiration to become a Great Power is taken to necessitate a growing expansion of policy into other regions, especially the Middle East, and to take an active role in economic and political aspects, hence the necessity of establishing peace-brokering capabilities in the region.

Establishing a Precedent: China's Role in Brokering Peace Across the World

Unlike their American counterparts, the Chinese Government has hitherto not played a primary role throughout the Middle Eastern peace process. However, as China's standing as a global power came into fruition following the Deng Xiaoping era, it progressively sought to establish its own peace brokering efforts across the world:

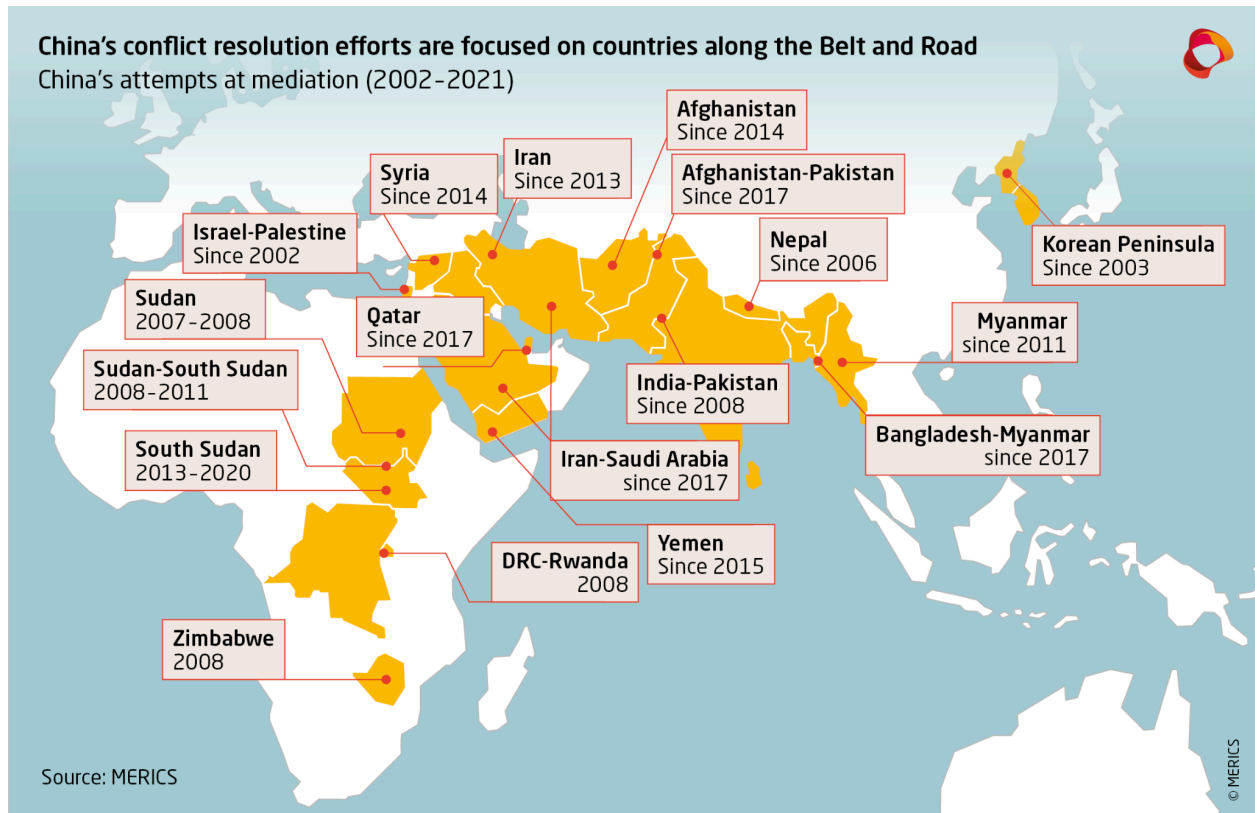


Figure 2: China's Growing Mediation Efforts in the 21st Century

The first overarching achievement of Chinese diplomacy in the Middle East came in the form of the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement agreement in March 2023, heralded as the most significant piece of diplomacy in the Middle East since the Abraham Accords (Parsi & Aljabri, 2023). Whilst many in the Western media have sought to downplay the impact of Chinese diplomacy in achieving the deal- and therefore, as per the literature stated, reject the Chinese as a successful mediator- it has been acknowledged by academics that Iran and Saudi Arabia had several talks previously since the breaking of diplomatic relations in 2016 (ibid.), including years of diplomatic efforts in Baghdad (Motamedi, 2022). Whilst significant, China can only be partially supported as a crucial mediator because- as reported- it predominantly used the lower forms of mediator strategies, namely only being the facilitator for communication and establishing the procedural- rather than the substance- of the negotiations. As the United States has done throughout its efforts in the Middle East hitherto, China must progressively become more assertive and direct in their approach towards diplomacy. Whilst this may not always be appropriate- e.g. the case for the division of Yemen, where although a directive strategy, its substance cannot be determined by the Chinese- it should still be the dominant policy in most situations, such as dealing with rapprochement between Egypt and Israel. Finally, the agreement made the world see China as an actor aiming to advance regional stability, not only focussing on mending disputes between Saudi Arabia and Iran- itself an act of creating regional stability- but focussed on progressing peace in other parts of the region, namely steps towards peace in Yemen (Abubaker, 2024).

The Beijing Declaration was the second notable accomplishment over the past year in the region, bringing 14 Palestinian factions to the negotiation table and agreeing on a framework for “establishing an interim

national reconciliation government” (Chen, 2024). The magnitude of the agreement is yet to be determined; the historical animosity between factions such as Fatah and Hamas has meant many agreements and diplomatic feats in the past have failed to live up to their intended ends or have failed to materialise into any peace, such as a 2017 Reconciliation agreement between Fatah and Hamas (Marteu, 2017). Mahmoud Abbas, the President of the Palestinian Authority, himself has thrown into light his belief in the futility of the agreement, much to the bewilderment of Middle Eastern commentators (Elgindy, 2024), yet brokering such an agreement in this climate itself is a remarkable feat nonetheless and has- at least temporarily- bridged the Palestinian factions to promote unity.

