

Beijing's Pursuit of a Diplomatic Role in a Region in Flux

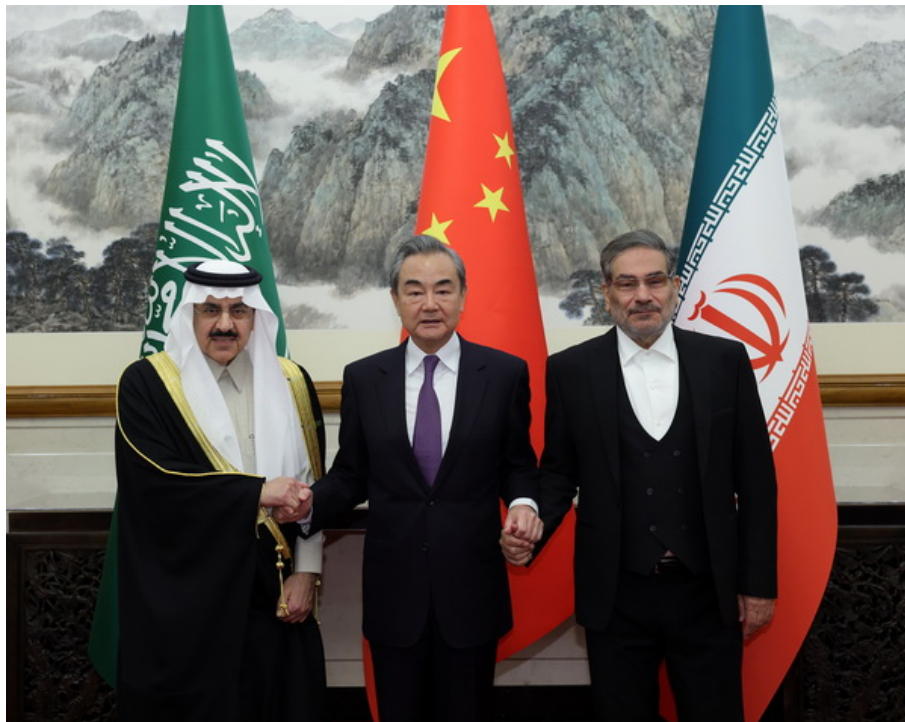
Abdulla Saeed Alhemeiri

Sino-Gulf Institute, 26 May 2026

<https://www.sinogulfinstitute.com/analysis-crisis>

Abstract

The trilateral talks in Beijing on 10 March 2023, at which Saudi Arabia and Iran agreed to restore diplomatic relations, showed China acting as a diplomatic broker in the Middle East. This article examines how the 2026 conflict between the United States and Iran tested China's trade, energy, and diplomatic ties with the Gulf, and how Beijing responded through ceasefire proposals, bilateral channels, public statements, and United Nations voting, with no military commitment to any party. It argues that China's principles for the region date to the 1980s, and that the economic weight now behind them makes them read as policy.

