Navigating Diplomacy: A Text Analysis of Sino-American Public Diplomacy and the Resolution of Saudi-Iranian Tensions

Xiru ZHAO

PhD Candidate, Graduate School of International Culture and Communication, Waseda University, Japan, zhao34x@fuji.waseda.jp, ORCID: 0000-0002-1976-2115.

You XU

PhD Candidate, Graduate School of International Culture and Communication, Waseda University, Japan, xuyou@fuji.waseda.jp, ORCID: 0009-0002-1569-276X.

Abstract

This study analyzes the divergent approaches of Sino-American public diplomacy in the context of Saudi-Iranian reconciliation. Utilizing text analysis of governmental policy documents, this research explores how China, and the United States employ distinct strategies in Middle Eastern when dealing with the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran between 2016-2023. While the United States historically emphasizes the promotion of democratic values and human rights, China adopts a pragmatic, economic-focused approach, as exemplified by its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In March 2023, the reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran facilitated by Chinese government, underscores the effectiveness of China's strategy emphasizing non-interference, mutual benefits, and economic development. The findings suggest that China's approach, centered around economic cooperation and non-interference, may offer a new "Chinese model" for conflict resolution in the Middle East areas. The paper contributes to the understanding of shifting global diplomatic dynamics and the potential for alternative conflict resolution methods in a complex regional landscape.

Introduction

The landscape of Middle Eastern geopolitics is dynamic and intricate, characterized by the interweaving of ideological and religious issues with both domestic and international frameworks. This interplay gives rise to a myriad of complex relationships and interactions among Islamic countries (Cerioli, 2018: 295). Saudi Arabia and Iran, while sharing the foundational roots of Islam, showcase significant contrasts in their internal attributes, stemming from diverse interpretations of religious doctrines, cultural backgrounds, and political systems. The conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran dates back to the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979, marked by ideological differences and regional power struggles. Tensions escalated with the severance of diplomatic relations in 1988, following confrontations and mutual distrust.

After the Cold War, both the United States (US) and China have been actively involved in addressing Middle Eastern issues. The United States has been an important participant in the Middle East's geopolitical landscape, marked by key interventions such as the Gulf and Iraq Wars, support in the Yemen Civil War, and a strategic shift with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) withdrawal, all reflecting its ongoing engagement and complex relationships in the region. The interests of the country are wide-ranging, leading to the complexity of its specific policies.

On March 10, 2023, under China's mediation, Iran and Saudi Arabia restored diplomatic relations after seven years since 2016. The three countries announced an agreement that included the restoration of diplomatic ties, with the reopening of each other's embassies and representative offices within two months; an emphasis on respecting national sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs; and an agreement for the foreign ministers of both countries to meet, arrange the dispatch of ambassadors, and discuss strengthening bilateral relations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023). The successful reconciliation shows China's growing involvement in the Middle East area and reshaping the dynamic. Until 2024, China has established comprehensive strategic partnerships or strategic partnerships with 12 Arab nations. Furthermore, twenty-one Arab states, in addition to the Arab League, have officially joined the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Aluf, 2024).

The successful reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia prompts our research question: What different approaches to public diplomacy have China and the US adopted in addressing issues in the Middle East? Why was China able to facilitate the reconciliation between

Saudi Arabia and Iran? While the US has historically played a key role in the Middle East, its efforts at conflict resolution have been deeply influenced by western values and strategic interests. While with the rise of China as a significant player on the global stage, a new pattern of conflict resolution begins to emerge. China's approach offers a new perspective that diverges from traditional western methods, exploring alternative pathways for peace and stability in the Middle East.

To answer the question, our research is organized in three parts. We first examine the existing literature on the ideology of public diplomacy in both China and the US and propose our hypothesizes on the discussed issue. In the second part, we have selected the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran, spanning from the severance of diplomatic ties in 2016 to the reconciliation in 2023, as a case study. Through text analysis of publicly released governmental policy documents, we aim to categorize and accentuate the divergent public policy strategies of China and the US to substantiate our hypothesis. Our objective is to identify and illustrate the distinct strategies employed by each country in addressing the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran, using visual representations such as graphs of frequently used words to support our findings. In the last part, we discussed divergences in diplomatic approaches between the US and China, offering our analyses based on the results obtained.

1. US and China's Participation in the Middle East

Public diplomacy, fundamentally defined as the strategic engagement and relationship management between countries and foreign publics or governments, stands as a cornerstone of modern international politics. This conception evolved notably during the Cold War, primarily in reaction to the expanding reach of mass media and the escalating influence of public opinion (Snow, 2020: 23). In the context of today's globalized environment, the role of public diplomacy is increasingly critical, shaping the international perception of a nation and steering its foreign engagements (Gurgu, 2016: 127). According to Cull (2008: 43), public diplomacy transcends the mere boundaries of being an ancillary function of international relations; rather, it is integral to the fabric of global communication, fostering substantive connections between nations, their citizens, and governmental frameworks. This paradigm is underscored by its significant impact on foreign policy formulation and decision-making processes (Daimah, 2022).

In the arena of conflict mediation, public diplomacy emerges as a pivotal tool in the phases of conflict prevention, resolution, and post-conflict reconciliation (Melissen, 2005: 145).

This form of diplomacy facilitates the alteration of perceptions and fosters mutual understanding through strategic communication and engagement, thereby laying the groundwork for peaceful negotiations and diplomatic resolutions (Potter, 2008: 67; Sheafer, 2009: 449). A critical component of this strategy is news management, which involves the strategic control and dissemination of information to manage public perceptions and maintain favorable media coverage during diplomatic crises. By shaping media narratives, news management not only supports negotiation processes but also plays a crucial role in preventing the escalation of conflicts (Leonard, 2002). Effective news management requires a proactive approach to communication, ensuring that all media releases and public statements support a coherent diplomatic strategy. This includes the timing of communications to maximize impact, choosing the right channels to reach target audiences, and framing messages to align with diplomatic objectives. The ability to manage news effectively can calm tensions and pave the way for effective dialogue, thereby enhancing the prospects for successful mediation.