Finally, it must be noted that China has played a role in other notable cases of diplomacy, albeit not in the position of the primary peace broker. The primary example here is the JCPOA. China, as part of the UN Security Council, played a major role in the development and support of restricting Iran’s nuclear programme. As highlighted by Garver, China adopted a carrot-and-stick approach, restricting oil purchases in the years before the JCPOA whilst successfully acting as a crucial mediator between the US and Iran, conducting over a dozen high-level discussions with Iran (Garver, 2016). Whilst China’s relationship with Iran has drastically evolved since this period (Gerecht & Takeyh, 2023), and as will be shown China should radically shift its policy regarding the nuclear issue, the JCPOA case study shows the pragmatic and considerate approach China has previously taken towards diplomacy in the region.

Why China Can Replace the United States

The rise of China’s relative power within the international system in the post-Maoist era has been perceived by some to be a threat to the international system itself. As John Mearsheimer asserts, China’s rise will not be peaceful because of the intense security competition between China and the US, with the US aiming to prevent and contain China’s rise (Mearsheimer, 2005). As classically stated in the Thucydides Trap (ibid.), an upcoming great power cannot challenge a preexisting great power without inevitable conflict, and scholars- especially the offensive realist- believe the same will unfold between China and the United States. This Great Power competition is overtly playing out in the Middle East, and such competition will manifest in the Middle East peace process.

One of the key separations between China and the United States is the lack of a pro-Israel lobby present in China. The United States has long been beholden to the demands of the pro-Israel lobby, with groups such as AIPAC and the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organisations. Whilst the United States at times has broken away from the demands of the lobby, most notably with the Iranian nuclear deal, the United States nonetheless follows the demands of the lobby far more often than they do not (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2007). Even in the case of the Iranian nuclear deal, its eventual repeal by the Trump administration came after the bombardment of pressure from groups such as AIPAC urging the president to end the agreement. It was once said by an AIPAC official to a journalist, “You see this napkin? In 24 hours, AIPAC could have the signature of 70 senators on this napkin” (Walt, 2009), highlighting the blank check that AIPAC and other Israeli lobby groups have over the US political system. This influence has for too long impeded progress towards establishing peace in the region. This bias has manifested into mainstream policy, and most notably into the peace settlement stage. Whilst the consensus for peace in the Israel-Palestine context has been on a two-state solution, the United States has continued to ignore this; of the 89 vetoes used by the United States in the UN Security Council, 42 of those have been in favour of Israel, from blocking restrictions on Israeli settlement expansion to rejecting

Palestinian statehood (ibid.). This has materially influenced peace-broker efforts in the region, from campaigns to abrogate the Iranian nuclear deal to lobbying politicians to ignore international law violations of Israel's settlement expansion (ibid.). Impartiality is often stated as an incredibly important feature in diplomacy (e.g. Kleiboer, 1996), and China's largely impartial stance in promoting a two-state solution gives it far more credibility relative to the United States, and as will be shown in-depth this is the case for both the Arab-Israeli normalisation process and in the case of Iran's peace with the wider region.

The writer Khalidi wrote about the importance of language in the discourse around peace settlements, highlighting how "in the American/ Israeli official lexicon, "terrorism" in the Middle East context has come to apply exclusively to the actions of Arab militants" (Khalidi, 2013). As one of the central debates in constructivist theory- what is a terrorist and who determines who a terrorist is (ibid.)- the biased discourse heavily benefits the US and Israel: it enables them to decide who to negotiate with, how they should conduct wartime operations, and allows Israel to prioritise its security "over virtually everything else, including international law and the human rights of others" (ibid.). In totality, the United States has shown on a multitude of occasions that it is a biased actor in the Middle East peace process, limiting its ability to conduct the peace process.

The second major consideration is the contrasting ideological standings of the United States and China. The United States throughout its history of involvement in the region has been fixated on its ideological pursuits as well as its economic and security pursuits. In this, the neoconservative aspirations of spreading liberal democracy throughout the region through military might, the vehement support for Israel, and its hellbent nature for maintaining unipolarity- a manifestation of its belief in US supremacy in the post Cold-War paradigm- meant that the United States, despite changing administration, maintained a very similar outlook on the Middle East throughout. As Simon further puts it, US policy was shaped by "political imperatives, ideological fixations, [and] emotional impulses" (ibid.). China has no such ideological fixation in its foreign policy, prioritising pragmatism and economic considerations above all else.

The lack of a militarised foreign policy by the Chinese also gives further credence to why the Chinese can play a greater role in the Middle Eastern peace process. The history of over-reliance on its military capabilities has acted as an impediment to further peace. For example, it was estimated by the United States that their intervention in Lebanon in 1982 would eventually help accelerate peace between Lebanon, Syria, and Israel (ibid.) when in actuality it dulled any prospect of peace and intensified Syrian involvement in Lebanon (ibid.). In the US's mediation of the intervention, the 17th May Agreement- which aimed at normalising relations between Israel and Lebanon- stoked further division within Syria and Lebanon and to this day Israel has not normalised relations with either Syria or Lebanon; the US "had not learned the limits of force and the use of military force in support of foreign policy" (ibid.). The same failure was believed to be present when the United States failed to militarily support Saudi Arabia after its oil facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais were attacked (Hubbard et. al, 2019). The failed US response has been attached to the subsequent decline in US-Saudi relations and is one of the reasons why China was able to achieve the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement agreement.

This lack of desired intervention lies at the heart of China's policy towards foreign affairs, a direct homage to its anti-imperialist stance since the end of the Century of Humiliation. China has frequently

vetoed UNSC resolutions concerning US-backed plans for intervening in Syria and has vehemently lambasted the US's overextension of military force in Libya and Iraq, and its parochial military backing of Israel (Chen, 2013). In this, China has asserted a varied approach to diplomacy whereby peaceful resolution without the direct intention of extending its power has been at the core of China's policy. As stated previously, China's global initiatives, most notably the GCI, aim to counter previous international doctrines of humanitarian interventionism and the Responsibility to Protect by stating that no state has the right to impose its own values, governance or economic models as a means of developing relations or as an extension of power politics (ibid.).

