**A new mediator in the region**

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Thursday, Aug 03, 2023

Earlier this year, China emerged as a new trustworthy mediator in the Middle Eastern region by successfully brokering a detente between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

The subsequent Sino-Palestinian strategic partnership and China’s renewed commitment to the settlement of the Palestinian question also endorses its resolve to engage as not only a mediator but also a stakeholder in regional peace.

This is a noteworthy step forward from China’s traditional approach of political non-alignment and implies a foreseeable diplomatic reorientation on the part of regional players – at least in theory. For instance, these emerging features of China’s foreign policy and its international dispute resolution capacity have enhanced its relevance to other disputes, such as the Kashmir dispute in South Asia.

A closer look at China’s strategic partnership diplomacy in the region alongside its development-led approach to dispute resolution helps decipher its motives as a stakeholder and delineate its position as a trustworthy international mediator.

It is understood that China’s strategic partnership agreements with Iran and Saudi Arabia are a major source of trust between the parties and enhance the sustainability of their reconciliation.

Evidently, China has pulled off the diplomatic feat of Iran-Saudi Arabia rapprochement by introducing its development-led approach to conflict resolution and exploiting the resources that a Chinese strategic partnership offers to the parties.

It is more obvious now that China has introduced an innovative development-led approach to regional peace and dispute resolution as an alternative to the American approach to peace in the Middle East.

Iran and Saudi Arabia have long been cognizant of the benefits of ending their hostility and developing friendly relations. China’s engagement helped the two countries define the guiding principles and incentives for their reconciliation and sustainable cooperation.

In effect, China is the source of the strategic glue that ties Iran to Saudi Arabia and can sustain their reconciliation initiative. Through its strategic partnership diplomacy, China is enhancing not only much-needed trust between the parties but also the sustainability of their reconciliation.

Unlike the American approach to peace in the region – which is pegged to security and Arab-Israel relations – the Chinese approach seeks to pursue a greater common good and align the economic strength of the Arab states to China’s strategic economic agenda for the region. This common good is appropriate to serve as a higher or greater incentive for reconciliation and also facilitates the achievement of those bilateral incentives.

As it appears, with its development-led approach to conflict resolution, China has re-channelized the negative energy of a long-standing conflict between two of its partners and turned it to the achievement of the long-term strategic goals as a greater good that they share with China. This feature of China’s approach to conflict resolution has enabled de-escalation between the parties and an effort at strengthening their bilateral relations.

The Iran-Saudi Arabia rapprochement does not itself erode US influence in the region. However, continued strategic economic cooperation of the parties with China will offset the American influence in the region and balance it with China’s.

Irrespective of US support or opposition to a desired Iran-Saudi entente, China’s mediation is a giant leap towards becoming a great power with the credibility to mediate solutions to international conflicts. What China will continue to build is its technical capabilities, resources and political clout necessary to sustain mediated solutions.

As for China’s resourcefulness, it has set up a mechanism of coordinated international cooperation with its partners under the umbrella of its strategic partnerships diplomacy. This mechanism offers frameworks for the management of international repercussions of their bilateral or multilateral cooperation.

A prototype of this mechanism was deployed by China and Pakistan under the Joint Cooperation Committee (JCC) of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The Joint Working Group on International Cooperation and Coordination and the Foreign Ministers’ Dialogue served to consolidate political cooperation between the parties and streamline their coordinated response to the international repercussions of China’s strategic partnership with Pakistan.

These mechanisms proved instrumental in ensuring international political cooperation to avert the FATF sanctions on Pakistan and China-Afghanistan-Pakistan trilateral cooperation for socioeconomic development, trade and security. China also recently launched a preparatory office for resolution of international disputes, that combines its resources for such initiatives.

China’s philosophies of peaceful coexistence, political non-alignment and its development-led approach to conflict resolution have great appeal in countries with longstanding disputes. However, some of these countries, such as Palestine, are already weary of the UN’s dysfunctional mechanisms and America’s disinclination to intervene and help.

Therefore, if China aspires to attain the status of a great power comparable to the US, it will have to be capable of functioning as a better alternative to the US – not only in the domain of the economy but also in conflict resolution and be prepared to address long-standing conflicts.

The antithesis of China’s development-led approach to conflict resolution dictates that conflicts prevent and potentially reverse development of all types. China therefore faces legitimate expectations of its strategic partners currently engaged in, or at risk of, conflicts that it will contribute to resolving those conflicts. China cannot afford to allow a (mis)perception that it is a partner in economic dealings and a stranger when its friend is embroiled in a conflict.

Considering its heavy investments and extensive partnerships in the Middle East and South Asia, capabilities of conflict resolution may become a necessity for China at some point. An unforeseen conflict between its strategic partners or involving one of them may create compelling situations calling for China’s intervention not only to support its partners but also protect its economic and political interests.

Such a situation will test China’s partnership diplomacy versus the conventional ‘alliance’ diplomacy in the domain of peace and security. Notwithstanding the scepticism about the sustainability of the Iran-Saudi Arabia reconciliation, the Iran-Saudi detente has raised China’s credibility and trustworthiness as an international mediator to a level enjoyed so far by the US.

This has triggered hopes for other countries affected by long-standing conflicts such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in the Middle East and the Kashmir dispute in South Asia. In both cases, a pronounced failure of the UN dispute resolution mechanisms and unwillingness of the US to engage as a mediator have warranted alternative thinking and innovative approaches to conflict resolution.

China’s new approach to conflict resolution is bound to have varying potential of successful application to other cases of standing disputes. For example, in the case of the Kashmir dispute, there are similarities as well as dissimilarities to the case of Iran-Saudi rapprochement.

Unlike Pakistan, India is not China’s strategic partner although both countries enjoy substantial economic ties. India has also strategically aligned with the US and is known for serving as a counterbalance of China. Furthermore, defying the UN Resolutions on Kashmir (1948-51), India has previously blocked third-party mediation attempts citing the Indo-Pakistani Simla Agreement (1972) which encourages the parties to settle their differences through “bilateral negotiations or by any other peaceful means”.

However, there is a marked presence of ample negative energy in the parties which can be re-channelized to a greater common good of regional peace and prosperity. Besides, China has a highly developed strategic partnership with Pakistan, a growing leverage over India and shares political platforms with both parties – such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). These factors weigh in favour of seeking China’s mediation in case of imminent threats to peace or other legitimate interests of the parties concerned.

It should be noted that the Sino-Indian border skirmishes of 2020 tested the strength of India’s economic ties with China and proved their high priority in India’s foreign economic policy despite domestic opposition.

Meanwhile, the two economic powers have continued to share a vision of peace and prosperity at the platforms of BRICS and the SCO. Alongside these signs of increasing cooperation between China and India, the vertical growth of Sino-Indian bilateral trade and a growing deficit in favour of China are indicators of China’s increasing leverage.

The views expressed in this article are personal.

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