



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**China's Geopolitical Puzzle: Success in Middle East Mediation,  
Challenges in the South China Sea**

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**ABSTRACT**

This article seeks to explain China's aspirations in the SCS. China successfully acted as a mediator in the resolution of the Iran-Saudi dispute; nonetheless, the question arises: Why has China been unsuccessful in addressing the South China Sea (SCS) problem? This article offers an analytical framework, by applying the qualitative interpretivist approach, for comprehending China's goals in the SCS. By using the framework, we conclude that China seeks to assert de facto control over the SCS, which entails sovereignty over the contested islands and the capacity to regulate conduct in the adjacent seas. These goals are harmful to U.S. and allied interests. Results suggest that China's success in the Middle East is attributed to its non-alignment and economic inducements, while assertive action in the SCS exacerbates regional resistance. This article recommends a more cooperative approach in the SCS for improving regional stability.

**KEYWORDS** Conflict Resolution, Iran-Saudi Conflict, Mediator, South China Sea Dispute, UNCLOS

**Introduction**

China is increasingly acknowledged for its efforts to forge new economic and diplomatic partnerships via its Belt and Road infrastructure program. However, Beijing is also expanding its global influence and influence in less conspicuous, subtler, or unexpected ways. The Washington Post staff (November 21, 2023) reports that Beijing is establishing the groundwork for its new international order and influencing institutions and locations beyond its borders in its own image. This is occurring at every cardinal point. This was the first time China had openly accepted its role as a facilitator in settling long-running problems between countries in the region that are at odds with each other. Authorities in China say that as a major country, it will continue to be responsible and work with others to solve important problems. China has done what it needed to do as a host for talks by being a "reliable" and "good-faith" broker (Gadzo, March 11, 2023).

In 2016, Saudi Arabia put to death a well-known Shia Muslim expert. This led to protests in Iran, which ended with an attack on Saudi Arabia's embassy in Tehran. The two Gulf countries, Iran and Saudi Arabia, had a close relationship. Nevertheless, the geopolitical dispute between the two has been ongoing for decades. In numerous conflict zones throughout the Middle East, both parties have maintained opposing positions and participated in proxy skirmishes. Since 2021, the two sets of officials in Iraq and Oman have engaged in discussions, but they have not reached any agreements. The negotiated deal signifies China's increasing interest and rising influence in the area. China is well-positioned to broker a deal due to the United States' strained ties with Iran. China's lack

of commitment to a certain goal makes it a comparatively low-risk and high-reward endeavor. Beijing buys oil from Iran and Saudi Arabia; the Gulf serves as a vital energy supply for Beijing. Thus, China has a distinct interest in improving its connections and stability within the area. Consequently, from their viewpoint, China's petroleum supply and economic interests would be affected by the fighting in the Persian Gulf (Gadzo, March 11, 2023).

China's economic interests, energy security concerns, and aspiration to assume a more prominent role in global diplomacy influence its participation in the Iran-Saudi conflict. Consequently, China's involvement in the region has the potential to impact the conflict's trajectory and to aid in the promotion of stability and the reduction of tensions. Conversely, China is attempting to undermine the resolution of the SCS dispute. The Philippines, Brunei, Taiwan, Malaysia, Vietnam, and China are the primary countries involved in the SCS dispute, which includes overlapping territorial claims. Due to its substantial natural resources, such as oil and natural gas reserves, and its critical position in global trade and maritime routes, the region is of strategic significance.

In the busy SCS, many Asian countries claim rocks, islands, and other land features as their own. The China may be the most aggressive in these claims. The US doesn't claim Land in the SCS or dispute who owns its land features. It has, however, pushed for peaceful solutions to disputes that are in line with international law. International law also doesn't agree with the US and China on what rights foreign forces have to fly, sail, and work in a country's private sea or Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). This is not the same as their differences about who is in charge (Dolven et al, December 19, 2022).

China claims almost the whole SCS based on historical records. However, China's neighbors also have historical and legal rights to different parts of the sea. The disputes revolve around the ownership of numerous islands, reefs, shoals, and other water features in the region, such as the Paracel Islands, the Spratly Islands, and Scarborough Shoal. China's aggressive actions, such as the construction of fake islands and military bases in contentious areas, have escalated tensions, causing concern among other claimants and the rest of the world. The US has also been active, running freedom of passage operations to fight what it sees as too many marine claims (Wilson China Fellowship, 2020-21).