China, unlike the United States, also has a great deal of interest in further growing and developing its relations with Iran, and the development of relations and a strategic partnership between the two countries means China has expanded its influence into what was previously one of the strongest American allies-one of the twin pillars of the US's Middle Eastern strategy- in the region before the 1979 revolution in Iran. As part of this strategic partnership, the two countries signed the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreement in March 2021, a 25-year plan for- inter alia- accelerated Chinese foreign investment to the tune of \$400 billion and a steady flow of discounted oil from Iran to China. Moreover, joint naval exercises with Russia have furthered military cooperation between what has been labelled as the "Axis of Upheaval" (Kendall-Taylor and Fontaine, 2024). This deepening of relations makes China a far more trustworthy and reliable actor than the United States in dealing with Iran, an incredibly important element due to the rise of Iran as a regional great power. Iran's former President, Ebrahim Raisi, even wrote an article for China's "People Daily", championing the shared historical nature of both their civilisations, the fraternity between the two countries, and expressing hope for even further cooperation (Raisi, 2023), a core pillar in Iran's foreign relations realignment in its "Look East" framework (Azizi, 2023). Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and a myriad of failures at rapprochement between the two sides, Iran and the United States are too incompatible and parochially fixated on their ideological positions to make any progress on improving tensions between Iran and other Middle Eastern states. One such case is that of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, where despite years of negotiation and a final agreement being reached, it was abrogated a mere two years by the Trump administration (ibid.). As Iran continues to gain relative power throughout the region and gains status as a Great Power in the region, it will become imperative to ensure any mediator has a solid relationship with Iran, just as the United States has had a tremendous influence when it comes to Israel as a result of its pro-Israeli stance.

Policy Recommendations

The following are policy recommendations that China can pursue to become a dominant actor in the Middle East peace process. In its totality, it presents a roadmap for how China can establish credibility in the peace process, and specific policies to ensure success in future mediation efforts. The approach emphasises on the use of Directive Strategies as highlighted in the literature review. It must be noted that as per the historical background section, the use of Directive Strategies must be used cautiously so as to not overextend its influence in what may be perceived as violations of sovereignty and national independence. Finally, it should be noted that these recommendations act as an extension to the aforementioned section on why China can replace the United States, laying out in detail the strategies it can use to implement this.

The Arab-Israeli Normalisation Process:

1. Seek growing relations with Middle Eastern mediators:

- ❖ The Middle East is increasingly becoming a region where competition exists not only between external actors but internal actors. The growing multipolarity has manifested into the field of conflict mediation. External powers seeking to establish itself in the region's diplomacy can only be achieved with the cooperation of internal actors. States such as Qatar and the UAE have increasingly become involved in the peace process across the region (ibid.), and consequently China must ensure strong and robust relations with these states to gain sufficient influence in the Middle Eastern peace process.

2. Push for an Arab Peace Initiative II (API II):

- ❖ The Arab Peace Initiative was a 2002 proposal by the Arab League, aiming to find a final settlement for the Palestinian question. The original format of the API was predicated on ensuring that any developments on Arab-Israeli normalisation came with a concomitant assurance that the Palestinian question is not left behind, as many Arab states believed the 1978 and 1994 normalisation agreements with Egypt and Jordan respectively had failed to make progress on. The API would also make East Jerusalem the official capital, provide land swap opportunities, establish a Palestinian state, and ensure the security for all those in the region.
- ❖ Since the first API, a region-wide response has been compromised by internal shocks to the region, namely the Arab Spring and the collapse of relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran between 2016 and 2023. Additionally, the growth of settlements and the in the West Bank has made a land-for-peace solution unviable and the growing disparity between Palestinian factions and the Israeli government has suppressed recent attempts at finding a sustainable solution to the Palestinian question. Instead, the current framework in the form of the Abraham Accords has furthered normalisation “without guarantees for Palestinian rights” (Alghashian, 2023) and has failed to make any progress on the establishment of a Palestinian state. The United States has continued to veto UN Security Council resolutions concerning Israel's settlement expansion (e.g.), and former US President Trump's direct approach of being pro-Israeli saw the official recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital (Landler, 2017) and the recognition of the Golan Heights as part of Israeli sovereign territory (Trump, 2019), legitimising the occupying status of Israel.
- ❖ Over the past half-decade, China has hosted a plethora of multilateral conferences with Arab states, including the 2022 China-Arab States Summit with 21 states in the Arab League, many China-GCC summits, and the recent China-Arab Countries Cooperation Forum (Sela, 2024). Through these forums, China can be able to establish and lead such an initiative to challenge the current Abraham Accords paradigm. A second Arab Peace Initiative brokered by the Chinese will mark one of the definitive aspects of Chinese diplomacy if achieved correctly, helping to find a meaningful long-term conclusion to the Palestinian question.
- ❖ The broad line of negotiations should happen in line with United Nations Security Council Resolution 242, similar to the approach of the first Arab Peace Initiative. The following will focus on the key areas of the agreement: land, settlements, borders, refugees, the Temple Mount, the status of Jerusalem. All of these issues will be briefly discussed for brevity and act as a mere guideline or general solution to the deep

disagreements that exist. The selected issues go broadly in what are considered the ‘final status solutions’ under the Oslo Accords- issues which are “of prime importance, which must be resolved as part of a final status agreement” (Starky, 2018).