Furthermore, the involvement of third parties in mediation and political engagement contributes significantly to the peacebuilding process, creating vital political avenues for dialogue and discourse (Papagianni, 2010: 250). Zartman (1985: 28) argues that the efficacy of a mediator is attributed to their capacity to foster a desirable outcome and redistribute the balance of power among conflicting parties. The strategies of preventive diplomacy and conflict prevention are crucial for halting the progression of armed conflicts before they intensify (Zyck, 2012: 68).

1.1. The US's Value-Driven Public Diplomacy

American public diplomacy has traditionally been tied to the promotion of its core democratic values – freedom, equality, and democracy. This characteristic can be traced back to President Wilson's advocacy for national self-determination in the aftermath of World War I. Fast-forwarding to the 21st century, the endeavors of the US to implant democratic systems in countries like Iraq and Afghanistan serve as contemporary examples of this ongoing commitment to the propagation of democratic principles (Zakaria, 2008: 13). Fast-forwarding to the dawn of the 21st century, the narrative of US international interaction remains imbued with its enduring dedication to the propagation of democratic values. The endeavors of the US to institute democratic systems in war-torn countries like Iraq and Afghanistan can be seen as contemporary manifestations of this ongoing commitment (Berman, 2003).

Owing to its global leadership position, the US has been a central figure in the development of international security measures since World War II, adopting a strategy profoundly rooted in its core values (Stasinopoulos, 2003: 311). This strategy is characterized by a multifaceted approach that includes the application of military force, arms control, and the advancement of democracy and human rights (Murphy, 2003: 3). Particularly following the events of September 11, the US has significantly influenced the progression of international security institutions, illustrating its substantial impact in this realm (Chainoglou, 2011: 25). Moreover, US involvement in the international law concerning global security reflects its stance on multilateral institutions, its initiatives in the War on Terror, and its navigation of competitive geopolitical landscapes (Jorgensen, 2020). In implementing its strategy, the US emphasizes enhancing the capabilities of partner nations to address security threats effectively, with news management ensuring that such engagements are perceived as collaborative and constructive, rather than imperialistic.

However, the role of the U.S. as a global champion of democracy can sometimes lead to interventionist policies. According to Ikenberry (2001: 19), the US playing the role of a global champion of democracy can often result in interventionist policies that ignore the nuances of local political and cultural dynamics. The imposition of American-styled democracy can inadvertently exacerbate internal conflicts and disrupt traditional structures of governance. This highlights the inherent complexity and controversial nature of democracy promotion as a key facet of American public diplomacy. It raises questions about the practicality and efficiency of this approach, given the varying socio-cultural landscapes across different countries (Nye, 2004: 134). Furthermore, some other scholars also doubts whether the US's interventions were really motivated by its commitment to global security and democracy, or the US just used global security and democracy as a strategic narrative tool in the matrix of contemporary geopolitical maneuvers, particularly evident in Kosovo and Iraq (Hehir, 2009; Ritter, 2003). These studies reveal the multi-faceted nature of US public diplomacy, which encompasses an intricate interplay between its commitment to democratic ideals and the crucial reality of its implementation.

1.2. China's Pragmatic Public Diplomacy

In contrast to the US's values-driven diplomacy, China adopts a pragmatically economic approach to its public diplomacy. With its historical context and unique sociopolitical structure, China tends to prioritize economic development over ideological exportation in its diplomatic

Bölge Çalışmaları Dergisi

Navigating Diplomacy: A Text Analysis of Sino-American Public Diplomacy and the Resolution of Saudi-Iranian Tensions

endeavors, notably the BRI. The BRI, proposed by President Xi Jinping in 2013, is a clear reflection of this approach. It involves an ambitious plan to boost trade and stimulate economic growth across Asia and beyond by investing massively in infrastructure projects, including ports, roads, and railways. This plan, as Wang (2016) argues, is aimed at enhancing China's economic prowess and strategic influence, albeit devoid of direct ideological imposition News management plays a critical role in China's public diplomacy by carefully curating the narrative surrounding China's international engagements to emphasize mutual economic benefits and cooperation rather than dominance or geopolitical maneuvering. Callahan (2015) examines China's pursuit of a "new type of international relations", distinct from the "American-led liberal international order". According to him, China seeks to build its global image and influence through partnerships based on mutual economic benefit rather than overtly exporting its political or social values. This form of relationship building presents a contrast to American normative power, which largely relies on the diffusion of its political model and democratic values.

China's security strategy has been also characterized as pragmatic, primarily centering on strengthening bilateral relationships (Tow, 2011: 157). According to Liu (2017: 151), China has encountered a blend of conventional and unconventional security challenges, prompting a strategic pivot towards providing public security goods and aligning with the interests of significant international stakeholders. This strategic shift marks a divergence from the US's security approach, inclining more towards cooperative security measures (Yahuda, 2003). Saunders (2020) points out that China's global military and security engagements have not only intensified but have also embraced traditional military objectives alongside military diplomacy. This broader engagement is part of China's evolving international conduct, which now features a more prominent role in global security (Medeiros, 2009: 37). Nonetheless, Heath (2018) posits that the global ramifications of China's quest for overseas security has provoked significant debate and concern.

China's diplomatic strategy, with its pragmatic emphasis, presents a complicated situation for the global order. Critics often argue that it is akin to a double-edged sword with profound implications. On one hand, China has positioned itself as a key economic player and financier in developing countries, providing significant loans and investments. However, many scholars argue that the "no-strings-attached" nature of these financial interactions may ensnare these developing nations into a problematic debt trap, severely jeopardizing their fiscal stability and future growth

(Brautigam, 2020). There is also an ongoing debate about China's willingness to engage with authoritarian regimes. Critics argue that this approach undermines the promotion of democratic values and encourages the perpetuation of autocratic governance worldwide (Shambaugh, 2020: 13). This position is problematic as it seemingly contradicts the global aspiration for upholding and promoting human rights and democratic processes (Nye, 2021: 9). In essence, the economic orientation of Chinese diplomacy creates a nuanced debate about its long-term effects on international relations and global stability.