There have been many attempts to settle the disagreements, such as direct talks between the claimed states and international processes involving regional organizations. China and the ASEAN aimed to ease conflicts and promote peaceful solutions through the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the SCS (DOC). However, there has been little to no movement toward a firm and thorough code of conduct. Some experts think China is only interested in making money. Eighty percent of China's oil imports pass through the SCS, an area rich in oil and natural gas reserves. This view says that Beijing only wants to protect its energy sources and trade that goes through the SCS. Others think that China's goals are more evil and far-reaching. They say that China is building a "great wall of sand" to keep other countries, like the US, out. In this case, the authority of the government may require that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have full control over the SCS, making it necessary for countries to get Chinese approval before doing anything there (Shambaugh, 2018).

There is a claim that China aims to assert *de facto* control over the SCS by obtaining sovereignty over the contested islands and instituting a framework of behavior standards in the surrounding seas. The principal explanation for the adverse effect of

these intents on U.S. and ally interests is Beijing's ultimate aim or desired results. The problematic nature of China's process goals is contingent upon their effectiveness and efficiency. China is now using economic, political, and indirect military strategies to attain this goal, perhaps owing to its insufficient military capabilities. Preliminary indicators suggest that the military's role in consolidating Chinese rule will increase in the near future (Wilson China Fellowship, 2020–21).

## Literature Review

### China's Growing Influence on Global Affairs

Robert Mogielnicki, a senior resident researcher at the Arab Gulf State Institute in Washington, DC, said to Al-Jazeera that the mediated Iran-Saudi accord indicates an increasing Chinese influence and its intensified interest in regional engagement. In recent decades, America has been the only viable partner for states such as Saudi Arabia. These countries now have other options. China can provide significant assistance in economic, political, and military spheres (Muzaffar, et. al., 2017). Saudi – Iran Strife: Complexities for Pakistan, *Global Regional Review*, 2 (II), 119-134med Gadzo, March 11, 2023). Saudi Arabia and Iran are the dominant countries in the Middle East. Both of these states have been vying for dominance in the area. Saudi Arabia has its economic influence, while, Iran is important because of its military potential. The pursuit of hegemonic dominance led to disputes and rivalries. The revolution of 1979 in Iran posed a significant danger to Saudi Arabia as well as its allies. This danger generated proxy conflicts throughout the area. Subsequently, Saudi Arabia and Iran developed antagonistic stances against one another (Ali et al, 2020).

On September 22, 2018, an assault on a military event in Ahvaz, a city in southwest Iran, claimed the lives of 25 people and injured many more. Members of Iran's elite Revolutionary Guards Corps among others were among the victims. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, swiftly attributed this incident to many nations. Khamenei said in a statement on his official website that the same individuals who rescue the Americans every time they are caught in Syria and Iraq – whose hands are in the pockets of Saudi Arabia and the UAE – performed this terrible deed (Mabon, 2018).

The competition is not constant throughout time and geography. Indeed, an examination of the competition uncovers five different epochs: the pre-revolution era, marked by mutual distrust but an ability to collaborate; The revolution and the Iran-Iraq war fueled a phase of profound hostility from 1979 to 1991. From 1991 to 2003, a period of growing rapprochement emerged, marked by a mutual perception of security after Khomeini's demise and the rise of reformist politicians in Iran, along with shared apprehensions about Iraqi aggression. From 2003 to 2011, the War on Terror and the provocations of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013) drove a resurgence of animosity. From 2011 onward, the rivalry unfolded against the backdrop of the Arab Uprisings. During these ages, opportunities influence the competition, which typically, though not exclusively, develops along sectarian lines. The Gulf's discordant security organization fundamentally roots the geopolitical conflict (Jones, 2011).

The period from 2011 to 2014 was marked by renewed rivalries following the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011. The Shia-dominated government of Iran supported President Bashar al-Assad by supplying armed soldiers and financial resources to combat Sunni insurgents. Sunni-majority Initially, Saudi Arabia supported the rebel factions, but in 2014, it allied with a US-led coalition to combat ISIL (ISIS). Gulf relations weakened after two 2015 incidents. During the 2015 Yemen civil war, Saudi

Arabia backed the internationally recognized government and targeted Houthi strongholds. Iran-allied Houthis. A stampede in Mecca during the 2015 Hajj worsened tensions. Iran accused Saudi Arabia of mishandling the Islamic calendar's biggest event. Iranian pilgrims made up about 400 of the 2,000 stampede victims. Saudi Arabia killed Shia leader Nimr al-Nimr, a government opponent, four months after the Mecca stampede. Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei warned of "divine retribution" following Nimr's death as Tehran protesters assaulted the Saudi embassy. Riyadh cut ties with Tehran. Iranian Hajj participation ended in 2016 (Al-Jazeera, March 10, 2023).