- ❖ Land: For the Israeli side, Israel must withdraw fully from the Golan Heights and have it returned to Syria, and Israel must see a gradual reduction in its military and settlement presence in the West Bank. Palestinian officials have already stated that a largely contiguous state in the West Bank along with the Gaza enclave is the only acceptable Land resolution. As happened in Gaza, an agreement must be settled in the long term as a means of gradual change, such as a gradual reduction in military outposts and gradual settlement reduction, starting with the smallest and farthest out settlements. Ultimately, Palestinian land should account for over 95% of the pre-1967 borders, unlike the Trump peace plan in 2020.
- ❖ Settlements: Arguably the most contentious of the issues, the issue of settlements has been a significant barrier to peace hitherto. As shown in figure 1, Israel’s expansion of settlements has rapidly expanded as a means of legitimising occupation. There are two clear precedents of settlement abolishment in Israel’s case. The first was following the Israeli handover of the Sinai Peninsula back to Egypt, where during its years of occupation following the Six-Day War Israel had built 18 settlements. Israel had removed all of its settlements in exchange for normalising relations with Egypt, and whilst there were settler protests, Israel nonetheless continued until Israeli settlements were completely removed. The second was in Israel’s disengagement from the Gaza strip, where although the sovereignty of Gaza was not established, Israel removed all of its settlements from the strip, where although occurring over many decades, Israel fully removed all its settlements from the land; by 2005, in fact, only 18% of Israeli settlements remained when Israel declared the unilateral disengagement from the region. Today, approximately 25,000 settlers live in the Israel-occupied Golan Heights, and over 500,000 settlers live within the West Bank, known by Israel as Judea and Samaria- with the exception of East Jerusalem.
 1. Israel must give back all of the Golan Heights to Syria and remove all of their settlements, with the only potential exceptions being the Israel had previously shown willingness to remove its settlements, such as under previous Israeli PM Ehud Olmert (Buck, 2007). Whilst Israel remains weary over relinquishing the Golan Heights for Security concerns and water security, alternatives have been proposed and rejected, such as the 2009 Land Exchange Agreement where Jordan would relinquish some of its own territory and be given as Syrian sovereign territory in exchange for Israel maintaining control of the Golan Heights (Lis, 2009). Whilst Israel must reverse its 1981 annexation and return it back to full Syrian sovereignty, any agreement must ensure Israel’s water security is maintained, with the Golan Heights accounting for $\frac{1}{3}$ of Israel’s fresh water supplies (MEE, 2019). As has been seen, settlements in the Golan Heights have increasingly faced security risks as being attacked by hostile external actors, namely Hezbollah forces in Lebanon. Consequently, the Israeli government must come to an arrangement to relocate settlers in the region to ensure the security of its citizens/

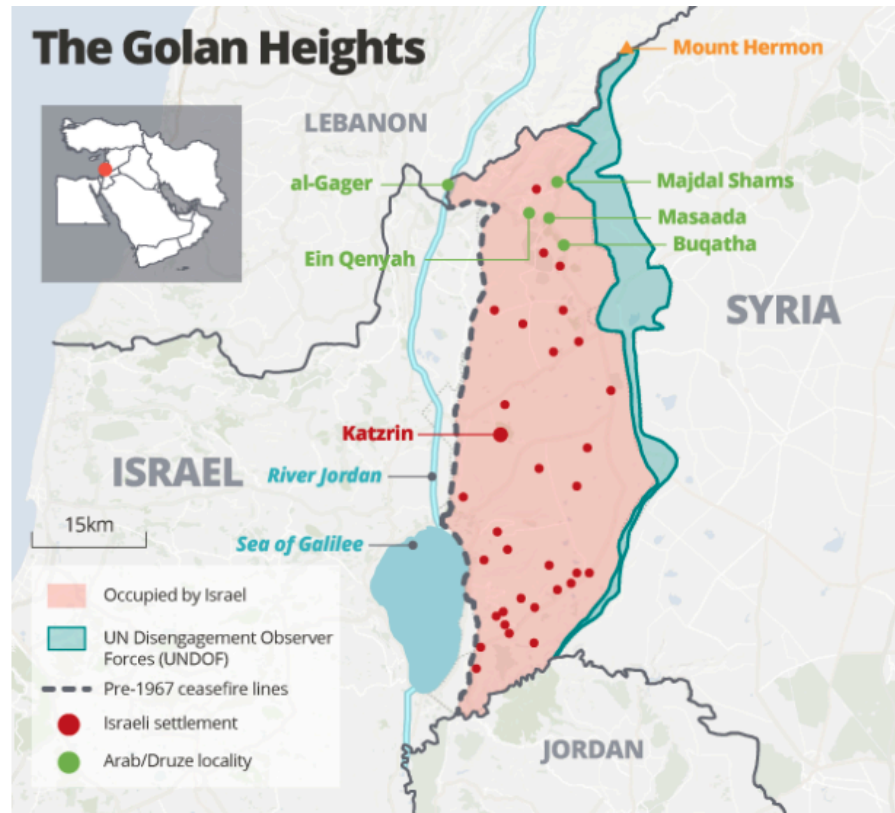


Figure 3: The Geography of the Golan Heights and the Water sources in the region (ibid.)

2. Land swaps in the West Bank are also a significant barrier to any peace agreement. Most recently, former PM Ehud Olmert proposed that Israel 4.4% of the West Bank- largely in areas of East Jerusalem- for an equal exchange of land to be given to a new State of Palestine as a corridor that links the West Bank to the Gaza Strip (ibid.), fulfilling a key Palestinian aim in having a contiguous state. This idea was however rejected by many of both sides, highlighting the incredibly complex situation especially at a time with immense tensions on both sides.
- ❖ Status of Jerusalem: The status of Jerusalem has also been put into contention in recent years over unilateral decisions by Israel and the United States. Disputes over the Temple Mount and the location of Israel's capital has led to a progressively more hostile environment in the area. Any solution to the Palestinian question must see a recognition of East Jerusalem as part of the State of Palestine- including the removal of all Israeli settlements from East Jerusalem. According to reports, Israel rapidly accelerated its expansion of settlements in East Jerusalem since the start of the Gaza conflict, building more than 20 settlement projects (Burke, 2024). Whilst in 2008 Palestinians were prepared to concede all settlements in East Jerusalem (Sherwood, 2011), the lack of willingness from Palestinians to have aspects of their proposed capital surrounded by settlements and the increasing number of settlements have made this an untenable point of negotiation.