2. Research Hypothesis

We formulate two hypotheses derived from the reviewed literature that articulate the distinct features of public diplomacy as practiced by the US and China.

Hypothesis 1: American public diplomacy is driven by a combination of the promotion of democratic values such as freedom, equality, and democracy, as well as the pursuit of national interests.

This hypothesis is grounded in the historical and ideological foundations of American foreign policy. The US has consistently positioned itself as a global champion of democracy, aiming to shape international norms and governance structures in alignment with its foundational values. This approach has been evident in various American diplomatic and international aid efforts, particularly in the post-World War II era and more recently in the reconstruction efforts of countries like Iraq and Afghanistan.

Hypothesis 2: Chinese public diplomacy adopts a pragmatic and economic-focused approach, prioritizing economic development and international partnerships over the exportation of ideological values.

In contrast to the American approach, China's public diplomacy is hypothesized to be characterized by pragmatism and an emphasis on economic relationships. Initiatives such as the BRI exemplify China's strategy of leveraging economic investments and infrastructure development to bolster its global influence and strategic interests. This hypothesis suggests that China's diplomatic efforts are less about exporting a particular political ideology and more about establishing a network of economic partnerships and dependencies.

3. Conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran

To evaluate our hypotheses, we intend to examine the reconciliation orchestrated by the Chinese government as a case study, contrasting the public policy strategies of China and the US. Saudi Arabia and Iran have been engaged in a prolonged state of conflict. Following the victory of the Iranian Islamic Revolution and the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1979, the newly established Islamic Republic of Iran pursued an internal and external strategy of "neither East nor West, only Islamic". At that time, Iran considered Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab countries as the primary targets of its "exporting revolution" policy, leading to a comprehensive confrontation in the Iran-Saudi relations (Liu, 2023: 18). In the 1980s, Iran and Iraq erupted into war, during which Saudi Arabia chose to support Iraq in an attempt to contain Iran's potential for external expansion. In July 1987, strained relations reached a critical point during a conflict in Mecca, resulting in the tragic deaths of 275 Iranians. This led to protests in Tehran and caused the death of a Saudi diplomat. As a consequence, Saudi Arabia announced the severance of diplomatic relations with Iran in April 1988 for the first time.

In 1989, following the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, Ali Khamenei succeeded him as the Supreme Leader of Iran. During the presidency of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani from 1989 to 1997, Iran, facing domestic economic difficulties and the disastrous consequences of the Iran-Iraq War, adopted a more moderate foreign policy approach. Improving relations with Gulf Arab states became a priority. After Iran restored diplomatic relations with Iraq in 1990, it reestablished diplomatic ties with Saudi Arabia in 1991. After Mohammad Khatami was elected as President of Iran in May 1997, the Iranian government pursued a moderate diplomatic policy, making efforts to improve relations with Gulf countries. While Iraq War in 2003 led to a sudden and severe shift in the situation in the Middle East, especially in the Gulf region, where sectarian conflicts increasingly intensified. In the year of 2011, the Arab Spring fuels bilateral tensions and further speeded up the competition among Gulf countries (Aydın, 2013: 124). Iran and Saudi Arabia again cut ties in 2016 due to the attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran and the Saudi consulate in Mashhad, following the execution of a prominent Shiite cleric by the Saudi government.

The Middle Eastern foreign policies of China and the US are vastly different, reflecting deep disparities in the public diplomacy philosophies of the two countries (Yao and Tian, 2023: 24). On March 10, 2023, China, Saudi Arabia, and Iran issued a tripartite joint statement in Beijing, announcing that Saudi Arabia and Iran had reached an agreement to restore diplomatic

relations. The reconciliation agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran marked an end to seven years of hostility and decades of political rivalry. Both parties agreed to reactivate the security cooperation agreement signed on April 17, 2001 (22nd of 1st month, 1422 Hijri), and the general agreement signed on May 27, 1998 (2nd of 2nd month, 1419 Hijri), encompassing economic, trade, investment, technology, science, cultural, sports, and youth fields. The announcement by Saudi Arabia and Iran to restore diplomatic relations marks a constructive role played by China's active mediation. This stands in stark contrast to the long-standing approach of the US in the Middle East, which has involved forming alliances and exacerbating conflicts. We selected the severance of diplomatic ties in 2016 to the reconciliation in 2023 as our study period to further explore the differences between China and US' public diplomacy when dealing with the conflict issue.

4. Methodology

4.1. Framing

The concept of framing in the media serves to simplify and interpret complex issues for public consumption (Kim et al., 2002: 10). This simplification process is critical in the realm of news, where information must be made accessible and understandable to a broad audience. According to Robert Entman (1993: 52), framing involves selecting and highlighting certain aspects of perceived reality within a communicative text to promote a particular understanding or perspective. This includes defining problems, suggesting causes, passing moral judgments, and recommending solutions. The strategic choice of what to include and what to omit can significantly influence the audience's perception and interpretation of events and issues. This theory helps explain how framing can shape individuals' perceptions and understandings by attributing particular causes or solutions to events or issues. By framing a situation in a certain light, media can guide the audience towards a specific viewpoint or understanding, impacting their perception and potentially their actions in response to the issue at hand.

The importance of framing extends into the analysis of public diplomacy, where it shapes how national policies and actions are perceived internationally. Scholars have done a lot of research delving into the framing processes in public diplomacy and their impact on public audiences (Snow, 2004: 474; Pan and Kosicki, 1993: 57). Their studies suggest that the way information is framed can affect the public's understanding and attitude towards foreign policies and international relations. Specific words, phrases, or metaphors that seem to carry a lot of

weight or are repeated throughout the text. These often indicate what is the emphasis and can point towards the underlying frame.

5. Data Collection

To answer the research question, we utilized the text analysis software NVivo to examine the frequency of word usage. NVivo supports multiple languages, including English and Chinese, allowing for comprehensive data analysis. The analysis of China and United State's public policies is carried out through the lens of framing to identify the area of focus in the policy-making and how they deal with the relationships between the countries in the international domain. The online data and information we gathered for this research span from January 4, 2016, to June 19, 2023. This seven-year period marks the timeframe from when Iran and Saudi Arabia severed their relations completely, until their reconciliation on March 10, 2023, facilitated by China's negotiation efforts.