By imposing an embargo on Qatar in June 2017, Saudi Arabia and its allies in the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt caused yet another regional split. They claimed that Qatar was backing "terrorism" and was too cozy with Iran; Doha refuted the claims. They repaired the connections in January of 2021. Over Riyadh International Airport, Saudi Arabia successfully intercepted a ballistic missile in 2017. It claimed that the Houthi rebels in Yemen were responsible for launching the missile and that Iran was the supplier. According to the state-run Saudi Press Agency, the crown prince told Boris Johnson, who was British Foreign Secretary at the time, that Iran's actions "may be considered an act of war against the kingdom." Both Israel and Saudi Arabia were happy when President Trump decided in May 2018 to pull the US out of the Iran nuclear deal. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman said in an interview shown on US TV that he would "follow suit as soon as possible" if Iran got nuclear weapons (Middle East Centre, August, 2018).

After severing diplomatic relations, Iran and Saudi Arabia finally met face-to-face in April 2021. I was the host in Baghdad. Iraq and Oman acted as mediators for the four rounds of discussions that took place between April and September 2022. Following the fifth session of negotiations between the two countries, a senior aide to Khamenei demanded the reopening of the Iranian and Saudi embassies. Talks between Mohammed bin Salman and Chinese President Xi Jinping took place during Xi's visit to Saudi Arabia. Xi Jinping will meet with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi on his February 2023 visit to China. Riyadh and Tehran declare their decision to reestablish relations the following month (Al-Jazeera, 10 March, 2023).

### **South China Sea Dispute and China's Territorial Claims**

China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan are just a few of the countries in the area that claim land that crosses. This is what the SCS conflict is about. The area is extremely important because it is a key part of world trade and sea routes and has a lot of natural resources, especially oil and gas stockpiles. Malaysia, Brunei, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam are all angry at China because it claims a lot of land over the sea that is thought to hold 11 billion barrels of unknown oil and 120 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. In the SCS, different countries have claimed islands and zones since the 1970s. A lot of fishing and natural products can be found in the Spratly Islands in particular (Global Conflict Tracker, June 26, 2023).

Since 2013, the discussion about China's military bases built on disputed land in the SCS has included questions of sovereignty and the ongoing dispute between the U.S. and China over the freedom of navigation for military ships and planes. A lot of people thought that the military bases were the PRC's way of trying to question U.S. military power in coastal East Asia by extending its military influence eastward from its shoreline. A big part of China's efforts to modernize its military is improving its ability to stop or stop other countries from getting involved in regional military battles. People are still

keeping an eye out for possible moves China might take to exercise its control over the SCS. For example, China could start reclaiming another land feature, like Scarborough Shoal, or set up an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over parts of the SCS. China's use of force and threats to increase its power, especially in the SCS, has been a focus of recent Congresses. They have passed laws to make it easier for the U.S. and its partners to protect their own interests and make sure freedom of passage and supervision (Dolven et al, December 19, 2022).

This is against international law, China says, so foreign armed troops, even spy planes, are not allowed to gather information inside its EEZ. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) says that claimant countries can easily pass through EEZs. Claimant countries don't have to tell other claims about armed actions either. In line with UNCLOS, the Philippines made a claim against China. The ruling from the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague came out in July 2016. It was mostly in favor of the Philippines. China signed the deal that made the tribunal, but it doesn't agree with the court's power. Satellaview data from the last few years shows that China is building new islands or making old islands bigger in order to get back land in the SCS. China has added sand to islands that are already there and built ports, military camps, and airstrips. The Paracel and Spratly Islands, where China has twenty and seven spots, are two places where this is especially true. There are now more attack planes, cruise missiles, and a tracking device on Woody Island thanks to China. To protect its military, economic, and political interests in the area, the US has started FONOPs and helped its Southeast Asian friends fight China's land claims and growth. Japan has given the Philippines and Vietnam armed ships and other tools to make their seas safer and stop China from entering the controversial area (Global Conflict Tracker, June 26, 2023).