- ❖ China can play an incredibly crucial role here in all of the issues stated above, advancing the peace process in areas where domestic restrictions prohibit the United States in advancing. If China can make meaningful ground even in a few of the issues, such as the creation of a contiguous Palestinian state, then China would have made profoundly more progress in finding a meaningful resolution to the Palestinian question than the United States has been able to achieve.

3. Explore the possibilities of an Israel-Palestinian Confederation

- ❖ A growing block of scholars in the Israel-Palestine resolution discussions have suggested that the only two-state solution that can exist is where Israel and Palestine become a single entity that contains two separate and sovereign states. Eventually, this introduces the scope whereby each state can have their own domestic legislative and executive body, as well as its own judiciary, but there also exists a joint body to help legislate growing ties, an institution which perhaps can reside in Jerusalem. The two states can cooperate on some of the major issues facing both Israel and Palestine, such as water security, development planning, and agriculture, whilst ensuring internal security is independently managed.
- ❖ For the sake of brevity, the entire scholarship in this area cannot be covered, but China can potentially use this. It has many advantages, including the eventual freedom of movement of citizens, cross-border economic cooperation, no physical wall to separate Jerusalem, and the issue of settlements can potentially be overcome in some ways. As highlighted by Dajani and Yehuda, Israel settlements need not be removed so long as they accept living in a Palestinian state and follow Palestinian law, instead of the current paradigm whereby Israel settlers are often only subject to Israeli law.
- ❖ That said, both states will have internationally recognised borders and continue to possess all of the qualities and criteria of a state as determined under the 1933 Montevideo Convention- that being having a defined territory, a permanent population, a government, and the capacity to enter into relations with other states (ISLA, 1933), fulfilling the declarative theory of statehood.
- ❖ There are major prohibiting factors at play here. Beyond the traditional arguments against the two-state solution, calling for even closer ties as a confederation seems inconceivable whilst both sides have such bitter animosity towards each other. To cooperate in areas such as security and development, whilst an asymmetry in state power still strongly exists, makes any ideas of an equal confederation a mere fantasy. Israel cannot tolerate the idea of a Palestinian army on its border- having frequently argued for a demilitarised Palestinian state (Farkash, 2014)- lest the idea of active security cooperation with the Palestinians. There is potential for a permanent UN-backed peacekeeping force to be stationed as a means of protecting the Palestinian population. It can also be argued that this does not solve the deeper problems of historical claims, with this merely being a means to achieving temporary peace rather than a lasting and permanent solution. However, it is a mediator's role to bridge such differences, and China has already shown its capabilities in resolving issues predicated on historical claims.
- ❖ In proposing this, the Chinese government can break from the post-1967 paradigm of there existing two completely separate states, and can enhance the chances of a successful two-state solution, with the capacity to ensure greater security and relatively increased

chances of success in creating a stable Levant. Whilst this concept needs further research, it poses as a fascinating opportunity away from what some suggest is an irreconcilable two-state solution paradigm.

Iran's Peace with the Wider Region

1. Broker Egypt-Iranian normalisation:

- ❖ As China successfully did in the rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, one of the critical pillars of Arab-Iran reconciliation is the establishment of relations between Egypt and Iran. Relations have been severed since the 1979 revolution, when the Shah fled to Egypt, and the new Islamic Republic's hostility towards Egypt's normalisation of relations with Israel with the Camp David Accords. Discussions have already been made between the two sides even before the Saudi-Iran, such as meetings between Egyptian and Iranian officials in Oman in 2022. Just as discussions between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the years prior to the final rapprochement agreement, China can once again act as an important mediator to bridge further disagreements that both sides might have, just as they did in the case of Saudi Arabia and Iran. Some scholars have highlighted how differing relations towards Israel and its relationship with the US may be a cause for prohibiting normalisation (e.g. Anani, 2023), but as seen in the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement, despite the Saudis growing relations with Israel and its long-standing relationship was not seen as a significant barrier. With both countries' recent ascension to BRICS+, growing cooperation between the two can help alleviate domestic economic and political pressures in both countries and ultimately help to further push the Middle East into a more stable region, benefitting both countries greatly.

2. China should allow/ not block Iran from developing nuclear weapons:

- ❖ This is the most contentious of the policy recommendations, but if achieved it will be the most impactful in creating and sustaining peace in the region. Currently, Iran has the capabilities of actually going past the breakout time, with the sufficient highly-enriched uranium fissile material to build a bomb in under a month (Stricker & Ruggiero, 2024); this step is far more political than to do with capabilities. The rationale for this is evident. In a constructivist viewing of international relations, only the West and Western-backed countries view Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon because they perceive Iran to be an existential threat to their existence. But Iran has shown to be an incredibly pragmatic and rational state actor, one which not only seeks to pursue its objectives but more importantly it is a state that cares deeply about its own survival. Iran has never used any of its chemical or biological weapons either, nor has it passed these on to its proxies, further highlighting its pragmatic- and cautionary viewing of CBRN weapons. Furthermore, the neorealist Kenneth Waltz wrote how Iran's acquiring of a nuclear weapon would create a balancing act throughout the region and allow for peace to be established (Waltz, 2012). With Israel as the only nuclear power in the region, Waltz believes this hitherto nuclear imbalance has been one of the primary sources of instability throughout the region. Whilst Israel has taken significant action to maintain its nuclear hegemony in the region in line with the Begin Doctrine- the policy of preemptive strikes on adversaries nuclear facilities to maintain nuclear hegemony, shown through striking Iraq's nuclear facilities in 1981 and striking Syria's facilities in 2007 (Spector & Cohen, 2008)- Iran is far beyond in their nuclear capabilities than either of the aforementioned

countries were. And whilst Israel has attempted to sabotage Iran's facilities in the past- e.g. with the Snuxnet bug that aimed to force a cyberattack on the The steps for Iran to get the bomb are straightforward in principle, but especially difficult to pass for political reasons. As Iran has been doing since the vitiation of the Iranian nuclear deal, Iran must limit the investigatory scope of IAEA inspectors and must try to keep as much of its developments in secret.