We have gathered official documents from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, with a particular focus on Saudi Arabia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People's Republic of China, 2024a) and Iran (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People's Republic of China, 2024b). These documents are listed under the tab of nations and organizations including related news, spokesman's speech, speech, and official files.

We also collected the official documents from the U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Saudi Arabia （U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Saudi Arabia, 2024) and U.S. Virtual Embassy Iran (U.S. Virtual Embassy Iran, 2024a; 2024b). The text we collect includes news, speeches, press releases, and events.

Owing to the fact that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China does not translate every document into English, we have chosen to use the original Chinese texts for a comprehensive study. To ensure clarity and reference, we have included the translated texts along with the original Chinese words in the appendix. We have chosen to focus on the top ten most frequently used words, excluding names of places and conjunction words for a more substantial and relevant analysis.

6. Result

The graph shows the top ten most frequently used words, excluding names of places and conjunction words in each country.

In our text analysis of official Chinese documents, the ten most frequently used terms were: "cooperation" (appearing 1390 times), "development" (1093 times), "bilateral" (707 times), "international" (702 times), "mutual" (547 times), "security" (451 times), "peace" (359 times), "stable" (333 times), "economic" (302 times), and "dialogue" (222 times). These terms highlight China's emphasis on collaboration, growth, and stability in its foreign policy discourse.

The recurrent utilization of the term "cooperation" signifies a central tenet within China's foreign policy, highlighting a commitment to fostering collaborative relationships with other nations, particularly within the realms of economic and developmental cooperation. This alignment is congruent with China's active promotion of the BRI, aimed at facilitating regional and global economic integration through substantial investments in infrastructure and facilitation of trade partnerships. Additionally, the frequent recurrence of the terms "development" and "economy" underscores China's steadfast dedication to fostering economic growth and advancement, reflecting the pragmatic orientation of its foreign policy, which prioritizes economic imperatives and developmental objectives. Moreover, the deployment of terms such as "bilateral" and "international" indicates China's diplomatic approach, emphasizing the significance of bilateral engagements alongside active participation in multilateral international forums and organizations. The incorporation of terms such as "mutual", "security", "peace", and "stability" reveals China's emphasis on principles of mutual respect, regional security, as well as the pursuit of peace and stability in its foreign relations. This underscores China's commitment to non-interference and the pursuit of common security objectives.

The utilization of the term "dialogue" illustrates China's preference for diplomatic discourse and negotiation as a means to address international conflicts and foster collaborative international relations. Usage of these terms elucidates the fundamental characteristics of China's foreign policy, which revolves around economic centrality and underscores cooperation, development, mutual respect, and stability, while also emphasizing the resolution of international disputes through dialogue and diplomatic channels. From our textual analysis of official documents released by the US, the top ten most frequently used terms are: "security" (appearing 462 times), "rights" (372 times), "international" (354 times), "human" (236 times), "woman" (225 times), "terrorist" (191 times), "financial" (181 times), "media" (166 times), "individual" (157 times), and "sanction" (151 times). These terms underscore the U.S.' emphasis on security, human rights, and financial stability in its foreign policy discourse.

The frequent use of the term "security" indicates that the US' foreign policy emphasizes national and international security, particularly in combating terrorism and maintaining regional stability. The recurrent inclusion of terms such as "rights", "human rights", and "women" serves to underscore the paramount importance that the US attributes to the safeguarding of human rights, particularly in the context of advancing women's rights and achieving gender equality. This underscores the values-oriented character inherent in the US foreign policy, which prioritizes the advancement of democratic principles and human rights values. Additionally, the utilization of the term "international" signifies the proactive engagement of the US within multilateral international frameworks and organizations when navigating international affairs. The presence of terms such as "terrorists", "finance", and "sanctions" elucidates the emphasis placed by the US foreign policy on counterterrorism efforts, ensuring financial stability, and leveraging sanctions as diplomatic instruments. The usage of terms like "media" and "individual" underscores the emphasis placed by the US on the role of media and the protection of individual rights within its foreign policy agenda. In summary, the recurrent incorporation of these terms unveils the foundational elements of the values-driven nature inherent in the US foreign policy, which prioritizes the protection of human rights, the promotion of core values, and the resolution of international issues through concerted efforts involving multilateral cooperation and judicious use of sanctions.

As depicted in Figure 1, China and the US exhibit notable differences in handling international policies, particularly concerning relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran, despite both countries' significant focus on regional security. These differences not only reflect distinct geopolitical strategic orientations but also exhibit their respective ideological viewpoints and core principles of foreign policy. In contrast, the analysis of US foreign policy discourse underscores the emphasis on human rights and financial stability. This indicates a preference in US foreign policy for promoting democratic values and human rights, while utilizing sanctions as means to uphold international order and security. These divergent approaches reflect the differing roles and influences of the two countries on the international stage, as well as their distinct strategies in addressing international conflicts and promoting reconciliation.
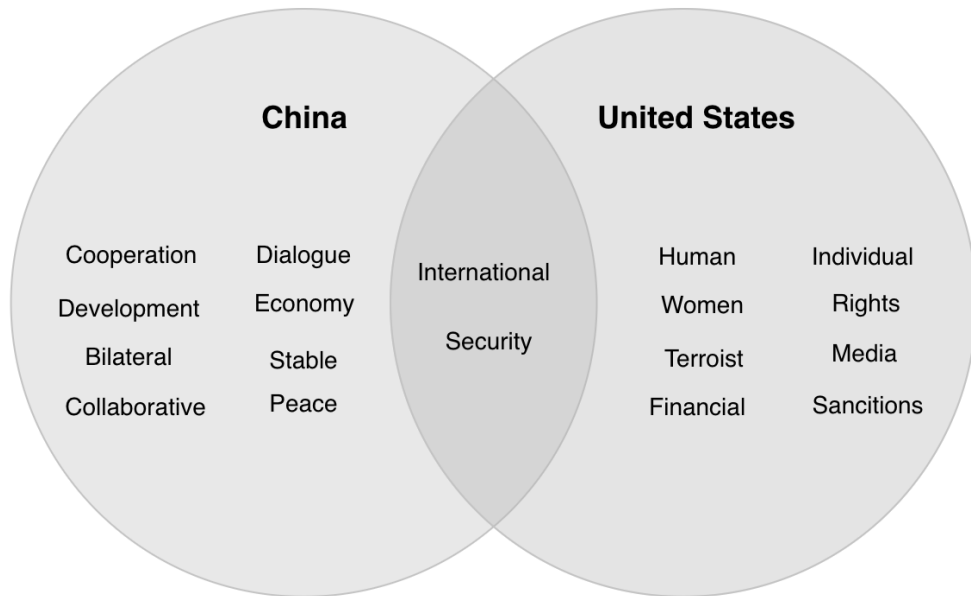
Figure 1. *The Frequently Used Frame by China and US*