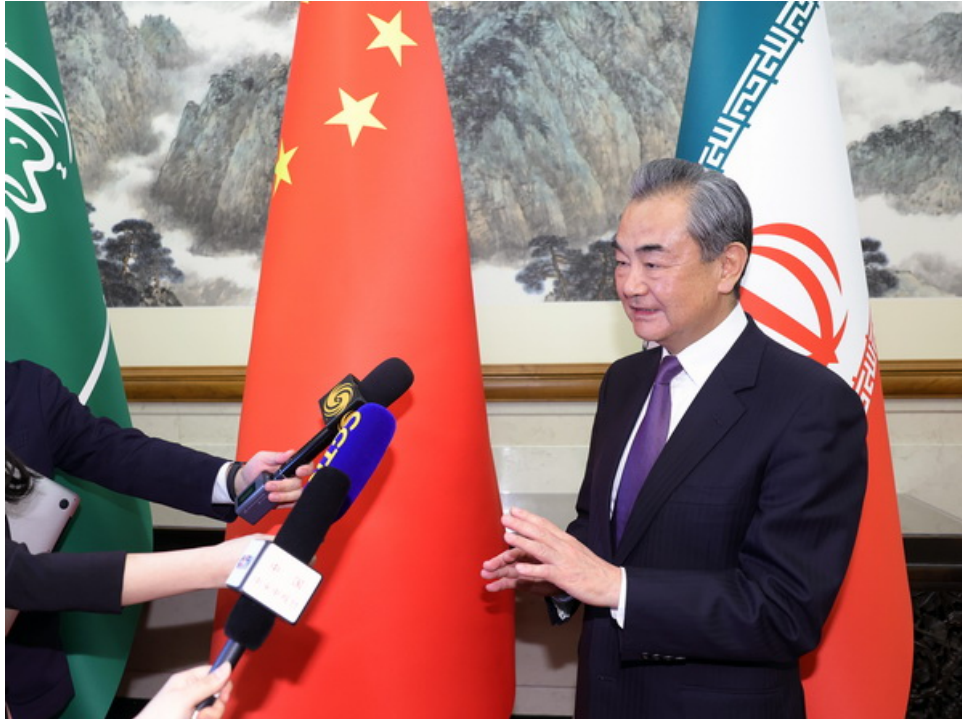


Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi (centre) joins the hands of Saudi National Security Advisor Musaad al-Aiban (left) and Iranian Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Shamkhani (right) after the trilateral talks in Beijing, 10 March 2023.

MFA, PRC

China was seen as a trader in the Middle East, not a broker. The handshake in Beijing on 10 March 2023, with the Saudi and Iranian security chiefs reconciling across Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, was the clearest evidence yet that this had stopped being true.

Behind a short trilateral statement, the Saudi National Security Advisor and the Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council shook hands across Wang Yi, with the three national flags arranged behind them. Wang told the press the agreement was "a victory for dialogue and a victory for peace." Whatever its long-term substance, it was a moment few would have predicted of China even a decade earlier.



Wang Yi addresses the press after the trilateral talks in Beijing, describing the agreement as "a victory for dialogue and a victory for peace."

MFA, PRC

China's presence in the region today rests on trade, energy, and diplomacy. The trade relationship is the longest-running and the most measurable, with China holding the position of the GCC's largest trading partner for several years, and both the UAE-China non-oil number and overall Saudi-China trade crossing \$100 billion in 2025. Energy follows closely, since roughly a third of Chinese crude imports come through the Gulf, and Beijing remains the largest single buyer of Iranian oil. The diplomatic track is the most recent addition, taking shape in Foreign Ministry calls with Gulf counterparts, ambassadorial op-eds in the regional press, and a UN Security Council vote in April on the Bahrain-led Hormuz resolution. The 2026 conflict between the United States and Iran has tested all three at once.

The April conflict prompted China to put its existing positions to use. Beijing and Islamabad opened with the Five-Point Initiative, calling for an immediate ceasefire, civilian protection, and a settlement grounded in the UN Charter. A week later, during Crown Prince Sheikh Khaled's state visit to Beijing, Xi Jinping delivered his own four-point Middle East proposal: peaceful coexistence, sovereignty, the international rule of law, and balanced development and security. Chinese ambassadors across the Gulf spent the rest of the month publishing op-eds in regional newspapers laying out the same framework. Wang Yi told the UAE Special Envoy in person that a blockade of the Strait of Hormuz "does not serve the common interests of the international community."

What is striking about Beijing's response is what it has avoided: no naval deployment, no public commentary on the choices made by individual Gulf states, no military commitment to any party. Where China has acted, it has acted through institutions: UN voting, bilateral channels, public statements written for several audiences at once.