- ❖ The primary limitation here is the potential of creating a nuclear arms race in the region, and this proliferation is uncertain in its outcomes. Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman stated that if Iran develops nuclear weapons then Saudi Arabia would see it as necessary to develop its own nuclear weapons. Since Saudi Arabia's nuclear programme is far behind that of Iran's, this may not materialise, especially with a sufficient international pressure on Saudi Arabia. Nonetheless, the previous hope for a "WMD- Free Zone in the Middle East" (WMDFZME) framework has never materialised, and as long as Israel maintains nuclear hegemony in the region, peace cannot be secured. Israel will never accept the decommissioning of its nuclear weapons per the South African model nor the transfer of its nuclear weapons/ material to the United States in line with the Libyan model. Nuclear balancing between India and Pakistan for example has significantly reduced the possibility of conflict between the two sides, and the same will likely happen between Iran and Israel.

3. Advocate a bifurcation of Yemen:

- ❖ China should pursue a policy of re-partitioning the state of Yemen, a re-introduction of the North and South states of Yemen as existed before the Unification of Yemen in 1990, a radical solution to the complex issue by some academics (McGinn, 2019). Whilst the Houthis have only been recognised de jure by two nation-states, the partition of Yemen with the Houthis controlling the North and the Saudi-backed National government controlling the South would allow for a return to stability. Hitherto negotiations have negated the reality of the ground, where the Houthi rebels control over 70% of Yemeni territory and
- ❖ In line with China's ideological position of non-interference, this is one of the appropriate cases where China should not use directive strategies and instead should act as a facilitator of communications between the recognised government in Yemen and the Houthi rebel forces. Consequently, China would not have any direction over the partition of Yemen, which can only be settled with the disputing parties themselves. As with the case of the other policy recommendations, China must further rely on internal actors within the region to also act as facilitator, particularly Saudi Arabia and Iran. The reconciliation agreement between the two states had put in place some parameters regarding the ending of the conflict in Yemen. However, almost a year and a half later, little progress has been made for a permanent peace settlement.
- ❖ Yemen acts as one of the understated assets for Chinese economic purposes. Successful brokering of peace can ensure China's investments in the country, such as China's oil explorations in the country, as well as for the stability of the flow of Chinese trade in the Red Sea. During the Houthi attacks on ships in the Red Sea throughout the end of 2023 and early months of 2024, China successfully brokered an agreement to protect its ships

in the area. Therefore, China must ensure this understated importance in its foreign policy is treated as one of the chief pillars of its Middle Eastern diplomacy.

4. Broker an Iranian-UAE agreement over the disputed Abu Musa, Greater Tunbs and Lesser Tunbs agreement:

- ❖ China should amend its policy towards the disputed islands in the Strait of Hormuz, pushing for joint sovereignty of the island between the UAE and Iran as had similarly existed just before the Iranian invasion of the islands in 1971. Currently, China recognises the islands as part of the UAE's jurisdictional sovereignty, causing a significant point of contention between the PRC and Iran.
- ❖ Whilst China should adopt this approach, it must be cautious with the fact that it should not be seen to simply be yielding to the demands of Iran. However, China has frequently pursued a pragmatic approach to its international relations. The more fundamental issue is the ramifications such an agreement will have on China's own disputes in the South China sea. On the one hand, acknowledging the historical claims of Iran over the three islands will give greater legitimacy to China's assertive actions to protect its historical claims to island archipelagos such as the Paracel and Spratly Islands. The islands had long been part of Persian land until Britain occupied the lands, very similar to the imperialism China has mentioned when discussing its own infringements of sovereignty during the Century of Humiliation.

Limitations

Whilst China can assert itself as a credible broker in the Middle East process, there are some hindering factors which limit China's capability. In this section, such hindering factors will be divided into two categories. Firstly, the internal/ domestic limitations of Chinese diplomacy, including ideological barriers, its geopolitical priorities, and the rising geopolitical disputes China has with its neighbours. Secondly, the independent variables involved in conflict mediation that China cannot control act as a barrier to all mediators aiming to broker peace in the region. As listed by Kleiboer, these factors- which affect the capabilities of all actors in the Middle Eastern peace process- include, "(1) the dispute, (2) the contending parties and their relationships... and (4) the international context" (Kleiboer, 1996). Extrapolating these factors to assess the limitations of diplomacy as a whole on the Middle Eastern peace process provides limitations to all external actors aiming to mediate peace in the region. Kleiboer extends this criterion with further criterion points including the incompatible sovereignty claims laid by competing parties over territory, ideologically incompatible disputes, issues over self-determination and nationhood, the issue of the internal cohesiveness within all of which are "most conspicuous" in the case of the Middle East (ibid.). The conflation of issues ranging from security and territory to ideological and historical claims to lands renders the Middle East an immensely difficult region to settle disputes, a problem which diplomacy can partially alleviate to reflect the realities of today.

Across the region, one of the pivotal suggestions for creating peace agreements between competing states is the need for security guarantees provided by external states. This security guarantee acts as a blanket cover for the respective states to ensure that either peace is upheld or serious repercussions are put into place for parties that may violate the agreement. This was believed to be one of the major demands by Saudi Arabia when the United States ultimately failed to broker a deal was the requirement of security

