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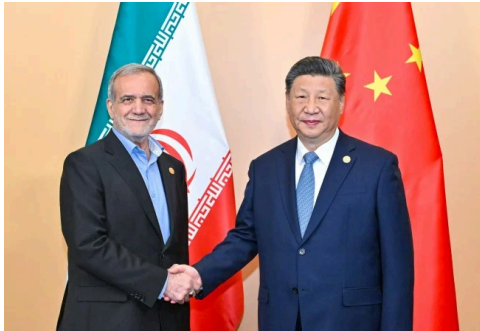
China / Diplomacy

China's diplomatic clout in Mideast at risk as threats build around ally Iran

Trump factor and fall of Assad in Syria will force nations, including China, to reassess ties amid instability

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In October, Chinese President Xi Jinping met Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian on the sidelines of the 16th Brics summit in Kazan, Russia. Photo: Xinhua

When Beijing brokered a historic [peace deal between Iran and Saudi Arabia](#) last year, it was seen as a milestone for [China's proactive engagement with the Middle East](#).

For Tehran, which has been under economic and geopolitical pressure from US President Joe Biden's administration, the deal marked a diplomatic breakthrough and a potential opportunity to end isolation, with Beijing's help.

However, with the [downfall of Syria's Bashar al-Assad](#), and the catastrophic loss of Hamas and Hezbollah during its war against Israel, Tehran faces mounting geopolitical threats with splintered regional proxies.



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Experts said that with Donald Trump's hawkish [Middle East policy cabinet](#), China-Iran relations were likely to strengthen under the common pressure.

But China's ability to remain a mediator could be at risk amid the growing risk of confrontation between Tehran and regional powers, which could complicate China's diplomatic legacy in the region.

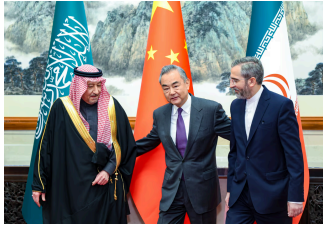
"It is almost certain that Trump's second term will continue to exert strong pressure on Iran, which, coupled with Israel's pounding and destruction of Iranian-backed forces such as Hamas and Hezbollah over the past year ...[It] will force Iran to opt for closer cooperation with other powers, including China and Russia," said Fan Hongda, a professor at the Middle East Studies Institute, Shanghai International Studies University.

[Iran](#) has experienced economic hardship since Trump's first presidency. After withdrawing from the Iran nuclear deal – a multipolar framework to negotiate Iran's nuclear issue – Trump imposed harsher economic sanctions on the Islamic Republic, a campaign Washington called "maximum pressure" and whose impact has lasted until today.

On the security front, the Trump administration coordinated the assassination of Qassem Soleimani in 2020, a major Iranian general and commander, dragging US-Iran relations to one of their most dangerous points in decades.

The harsh stance is likely to continue with Trump's Tehran-hawkish Middle East cabinet – including Massad Boulos, the president's Middle East adviser, Steve Witkoff, the special envoy to the Middle East, and Mike

Huckabee, the ambassador to Israel.



China's top diplomat Wang Yi was pictured with Saudi deputy foreign minister Waleed Elkhereiji and Iranian deputy foreign minister Ali Bagheri Kani, in Beijing in December last year, some months after Beijing brokered a diplomatic agreement between their countries. Photo: Xinhua

This month, Boulous told French media outlet Le Point that Trump would certainly pursue the “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran in the clearest indication yet that the incoming administration would enforce Iran’s economic and geopolitical isolation.

Clemens Chay, a research fellow at the National University of Singapore’s Middle East Institute said Tehran had two reasons for further strengthening ties with Beijing: “First, to show that little success is achieved from isolating the Islamic Republic. Second, to maintain Iran’s economic lifelines”.

In contrast to Washington’s hostility, China’s relations with Iran have grown economically and politically in the past few years, and it has been a major force trying to stop Iran being totally isolated.

China, the world’s second-largest economy, is a crucial trading partner and oil buyer for the Islamic Republic, reportedly through trade transit to circumvent sanctions.

Beijing has invited Tehran to join Brics and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) – two Beijing-led regional blocs – to avoid Tehran falling into further international isolation.

Chay said “this equally reveals the asymmetry in China-Iran ties where a disproportionate relationship is shaped as a result of Tehran’s dire needs”.

But James Dorsey, a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University, said Beijing might not be willing to seek closer relations with Tehran if Trump conducts a hawkish stance towards their partnership.

“[Iran] is already quite close to China. I don’t think China wants to be closer to [Iran]. China does not want to violate US sanctions,” Dorsey said.

“Sure, China and Iran have common interests, but they also have differing interests ... but finally [the two countries’ relations] are depending on what Trump will do [to China and Iran].”

Iran is one of China’s Middle Eastern partners in the Belt and Road Initiative, yet it has seen significantly fewer investments over the past decade compared with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and neighbouring Pakistan.

A landmark 25-year cooperation agreement signed in 2021 between the two countries has also seen little implementation, which even drew arguments inside Tehran.

On the diplomatic front, Iran is still an important pillar for China’s ambition as a mediator in the region, especially after Beijing brokered a historic peace deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran last year.

However, observers caution that Beijing’s growing role as a mediator could be at stake in the next four years, given the changing circumstances of Iran and its regional rivals.

Wen Shaobiao, a Middle East specialist at Shanghai International Studies University, said Trump’s unyielding support for Israel and harsh approach to Iran could shrink China’s space as a regional mediator.

He predicted that if Trump took a hardline attitude to support Israel, the Gaza war could be ended in a timely manner. Trump would continue to push his diplomatic legacy in the region, the Abraham Accords, which encourages Israel – Iran’s biggest rival in the region – to establish diplomatic relations with Arab countries.



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Biden's effort to connect Saudi Arabia and Israel last year, reported to be concluded soon, was interrupted by the Israel-Gaza war.

"China has always insisted that the Palestinian-Israeli issue is the core issue in the Middle East and calls for the 'two-state solution'. The Abraham Accords, however, are trying to marginalise the Palestinian-Israeli problem. The conflict between China and the United States on this issue will become more distinct," Wen said.

Jesse Marks, a non-resident fellow with the Stimson Centre's China programme and a former US defence adviser, said the growing conflicts in the Middle East – especially the recent regime change in Syria – risk further confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Syria has been one of the major battlegrounds for the Saudi-Iran decade-long confrontation. Tehran openly backed Assad's regime with force but Riyadh opposed the regime on the diplomatic front.

Riyadh was seen as one of the major blocks to Syria's full membership of the Arab League. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia resigned from the UN Security Council over China and Russia's veto of Assad sanctions, creating one of China's few diplomatic disputes with the kingdom.

"China has invested in building stronger engagement between Saudi Arabia and Iran. But the instability and escalation likely to follow in Syria will fuel disagreements and tensions across the region," Marks said.

"Beijing will have to carefully navigate a politically explosive environment as many of its key partners find themselves on opposing sides over Syria's future."