### **Disputes on the Sovereignty of SCS**

China asserts its "undeniable sovereignty over the islands in the SCS and the surrounding waters," however it does not specify which islands are referenced. The U.S. Department of State asserts that the amalgamation of China's "nine-dash line" on maps would include 62% of the sea. China has never clarified the significance of the dashed line. The Paracel Islands are located in the northern SCS. China has maintained sovereignty over them since 1974; nonetheless, both Taiwan and Vietnam claim ownership. China, Taiwan, and Vietnam each claim ownership over all 200 Spratly Islands in the SCS. the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and a treaty ally of the United States, all have claims to portions of the islands. The majority of them are located underneath Vietnam. China, Taiwan, and the Philippines each claim ownership over Scarborough Shoal in the East China Sea. Since 2012, China has assumed control of it. The 1994 legislation said that Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam were entitled to claim EEZs extending 200 nautical miles from their respective coastlines. The "nine-dash line" and "eleven-dash line" intersect between China and Taiwan. Indonesia contests China's territorial claims along its coastlines.

The core of the issues between China and the U.S. lies in divergent interpretations of UNCLOS, particularly on the operations of U.S. military vessels and aircraft in the SCS and adjacent regions along China's coastline. The UN and the majority of nations assert that UNCLOS alone grants coastal states authority over economic activities inside their EEZs. It does not confer upon them the authority to regulate navigation or overflight inside the EEZ, even by military vessels and aircraft. Numerous nations asserting claims over the SCS contend that UNCLOS grants them authority over commercial activities, as well as the navigation and aerial operations of foreign armed forces inside their EEZs. In recent years, the U.S. have intensified and publicized its activities in the SCS. Freedom of

Navigation Operations (FONOPs) are initiatives undertaken by the U.S. Navy to contest maritime claims deemed excessive by the United States. It aims to maintain a continuous presence in the SCS to uphold a free and open international order while the U.S. Air Force conducts missile operations in the region. China often conducts military exercises and patrols in the SCS and vehemently opposes U.S. military operations in the region. Chinese officials often assert that the United States' stance in the SCS jeopardizes regional peace and security. A representative of the PRC Foreign Ministry said in 2021 that these operations were just "freedom of trespassing" by U.S. military aircraft and vessels intended to intimidate and provoke. Except for Taiwan, which is not a member, China and the other SCS claimants must adhere to UNCLOS. Although the United States is not a signatory, it has always adhered to the regulations governing maritime disputes and rights established by UNCLOS. States may claim 12-nautical-mile territorial waters, 200-nautical-mile EEZs next to their coastlines, and "naturally formed" landforms capable of "supporting human habitation." When water levels are elevated, uninhabitable rocks emerge to create private oceans (Dolven et al, December 19, 2022).

### **China's Artificial Island Building**

From 2013 to 2015, China engaged in extensive land development inside the Spratly Islands in the SCS. The U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) reports that the development has created about 3,200 acres (five square miles) of additional territory in the seven contested regions now under Chinese control. China constructed military installations on the sites and, beginning in 2018, began deploying modern anti-ship and anti-aircraft armament systems, along with military jammers. China asserts that its actions are aimed at reconciling with other claimants, many of whom own a larger portion of the Spratly Islands and had started land reclamation and construction prior to China's involvement. However, China's efforts to assert territorial claims and enhance its military capabilities have far surpassed those of its competitors. The Spratly Island outposts, as stated in the DOD's 2022 assessment on PRC military and security advancements, "enable China to sustain a more adaptable and enduring military and paramilitary presence in the region." The study said that this "enhances China's capacity to identify and contest actions by competing claimants or third parties and expands the array of response options accessible to Beijing." (Congressional Research Service, June 5, 2023).

In 2013, the Philippines used the UNCLOS to start a review process about what China had done in the SCS. As of July 2016, a UNCLOS arbitral panel said that China's nine-dash line claim was not based on law. The ruling concluded that China's three occupied land features in the Spratlys do not confer any maritime zone entitlements, and China's actions of obstructing Philippine vessels, harming the maritime environment, and conducting reclamation activities within the Philippines' EEZ infringed upon the Philippines' sovereign rights. The United States has asked China and the Philippines to follow the decision, which they must do according to UNCLOS. But China said the decision was "null and void." China and ASEAN, which has 10 members, are writing a Code of Conduct (COC) for people who cross the SCS. A lot of experts don't think there will be an official Code of Conduct because they think China has pushed back the talks to make time for projects that will strengthen its position in the SCS (Dolven et al, December 19, 2022).