7. Discussion

The notable differences between China and the US in their approaches to relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran not only reflect distinct geopolitical strategic orientations between the two nations but also underscore their respective ideological viewpoints and core principles of public policies.

7.1. Challenges of the US Values-Driven Diplomatic Strategy in the Middle East

Rooted in its liberal democratic tradition, the US places significant emphasis on a range of Western values, including individual freedom, secular governance, political pluralism, and economic liberalism. These principles form the cornerstone of US diplomacy and often shape its foreign policy. However, these values may face numerous challenges in Middle Eastern countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and Iran, due to significant differences with the cultural, religious, and social norms of these nations (Esposito, 1992). Saudi Arabia is renowned for its strict adherence to Sunni Islam, particularly the interpretation provided by the Wahhabi sect, which guides its societal and political life. The country's restrictions on women's rights and freedom of speech starkly contrast with Western liberal values. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia operates under an absolute monarchy, lacking elected parliamentary institutions at the national level, which differs from the

norms of democratic political participation. While Iran is a theocratic republic, with Shia Islam occupying a central position in its political structure. The Supreme Leader, a religious figure, holds ultimate authority and wields significant influence over all government departments. Despite Iran having electoral institutions such as the Islamic Consultative Assembly and the presidency, candidates must obtain approval from the Guardian Council to ensure their alignment with the principles of the Islamic Revolution (Hiro, 1989). The enforcement of religious laws in both countries reflects a strong interaction between religion and politics, contrasting sharply with the Western values often advocated in US diplomacy. Given these cultural and political differences, the American-style values-driven democracy may be perceived as undermining traditional norms and threatening the established political systems of Saudi Arabia and Iran (Hassan, 2015: 479).

Human rights issues also play a significant role in US foreign policy in the Middle East. The human rights records of countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran differ significantly from the liberal democratic values advocated by the US, complicating diplomatic relations with these nations. Saudi Arabia has faced ongoing criticism for its human rights record, particularly concerning freedom of speech, women's rights, and treatment of minority groups (Ghaziani and Ghaziani, 2022: 310). The high-profile murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018 brought global attention to the country's press freedom situation. Despite some recent progress in women's rights, such as allowing women to drive and participate in public activities, institutional shortcomings remain significant barriers to full women's rights. Iran's human rights record is also troubling, criticized for restricting freedom of speech and association, mistreating racial and religious minority groups, and implementing harsh punishments without fair trials. (Gadd et. al., 2017) Iran's treatment of LGBTQ+ individuals is also a subject of criticism, as homosexuality is considered a crime under Iranian law. These human rights abuses contrast sharply with the liberal democratic values upheld by the US, posing a challenge to the US diplomatic relations with these countries as it seeks to balance advocating for human rights improvements with geopolitical realities and national security interests. Finding a balance between promoting its values and safeguarding strategic interests is a complex and challenging task for the US.

Given the significant cultural and political differences highlighted in the preceding discussion, the US intervention in Middle Eastern affairs has been characterized as interventionism and geopolitical manipulation, leading to longstanding disputes in the region and persistent distrust of the US (Ricks, 2006). A prominent example is the 1953 coup in Iran,

orchestrated jointly by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) of the US and the intelligence agencies of the United Kingdom, with the aim of overthrowing Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, who was seeking to nationalize Iran's oil industry at the time. The outcome of the coup was the reinstatement of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, whose authoritarian rule persisted until the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Many Iranians vividly remember the role played by the US in this event, viewing it as a typical example of Western interference in their country's affairs, further fueling distrust of the US (Kinzer, 2003). In the case of Saudi Arabia, its relationship with the US is more complex. While the US has long been the main supplier of arms to Saudi Arabia and has provided support in its regional conflicts, this connection is often seen as transactional, based on shared interests in oil and regional security rather than shared cultural or political values (Vitalis, 2006). Consequently, Saudi Arabia may approach with skepticism and caution the reconciliation methods advocated by the US, viewing them as another form of Western intervention in regional affairs. On February 12, 2024, China exhibited the FC-31 fighter model at the Saudi Defense Show, highlighting potential military cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia (Choi, 2024). However, military procurement was suspended following a bilateral agreement with the United States on May 2, 2024 (Nardelli, Jacobs, & Martin, 2024). This development indicates Saudi Arabia's interest in exploring new avenues for military collaboration despite existing commitments.

In addition to external factors, domestic politics pose significant challenges to formulating a comprehensive strategy to resolve the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In any democratic country, the decision-making process of foreign policy is profoundly influenced by a range of domestic political factors, a reality that the US policymakers must carefully navigate. Public opinion and media narratives are key factors shaping the US foreign policy (Gilboa, 2005). Extensive media coverage of issues such as Iran's nuclear program, human rights concerns in Saudi Arabia, and their roles in regional conflicts shapes public perceptions in the US. Consequently, public opinion tends to be skeptical of these countries, leaning towards supporting a hardline policy rather than engagement or compromise. Politicians advocating for a more conciliatory approach may face opposition from voters, making the adoption of nuanced diplomatic strategies challenging. Additionally, lobbying activities by interest groups further complicate the US' ability to promote reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Influential lobbying groups, including pro-Israeli organizations, defense industry interests, and various human rights organizations, seek to shape the US policy towards these countries. For example,

pro-Israeli lobbying groups wield significant influence, and policies perceived as favorable to Iran often face significant resistance in the US due to tensions between Iran and Israel. These lobbying efforts may influence decision-makers, hindering efforts for more cooperative diplomacy. Another factor influencing the US foreign policy is partisan political inconsistency. With changes in government, the US policy towards the Middle East may undergo drastic changes, as evidenced by the transition from the Obama administration's Iran nuclear deal to the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" strategy (Joobani and Daheshvar, 2020). These policy shifts reflect differing viewpoints within and between political parties on how best to handle relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia. The discontinuity of policies may undermine the stability and effectiveness of diplomatic efforts in the region.

