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Saudi Arabia and China: Sustaining Rapprochement Amid Diverging Priorities

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Saudi Arabia and China: Sustaining Rapprochement Amid Diverging Priorities

Recent diplomatic exchanges in Beijing reflect Saudi Arabia's effort to contain regional escalation while maintaining several channels of engagement. Yet the significance of Riyadh's outreach extends beyond diplomatic diversification. It also highlights a challenge: Saudi Arabia and China share an interest in regional stability, but their priorities, threat perceptions, and willingness to bear the costs of securing it do not necessarily coincide.

On November 2, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi received Saudi National Security Adviser Musaad bin Mohammed Al-Aiban in Beijing. Al-Aiban conveyed a letter from His Royal Highness Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman to President Xi Jinping concerning bilateral relations and matters of mutual interest. Wang expressed support for dialogue and a regional security architecture serving the long-term interests of regional populations. These exchanges reaffirmed diplomatic engagement, although they did not establish how shared aspirations would translate into concrete security commitments.

For Riyadh, the immediate concern is implementation of the March 2023 Beijing Agreement, which China mediated between Saudi Arabia and Iran, particularly its commitments to sovereignty and non-interference. China hosted and sponsored the rapprochement, but the agreement did not establish a formal Chinese security guarantee. Saudi expectations nevertheless extend beyond maintaining diplomatic relations: the political investment in rapprochement must yield tangible improvements in security.

Houthi attacks on the Kingdom sharpen this concern. From the Saudi perspective, continued Iranian support for a group threatening its territory is difficult to reconcile with the restraint and mutual respect envisaged by rapprochement. Riyadh's engagement with Beijing therefore concerns the relationship between diplomatic commitments and conduct on the ground. The Kingdom seeks greater Chinese willingness to encourage Iranian restraint and address the security consequences of Tehran's regional partnerships.

China, however, approaches these questions through a broader strategic framework. Its interests include protecting energy supplies, maintaining commercial relationships across the Gulf, preserving ties with Iran and managing competition with the United States. Saudi security concerns form part of this calculation, but they do not automatically determine Beijing's priorities. During his separate meeting in Beijing with Ali Bagheri Kani, Deputy Secretary of Iran's Supreme National

Security Council, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang explicitly affirmed Chinese support for Iran's sovereignty and security while advocating negotiations.

These differing priorities may shape how Riyadh and Beijing approach de-escalation. Saudi Arabia faces immediate security concerns, while China also weighs developments through the broader context of its relationship with the United States. A sustained American focus on Iran could carry strategic implications that influence Beijing's assessment of the urgency and terms of a settlement. This does not suggest that China favors prolonged conflict, but it may help explain its preference for dialogue and continued engagement with Tehran over more direct pressure. The challenge is to ensure that these approaches support timely progress towards regional stability.

That calculation also carries risks for China. Instability cannot necessarily be contained at a level that disadvantages Washington while leaving Chinese interests unaffected. Escalation could damage Gulf infrastructure, disrupt maritime trade and energy supplies, and weaken confidence among China's regional partners. Saudi Arabia's exposure is more immediate, but the longer-term consequences would extend beyond the Kingdom.

Al-Aiban's visit can be understood against this tension. Beyond seeking reassurance, it may have been an effort to persuade Chinese leaders that insufficient pressure for restraint risks producing instability more extensive and enduring than Beijing anticipates. It places Saudi diplomacy within a clear objective: bringing China's assessment of its own interests closer to Riyadh's security concerns.

The distinction between possessing influence and choosing to exercise it is central. China's economic relationship with Tehran provides channels for engagement, but Beijing must decide whether, and how firmly, to use them. Iran also retains independent security calculations. The practical question is therefore whether China sees sufficient benefit in encouraging specific changes in Iranian behavior, rather than limiting its contribution to general appeals for dialogue.

Saudi diversification remains necessary amid questions about the consistency of American security commitments. However, expanding engagement with Beijing cannot by itself resolve those uncertainties. Different partners offer different capabilities and pursue their own interests.

Regional mediation, including Qatar's communication with Washington and Tehran, remains useful alongside Chinese engagement, without making any single diplomatic channel sufficient.

For Riyadh, the task is to turn overlapping interests into more closely aligned policies. Protecting Vision 2030 requires an environment in which sovereignty, infrastructure, and maritime connectivity are secure. China's proposed regional security architecture will gain substance only if diplomatic principles are accompanied by reciprocal restraint and credible implementation. The significance of the Beijing exchanges will therefore depend on whether they narrow the gap between Saudi expectations and Chinese strategic calculations and encourage both sides to treat sustained regional security as an immediate shared responsibility.

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