guarantees for Saudi Arabia (ibid.), and many have suggested this to be one of the mandatory clauses in any Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement. However, unlike the United States, China cannot offer such incentives to parties, and this is for both practical and ideological barriers. For practical limitations, China has not yet developed a sufficient global military infrastructure to be able to ensure security guarantees. The United States has a plethora of military bases within the Middle East and has a wider network scattered around the nearby areas to help with operational logistics such as refuelling and restocking weapon systems. With China only having one foreign military base- situated in Djibouti- it does not have the operational capacity to fulfil the obligations required in a security guarantee. Whilst China has the largest navy in the world, China does not have the largest deep water navy and is still advancing its deep water navy capabilities, including the newly built advanced aircraft carrier the Fujian carrier, but hitherto still lacks sufficient capabilities to enforce security guarantees. As a result, the key feature of mediators offering an incentive, as stated in the literature review, means that China in some regards cannot offer crucial incentives at this current time. In the rapidly changing field of geopolitics, however, this has the capability to change. For example, reports following the US's withdrawal from Afghanistan indicated that China had trainers at the Bagram Airbase, a sign of their intention to start expanding outward. The same intention is demonstrated with the rise of China's joint naval exercises with Iran in the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman (AP News, 2024). Security guarantees may also be required with Iran, who fear relinquishing their nuclear programme and facing a similar existential threat as Libya did (Castelli, 2023). Since Iran cannot be guaranteed, China's policies should reflect the reality of the situation and pursue a policy whereby Iran is able to produce nuclear weapons but ensure they are fully monitored by the IAEA.

In the long run, questions arise about whether China can ever provide such security guarantees. As stated, military interventionism is against China's foreign policy philosophy. Moreover, it also greatly depends on whether China is a status quo power or a revisionist power¹. Whilst China's dominant role in institutions that aim to challenge the Western paradigm of the international system is clear, with the expansion of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) to Arab states and Iran, and the introduction of the likes of the UAE and Egypt into BRICS- and Saudi Arabia's imminent formal introduction- China has asserted it does not seek to overthrow the international order, but instead to ensure balance exists, very much in line with defensive realists assuming states as status quo powers seeking to create balance in the international system (Rynning, 2008). Therefore, while not entirely a status quo power, its efforts in the Middle East are predominantly a means of ensuring balance in the international system and may highlight a lack of willingness to increase engagement to the same level as the United States has been doing, limiting the scope of its ability to influence peace-making procedures.

Alternatively, China can seek to offer greater economic incentives as a means of bolstering its influence and providing the quid pro quo elements that mediators in the past- especially the United States- have offered previously. There is plenty of precedence for such an approach. The United States offered Jordan an economic agreement to write off its debt as one incentive to normalise relations with Israel and to support the country's economic development, which the Clinton administration was committed to doing

¹ A status quo power is a power who seeks to maintain how the international system is organised, from maintaining its institutions to ensuring that relative power between states is maintained. This is in stark contrast to a revisionist power, which is a power that seeks to alter the international system in areas where the state is dissatisfied. For example, Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a demonstration of Russia being a revisionist power, seeking to upend the Western dominance of the international system.

throughout its administration (UPI, 1995), and the current Abraham Accord framework looks to the corporate and transactional nature of peace rather than the underlying issues of the divisions within the region. In this, China is certainly able to offer incentives through its BRI, including debt forgiveness or preferential contracts as a means of establishing peace agreements.

A further limiting factor for why China could potentially fail to establish primacy as a Middle Eastern peace broker is the security challenges that China faces in its own periphery. China faces a plethora of disputes throughout Asia: contested sovereignty claims with Taiwan, contested sovereignty over islands and water rights in the South China Sea as per the 9-dash line and its wider First Island Strategy, concerns over the growing remilitarisation threat of Japan and potential NATO encroachment, and border disputes with India, to name a few. For China to expand its global initiative it must ensure that it has security over its neighbourhood, one of the distinguishing factors why the United States was able to ensure its regional hegemonic status throughout the Northern Hemisphere. As the United States has sought to ‘contain’ and encircle China through its growing alliances throughout the Asia-Pacific region (Luce, 2023), China still perceives active threats throughout the region. Before it can credibly seek to expand its power beyond its periphery, China must ensure it sufficiently resolves its regional disputes.

Regarding the premise of the question, it has further been argued that the United States is also not facing a crisis in its influence in the region, and resultantly will not be overtaken by the Chinese as the primary peace broker. It is true and undeniable that the United States has been successful with regard to the Arab-Israeli normalisation process; even with the Abraham Accords, the four Arab signatory states thus far- the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan- have maintained the spirit of the agreement with Israel despite the conflict in Gaza, with inter-state trade reaching \$10 billion, and diplomatic relations remaining robust (AAPI, 2023). Bahrain and the UAE have greatly benefitted from the cooperation with Israel that the US has facilitated. Military and intelligence sharing has become an important feature in Arab-Israeli relations over the past few years via joint alliances such as the Middle East Air Defence Alliance (ibid.). The United States also plays an incredible role in the security of the region. Over the past year, the United States has led coalitions such as Operation Guardian Prosperity to guard shipping lanes in the Red Sea against Houthi attacks, and the United States was the primary backer in defending Israel from the barrage of Iranian missiles and drones in April 2024 (Price & Miller, 2024). It is often noted that neither China nor Russia- nor any other external actor for that matter- can provide security guarantees like what the United States can offer. As highlighted in the Arab help towards Israel during the Iranian attack in April, “the efforts that Arab states did make to counter Iran were almost certainly driven by a desire to maintain their relationships with the United States... they see no alternative source for the kind of security the United States supplies” (Kaye and Vakil, 2024). Even discussions about reviving the Iranian nuclear deal- despite how far-fetched they might be- shows the overarching dominance the United States continues to play in the economy of the region and with the ability to exert tremendous influence. That said, the decline of the United States’ influence as highlighted in previous sections is an unequivocal phenomenon that is occurring. The growing multipolarity highlights the mere rebalancing of asymmetric power that has long existed within the region, and whilst the United States undoubtedly continues to have immense influence, the gradual decline of this power will leave an opening for other state actors to expand their influence in the region, namely China and its influence in the peace-brokering arena.