7.2. China's Opportunity in the Middle East

China's emphasis on infrastructure development and development projects aligns with the urgent needs of Middle Eastern countries for economic growth and modernization. The BRI, proposed in 2013, encompasses the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" to promote regional multilateral cooperation. Through the BRI, China has invested heavily in infrastructure projects in the Middle East, such as ports, roads, railways, and energy facilities. These projects not only provide the necessary material foundation for local economic development but also establish long-term economic partnerships between China and Middle Eastern countries. China is the largest trading partner for both Saudi Arabia and Iran respectively. Saudi Arabia has become China's first trade partner in the Middle East with a trade volume exceeding $100 billion. From January to November 2023, the bilateral trade between China and Saudi Arabia amounted to $98.61 billion, with China exporting goods worth $38.85 billion and importing goods worth $59.76 billion (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024a). China's exports to Iran amounted to $9.24 billion, while imports from Iran totaled $4.17 billion during this period (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024b). The biggest collaboration with the Saudi Arabia is the NEOM in Tabuk, as for the Saudi Vision 2030 in building the avant-garde future city for sustainable development, including basic water supply and railway transportation. (Xinhua News Agency, 2023). Saudi Arabian service Saudi Call, planned to launch construction of 100MW data centers with Chinese Shanghai Luamotong Group and China Mobile International Limited. In Iran, significant investment initiatives by Chinese entities include the establishment of Haier Iran Company by Haier Group

as a joint venture situated in the Isfahan Industrial Park, as well as the investment and establishment of a joint venture valve production plant by Suzhou Valve Factory. Compared to the value-driven foreign policy of the US, China's economically centered strategy prioritizes practical interests and win-win outcomes rather than ideological export or political intervention. This pragmatic approach largely addresses the urgent needs of Middle Eastern countries for economic development and modernization, thus making it easier to gain support and trust from these countries. As a stakeholder in the Gulf region, China actively promotes the normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran based on the concepts of a community of shared interests, a community of shared security, and a community of shared responsibilities (Sun, 2023: 100).

China's development goes beyond national prosperity, with a commitment to sustainable development for all humanity and a focus on shared human values as collaboration. On, April 21, 2022, Xi Jinping launched the GSI called for "common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security" and again reemphasized China's role as "non-interference in domestic affairs" and rejection of unilateralism in responses to the current tension between Russia and Ukraine. The reconciliation of Iran and Saudia Arabia can be interpreted as a successful implementation of the concept of a community with a shared future for mankind and the Global Security Initiative. It offers a Chinese solution and is a concentrated embodiment of the concept of a community of shared destiny for mankind for the Middle East issues. In December 7-10, 2022, Xi Jinping attends China- Arab summit, China-GCC summit and visits Saudi Arabia (Xinhua News, 2022). In February 2023, Iranian President Raisi visited China. During China's interactions with Saudi Arabia and Iran, both countries welcomed China's proposals for achieving security and stability in the Middle East and promoting dialogue among Persian Gulf countries. China expressed support for regional countries to enhance unity and cooperation, resolve differences through dialogue, achieve neighborly friendship, and pledged to work with Saudi Arabia and Iran to jointly uphold regional peace, security, and stability (Liu and Xu, 2023: 156). China advocates the global security concept in the middle east by stating in the GSI:

> "A concept of common security, respecting and safeguarding the security of every country; a holistic approach, maintaining security in both traditional and non-traditional domains and enhancing security governance in a coordinated way; a commitment to cooperation, bringing about security through political dialogue and peaceful negotiation; and pursuit of sustainable security, resolving conflicts through development and eliminating the breeding ground for insecurity."

It aligns with the needs of the Saudi Arabia and Iran, successful stablish a platform the the bilateral conversation.

7.3. China's Future Risks and Roles in the Middle East Area

Firstly, China maintains a principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries. This policy, while helping to maintain a certain level of diplomatic neutrality, may simultaneously restrict Beijing's willingness and capability to involve itself deeply in regional security issues. Unlike other global powers that might adopt more interventionist strategies, China's stance limits its operational scope, particularly in a region as tumultuous and conflict-ridden as the Middle East. Additionally, China's economic and political ties with multiple Middle Eastern countries may lead to conflicting interests, making it challenging for China to take sides or exert strong influence (Niu, 2014). These intertwined relations, marked by significant investments and strategic partnerships, impose constraints on China's ability to favor one nation over another without jeopardizing other bilateral relations or economic interests. Consequently, China is faced with a delicate balancing act: striving to maintain its non-interference policy while attempting to safeguard its diverse interests in a region characterized by intersecting rivalries and conflicting agendas. This balancing act complicates China's ability to assert strong influence or take definitive sides, thereby affecting its overall impact and presence in Middle Eastern geopolitics.

Secondly, China's military footprint in the Middle East remains notably smaller than that of the US. This limited presence reflects a cautious approach to regional engagement, aligning with its broader strategy of non-interference and economic prioritization. This lack of on-the-ground military experience poses challenges for China in understanding the full spectrum of security issues that characterize the Middle East. Moreover, this inexperience could affect Beijing's ability to project power or influence outcomes in the region effectively. While China has made strides in establishing economic influence through initiatives like the BRI, its military and strategic depth in handling the complex dynamics of Middle Eastern politics, particularly those involving armed conflict and national security concerns, remains underdeveloped (Sevilla, 2019). Consequently, this disparity in military involvement and regional experience could limit China's role and effectiveness as a stabilizing force or a mediator in ongoing Middle Eastern conflicts.