None of these positions are new in themselves. China's stated principles for the Middle East, non-interference, freedom of navigation, peaceful settlement, and refusal of alliances that would pull it into outside conflicts, date to the 1980s and have held steady through every regional shock since. What has changed is the weight that comes behind them, since five years ago a Chinese statement on the Strait of Hormuz read as commercial, while today the same words read as policy.

References

- Bawazeer, Basim. "Saudi-China economic ties deepen as trade exchange tops \$100bn." *Arab News*, 16 September 2026. <https://www.arabnews.com/business/saudi-china-economic-ties-deepen-as-trade-exchange-tops-100bn-3001924>.
- Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. "驻沙特大使常华接受《经济报》书面采访" [Ambassador Chang Hua gives a written interview to *Al-Eqtisadiyah*]. 7 August 2026. https://sa.china-embassy.gov.cn/xwdt/202608/t20260807_11999949.htm.
- Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the State of Qatar. "曹小林大使在卡塔尔《东方报》发表署名文章《止戈为武 共筑安全-化解地区困局的四点主张》" [Ambassador Cao Xiaolin publishes a signed article in *Al-Sharq* on four propositions for resolving the regional predicament]. 23 April 2026. https://qa.china-embassy.gov.cn/dsxx/zyhd/202604/t20260423_11898363.htm.
- Emirates News Agency (WAM). "GCC ranks 6th globally in goods trade volume: GCC-Stat." 25 January 2025. <https://www.wam.ae/en/article/15dxb0b-gcc-ranks-6th-globally-goods-trade-volume>.
- Emirates News Agency (WAM). "UAE-China Business Promotion Conference explores strengthening strategic partnerships in trade & investment." 13 April 2026. <https://www.wam.ae/en/article/bzp2cbl-uae-china-business-promotion-conference-explores>.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. "Five-Point Initiative of China and Pakistan For Restoring Peace and Stability in the Gulf and Middle East Region." 31 March 2026. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjbzhd/202603/t20260331_11884511.html.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. "Joint Trilateral Statement by the People's Republic of China, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the Islamic Republic of Iran." 10 March 2023. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531_11367487.html.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. "President Xi Jinping Meets With Sheikh Khaled bin Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, the UAE." 14 April 2026. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyxw/202604/t20260414_11891573.html.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. "Wang Yi Holds a Meeting with Foreign Ministers of GCC Countries." 20 September 2022. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/gjhdq_665435/2675_665437/2838_663666/2840_663670/202209/t20220921_10768898.html.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. "Wang Yi Meets with Special Envoy of UAE President to China Khaldoon Khalifa Al Mubarak." 13 April 2026. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjbzhd/202604/t20260414_11891629.html.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. "Wang Yi: Saudi-Iranian Dialogue in Beijing is a Victory for Peace." 10 March 2023.

https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/gjhdq_665435/2675_665437/2878_663746/2880_663750/202303/t20230313_11039691.html.

Reuters. "China says Strait of Hormuz blockade against global interests." *Khaleej Times*, 13 April 2026.

<https://www.khaleejtimes.com/world/asia/china-statement-us-strait-of-hormuz-blockade-against-global-interests>.

United Nations. "China, Russian Federation Veto Security Council Draft Resolution by Gulf States to Safeguard International Shipping through Strait of Hormuz." Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, SC/16330, 7 April 2026.

<https://press.un.org/en/2026/sc16330.doc.htm>.

United Nations. "Security Council: Russia and China veto resolution on Strait of Hormuz." *UN News*, 7 April 2026.

<https://news.un.org/en/story/2026/04/1167261>.

U.S. Energy Information Administration. "Country Analysis Brief: Iran." 10 October 2024.

https://www.eia.gov/international/content/analysis/countries_long/Iran/pdf/Iran%20CAB%202024.pdf.

Zeng Jixin. "Sheikh Khaled's Beijing visit affirms UAE-China ties in a troubled world." *The National*, 15 April 2026.

<https://www.thenationalnews.com/opinion/comment/2026/04/15/uae-china-middle-east/>.