Finally, as referenced in the literature review, a key determining factor in the success of mediators is the degree to which the disputants themselves. In the case of the Palestinian question, China- as well as other international actors- are impeded by the second factor mentioned: the contentions that exist between the contending parties. China has put itself in a credible position relative to the United States for a plethora of reasons already discussed, but it nonetheless faces similar barriers. At its current stage, conflict mediation is improbable as a consequence of both sides having diametrically opposing viewpoints: the Israelis, they continue to demand the total elimination of Hamas from the Gaza Strip and the imposition of Israeli sovereignty back onto Gaza, whilst Hamas has demanded a complete Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and the implementation of a sovereign state (ibid.). Moreover, as Kleiboer suggests, the internal cohesiveness of groups is paramount to the probability of success in peace negotiations. By this, Kleiboer refers primarily to the number of domestic stakeholders and considerations that parties must factor in. Currently, Prime Minister Netanyahu has an incredibly fractured domestic front, having to factor in contradicting demands from the families of hostages in demanding an immediate hostage release agreement, moderates within the political system who view Netanyahu's handling of the conflict as a tremendous failure, and the right-wing members of his coalition government who believes the government must go even further in their efforts to defeat Hamas and ensure the total security of Israel.

As Touval further contends, the context of the issue at hand is an incredibly damning aspect which would prevent any external mediation from being successful. As he wrote, "the importance the parties attach to an issue, the less likely it is that mediation will succeed... if the conflict concerns interests that are believed to survive or its self-image and identity, intermediaries will be unlikely to succeed. Territorial issues, which are often seen as related to the survival or identity of the antagonists, would be especially difficult to settle" (ibid.). In the case of the Palestinian question, the territorial aspect remains at the crux of the dispute. Despite decades of negotiations and settlements close to being reached, such as the Camp David negotiations in 2000, both sides of the dispute parochially hold on to the notions of either Israeli rejectionism (e.g. Amit & Levit, 2011) or Arab rejectionism (e.g. Kuperwasser & Lipner, 2011). This current conflict is no less the same. Despite the efforts of the US, Qatar, and Egypt- amongst many others- have failed to secure either a full hostage release or a permanent ceasefire to the conflict. As one commentator recently stated, despite the efforts of mediators, ultimately "the last word is with those on the battlefield" (Rasgon & Barnes, 2024). The current negotiations between Israel and Hamas have hit an impasse for this same rationale. For one, Israel has demanded they take full control over the Philadelphi Corridor (Bigg, 2024) whilst Hamas has demanded eventual sovereignty over the land, sea, and air borders over Gaza (ibid.). Progress has been made in some areas, such as broad recognition that a two-state solution along the pre-1967 borders with land swaps to compensate for some entrenched large Israeli settlements in the West Bank, but current conflict and the rejection by leaders on both sides to accept a permanent peace agreement has limited. Netanyahu and his current ministers have, for example, rejected the idea of creating a Palestinian state simpliciter (Dajani & Yehuda, 2024) and have accelerated military raids and settlement expansion to further its dominance and annexation of the West Bank.

Peace in the Arab-Israeli process also hinges on resolving the Palestinian question. Whilst many have felt that many Arab countries have sidelined the Palestinian issue, peace with certain states is necessarily conditional on agreeing to specific measures to improve the lives of the Palestinians, such as a Palestinian state becoming a full member of the United States or the reduction- or complete withdrawal- of Israeli settlements from the West Bank. This is the case for Syria, where negotiations in line with the UNSCR

242- known as Land for Peace, where Israel would fully withdraw from the Golan Heights in exchange for a permanent peace- have been hampered by the lack of progress on the Palestinian issue. This issue has been exacerbated by the ongoing Israel-Gaza conflict. Whilst many have argued that Arab states have long neglected the rights and justice of the Palestinian people, defying the Arab Peace Initiative which would have normalised Israel's relations with all Arab states in exchange for a two-state solution in broad alignment to the pre-1967 borders and instead following other frameworks and initiatives such as the Abraham Accord framework (AAPI, 2024), this no longer seems as a viable position to where peace can no longer be advanced without seriously addressing the Palestinian question. Most recently, Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman stated that no Saudi-Iranian normalisation can be established without the establishment of a recognised State of Palestine.

This is one of a complex series of challenges that external mediators have to battle through. As previously stated, the historical disputes remain deeply ingrained in the current paradigm of the Middle East. Whilst the Chinese government may not be able to navigate peace across the entire region, its efforts hitherto have highlighted the fact that China can play a proactive role in contributing to peace nonetheless. That said, as shown, while the United States has an unequivocal power advantage in the region, the aforementioned decline in US power in the region is a likely outcome that will precipitate throughout many areas of the Middle East, most notably in its lack of ability to broker new peace agreements.

Conclusion

Overall, this research paper is clear in its assertion that China can certainly become the primary peace broker in the Middle East, notably in the areas of continued Arab-Israeli normalisation and cooperation, and Iran's peace with the wider region. As laid out in this paper, the decline in the United States' power to influence peace agreements has created a vacuum that the Chinese are capable of filling. The policy of the United States as being the "world's policeman" has exacerbated divisions within the Middle East and has polarised the region to the brink of a region-wide conflict. As China continues to accumulate greater relative power as an external actor in the region, and the expansion of alternative multinational organisations such as BRICs, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and the growth of multilateral forums between China and Arab states, China will have the ability to use greater Directive Strategies to influence the peace process throughout the region, notably in the list of policy recommendations outlined in this essay. By pursuing such a strategy, whilst broadly sticking to its non-militaristic ideology, China can ensure it supersedes the US's influence over the peace-making process in the region.

However, this research paper does not assert that this paradigm change is a punctuated equilibrium event, but instead a gradual shift in power dynamics that favours China's abilities rather than the United States. The United States will continue to be an incredibly important actor in the region regardless, but without a radical change in outlook and policy by the United States, its hitherto position as the primary peace broker is untenable and will cease. For China, it should be a gradual adoption of the strategies mentioned in this paper that will help promote long-term stability in the Middle East, shore up support for China's economic and diplomatic aspirations within the region, and hopefully will lead to a peaceful and predictable outcome for all those involved in the Middle East. Deng Xiaoping once declared that China must "hide our capabilities and bide our time; be good at maintaining a low profile; and never claim leadership" (Heydarian, 2014). After 40 years, the time is now for China to begin to claim its leadership as the primary peace broker in the Middle East.

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