Thirdly, the US and its allies have long-established military bases, forged political alliances, and cultivated significant economic interests in the Middle East, creating a complex web of influence and commitments that have shaped the regional geopolitical landscape. Against this backdrop, China's escalating presence in the region, primarily driven by its economic ambitions and the strategic objectives of the Belt and Road Initiative, introduces a new dimension to the already intricate balance of power. This growing Chinese involvement may not only be viewed with suspicion by Western powers but also by regional actors who are accustomed to the existing US-led security and political order. As China continues to expand its economic, political, and to a lesser extent, military footprint, there is a potential for increasing geopolitical rivalries (Roy, 2016). This could manifest in various ways, including heightened scrutiny of Chinese intentions, competition over influence with traditional powers, and possible tensions with countries within the region itself. The perceived challenge to established interests and alliances by China's rising engagement could thus lead to a reevaluation of regional strategies by both global and local players, potentially exacerbating existing conflicts or sparking new ones in the struggle for dominance and control in this strategically vital area.

In summary, while China's recent diplomatic achievements highlight its growing influence, the path to becoming a dominant security force in the Middle East is fraught with challenges. These include its own foreign policy principles, a lack of military engagement and experience, and the complex web of regional dynamics. All these factors will significantly shape China's future role and influence in the region.

Conclusion

Based on the results and discussion, our first and second hypotheses are confirmed. There is a significant distinction between China's and the US' approaches to public diplomacy in the Middle East. On the issue of Saudi Arabia and Iran, China leans towards a cooperative and developmental approach, driven by economic considerations, whereas the US focuses more on a value-driven approach emphasizing human rights. This divergence highlights the contrasting strategic priorities and diplomatic styles of the two global powers in addressing regional conflicts.

China's proposal on the Saudi-Iran issue, grounded in the respect for the cultural and security concepts of each country, may offer new possibilities for resolving Middle Eastern conflicts. This approach, by aligning with the concept of a community of shared destiny for mankind, suggests a model for international relations that prioritizes mutual respect and

Collective well-being over traditional power dynamics. The Chinese solution reflects an innovative pathway that could inspire future efforts towards peace and stability in the region.

Despite its success, China's approach faces challenges amidst the complexities of the Middle Eastern context. The sustainability and effectiveness of the Chinese solution in the future will need to adapt to the changing circumstances and dynamics of the region. As such, while offering a promising alternative, the viability of this approach requires careful navigation of the intricate political and cultural landscapes of the Middle East, underlining the need for a flexible and responsive strategy in pursuing lasting peace and development.

References

Aluf, D. (February 26, 2024). China's influence in the Middle East and its limitations. *The Diplomat*. https://thediplomat.com/2024/02/chinas-influence-in-the-middle-east-and-its-limitations/.

Aydin, A. (2013). Hereditary Oil Monarchies: Why Arab Spring Fails in GCC Arabian States?. *Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi, 30*, 123-138.

Brautigam, D. (2020). Aid 'with Chinese characteristics': Chinese foreign aid and development finance meet the OECD-DAC aid regime. *Journal of International Development*.

Building a future city: China-Saudi cooperation in NEOM (2023, 7 December). *Xinhua News Agency*. https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/p/295018.html.

Callahan, W. A. (2015). The China Dream and the American Dream. *Economic and Political Studies, 3*(1), 143-160.

Cerioli, L. G. (2018). Roles and International Behaviour: Saudi–Iranian Rivalry in Bahrain's and Yemen's Arab Spring. *Contexto Internacional*, *40*(2), 295–316.

Chainoglou, K. (2011). An Assessment of Jus in Bello Issues Concerning Computer Network Attacks: A Threat Reflected in National Security Agendas. *Romanian Journal of International Law, 12*, 25-63

Choi, S. H. (12 February 2024). China displays FC-31 fighter model at Saudi defence show in bid

to increase exports as Middle East nations explore options. *South China Morning Post.* https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3251765/china-displays-fc-31-fighter-saudi-defence-show-bid-increase-exports-mideast-nations-explore-options.

Cox, M. (2019). American power before and after 11 September: Dizzy with success?. *International Affairs, 77*(3), 605-624.

Cull, N. J. (2008). Public diplomacy: Taxonomies and histories. The Annals of the *American Academy of Political and Social Science, 616*(1), 31-54.

Daimah, D. (2022). Public Diplomacy as an Instrument Foreign Policy. *International Conference on Social Science, 1*(1).

Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm. *Journal of Communication, 43*(4), 51–58.

Esposito, J. (1992). *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?.* Oxford University Press.

Gadd, E., Garraway, A., Smith, B., Lang, A., Robinson, T.C., & Walker, N. (2017). Human rights in Iran. https://www.brooklyn.cuny.edu/web/aca_socialsciences_polisci/infographic-unga72.pdf

Ghaziani, M. A., and Ghaziani, M. A. (2022). A reflection on the human rights attitude and international law approaches of Iran and Saudi Arabia. *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, *16*(3), 310–326.

Gilboa, E. (2005). The CNN effect: The Search for a Communication Theory of International Relations. *Political Communication*, *22*(1), 27–44.

Gurgu, E., and Cociuban, A. D. (2016). The role of public diplomacy in international relations in full process of globalization. *Annals of Spiru Haret University, Economic Series, 7*(2), 125-143.

Hassan, O. (2015). Undermining the transatlantic democracy agenda? the Arab spring and Saudi Arabia's counteracting democracy strategy. *Democratization*, *22*(3), 479–495.

Heath, T. R. (2018). *China's Pursuit of Overseas Security.* Santa Monica, CA: Rand.

Heidelbaugh, C. H. (2012). *Examination of National Policy to Build Partner Capacity.* US Army War College.

Hehir, A. (2009). NATO's "Humanitarian Intervention" in Kosovo: Legal precedent or

aberration? *Journal of Human Rights*, *8*(3), 245-264.

Hiro, D. (1989). *The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict*. Routledge.