### **United States Concerns**

There are many disagreements in the SCS over islands in the ocean and EEZs that cross between China, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam.

China has used force twice against Vietnam in the Paracel Islands, and in 2012, it took Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines by putting armed pressure on them. However, the United States is not involved in the border conflicts. However, China's plans for the SCS worry Washington in three ways. A lot of U.S. partners have their own goals in the SCS. China's claims are about the Philippines, which is a treaty partner of the United States. This could mean that the United States would have to fight a military battle to defend the Philippines' claims.

The SCS has considerable strategic importance for Northeast Asian nations, including U.S. allies South Korea and Japan, since the majority of trade and oil transportation transits via its maritime routes. These waterways also include substantial oil and gas deposits, in addition to fisheries. The SCS is also vital for Australia, since about one-third of its commerce transits through this region. Secondly, As the current world leader, the United States wants to keep international law, rules, and order. China, on the other hand, disagrees with what most people think about the international legal system for the seas. Military forces from the US and China often deal with each other as they try to practice and understand their own rights.

Third, the U.S. wants the people who are fighting to settle their differences in the SCS in a way that is calm and doesn't involve force. When there is no conflict, China's effective dominion allows them to do many things, such as taking advantage of and forcing people to use their money, setting up air defenses, creating maritime exclusion zones, expanding their military power, and increasing their political influence in the West Pacific. There is a chance that these planned actions will change the security situation in the region in a way that hurts the US and its friends and partners (Dolven et al, December 19, 2022).

## **Methodology**

This article employs the interpretivist approach within a qualitative research design, as it useful to understand and analyze China's geopolitical strategies in the Middle East and South China Sea. We collected data by conducting an in-depth review of secondary sources, including academic journals, policy papers, official statements, and media reports. Different themes and patterns are drawn from the data and explained accordingly. Thus, the methodology will ensure a nuanced understanding of the complexities underlying China's contrasting regional engagements.

## **Result and Discussion**

Results, therefore, reveal a stark contrast in China's approach and outcomes in the Middle East and the SCS. China has been successful as a mediator, for instance, by playing the role of resolving the Iran-Saudi dispute. Much of this success has been because of its neutral stance, not allying with regional powers, and use of economic incentives. By positioning itself as a neutral player, China managed to build trust among the conflicting parties while leveraging its economic investments and trade relations to encourage cooperation. This approach allowed China to bolster its reputation as a responsible global power, advancing its broader foreign policy objectives without provoking significant resistance from other global players.

On the other hand, China's policies in the SCS have been full of aggressive measures, such as the militarization of contested territories and unilateral claims to contested waters. These actions raise tensions with neighboring countries and deteriorate regional stability. The qualitative interpretivist analysis shows that the de facto control

of strategic waterways and the assertion of sovereignty over contested islands by China stand in direct conflict with the interests of the U.S. and its allies, thus resulting in resistance from regional states and international actors. The discussion highlights the fact that China needs to have a more inclusive and cooperative approach in the SCS by encouraging multilateral dialogue and strict adherence to international norms so as to reduce tensions and make its regional aspirations consistent with international expectations of stability and cooperation.

### **Conclusion**

While China has demonstrated successful mediation capabilities throughout the Middle East, exemplified by the peace between Iran and Saudi Arabia, its approach to handling the SCS issues is significantly different. The reason this issue cannot be resolved would be because of China's strategic intentions to take de facto control and sovereignty over the said region, which conflicts with the interests of the U.S. and its allies. This divergence underlines the fact that China's success in resolving conflicts is dependent on its geopolitical priorities. While in the Middle East, mediation works with the broader image of a global peacemaker; in the SCS, dominance undermines cooperative resolutions, further fueling regional tensions. Understanding this duality will provide critical insight into China's foreign policy strategies and their global implications.

### **Recommendations**

China should adopt a more cooperative approach to the SCS as it aligns regional strategy with its successful mediation role in the Middle East. It is prioritizing multilateral dialogue through frameworks existing in ASEAN-led mechanisms and international maritime agreements to build trust among its neighbors and reduce tensions regarding disputed territories. Furthermore, changing from assertive acts to confidence-boosting measures, such as joint resource development or maritime security cooperation, indicates a readiness to maintain the region's stability. Using its economic power more for common development projects rather than selfish ones would reduce resistance and generate goodwill in the region.



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