Ikenberry, G. J. (2001). American Grand Strategy in the Age of Terror. *Survival, 43*(4), 19-34.

Johansen, R. (2021). *Where the Evidence Leads: A Realistic Strategy for Peace and Human Security*. Oxford University Press.

Joobani, H. A., and Daheshvar, M. (2020). Deciphering Trump's "Maximum Pressure" Policy: *The Enduring Challenge of Containing Iran. New Middle Eastern Studies, 10*(1).

Jorgensen, M. (2020). *The United States and the International Law of Global Security*. KFG Working Paper Series.

Kim, S.-H., Scheufele, D. A., and Shanahan, J. (2002). Think about it This Way: Attribute Agenda-Setting Function of the Press and the public's Evaluation of a Local Issue. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *79*(1), 7–25.

Kinzer, S. (2003). *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror*. Wiley.

Leonard, M. (2002). *Public diplomacy*. The Foreign Policy Centre.

Liu, F. (2016). China's security strategy towards East Asia. *The Chinese Journal of International Politics, 9*(2), 151-179.

Liu, Z. M. (2023). Shate, Yi lang maodun genshen digu de lishi jingwe [The deep-rooted historical context of the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran]. *Shijie Zhishi [World Affairs]*, *09*,17-20.

Liu, Z.M and Xu, Z.M. (2024). Xinshidai Zhongguo canyu zhongdong Anquan zhili de linian yu shijian [The concept and practice of China's participation in Middle East security governance in the new era]. *Journal of University of International Relations, 2*, 139-162.

Medeiros, E. S. (2009). The new security drama in East Asia: The responses of US allies and security partners to China's rise. *Naval War College Review, 62*(4), 37-52.

Melissen, J. (2005). *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Ministry of Foreign Affair of People's Republic of China (2023), *The Global Security Initiative Concept Paper*. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbxw/202302/t20230221_11028348.html.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. (2023, March 10). Zhonghua

Renmin Gongheguo, Shate alabo Wangguo, Yilang yisilan Gongheguo sanfang lianhe Shengming. [Joint Trilateral Statement by the People's Republic of China, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the Islamic Republic of Iran]. *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China.* https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/1179_674909/202303/t20230310_11039137.shtml.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. (2024a). Zhongguo tong Shate alabo de guanxi [The relationship between China and Saudi Arabia], *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China.* https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/yz_676205/1206_676860/sbgx_676864/.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. (2024b). Zhongguo tong Yilang de guanxi [The relationship between China and Iran], *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China.* https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/yz_676205/1206_677172/sbgx_677176/.

Murphy, J. (2003). *The United States and the Rule of Law in International Affairs.* Cambridge University Press.

Nardelli, A., Jacobs, J. & Martin, P. (2 May 2024). U.S. and Saudi Arabia near defense pact meant to reshape Middle East. *The Japan Times.* https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2024/05/02/world/politics/us-saudis-defense-pact/.

Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft power: The means to success in world politics.* Public Affairs.

Nye, J. S. (2021). *"Do Morals Matter? Presidents and Foreign Policy from FDR to Trump".* Oxford University Press.

Pan, Z., and Kosicki, G. M. (1993). Framing analysis: An approach to news discourse. *Political communication, 10*(1), 55-75.

Papagianni, K. (2010). Mediation, Political Engagement, and Peacebuilding. *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations, 16*(2), 243-263.

Potter, E. H. (2008). *Branding Canada: Projecting Canada's Soft Power through Public Diplomacy.* McGill-Queen's University Press.

Ricks, T. (2006). *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2003 to 2005.* Penguin Books.

Ritter, S. (2003). *Frontier justice: Weapons of mass destruction and the bushwhacking of America.* New York:

Context Books.

Shambaugh, D. (2018). *China and the world.* Oxford University Press.

Sheafer, T., and Gabay, I. (2009). Mediated public diplomacy: A strategic contest over international agenda building and frame building. *Political communication, 26*(4), 447-467.

Snow, D. A. (2004). Framing processes, ideology, and discursive fields. *The Blackwell companion to social movements*, 380-412.

Snow, N., and Cull, N. J. (Eds.). (2020). *Routledge handbook of public diplomacy*. Routledge.

Stasinopoulos, D. (2003). Maritime Security – The Need for a Global Agreement. *Maritime Economics & Logistics, 5*(3), 311-320.

Sun, D.G. (2023). Shate yu Yilang fujiao lichen zhong de renlei mingyun gongtongti Shijian [Practice of community of shared future for mankind in the process of Saudi Arabia and Iran normalizing relations]. *Dangdai Zhongguo yu shijie [Contemporary China and the World]*, 3, 97-104.

Tow, W., and Rigby, R. (2011). China's Pragmatic Security Policy: The Middle-Power Factor. *The China Journal, 65*, 157–178.

U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Saudi Arabia (2024). News and Events. https://sa.usembassy.gov/news/(Access Date: 10.04.2024)

U.S. Virtual Embassy Iran, (2024). News. https://sa.usembassy.gov/news/(Access Date: 13.04.2024)

U.S. Virtual Embassy Iran, (2024). Speeches and Statements. https://ir.usembassy.gov/category/speeches/ (Access Date: 13.04.2024)

Vitalis, R. (2006). *America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier.* Sandford University Press.

Wang, J. (2016). Marching Westwards: The Rebalancing of China's Geostrategy. *International Strategic Studies, 3*, 57-75.

Xi attends China- Arab summit, China-GCC summit and visits Saudi Arabia. (7 December, 2022), *Xinhua News*. https://english.news.cn/special/202212xjp/index.html.

Yahuda, M. (2003). Chinese dilemmas in thinking about regional security architecture. *The Pacific Review, 16*(2), 189-206.

Yao, J. H. and Tian, W. L. (2023). Shate yu Yilang hejie tuxian zhongmei waijiao linian shenceng chayi [Saudi Arabia and Iran's reconciliation highlights the deep-seated differences in diplomatic concepts between China and the United States]. *Shijie Zhishi [World Affairs], 9*, 23-25.

Zakaria, F. (2008). *The Post-American World.* W.W. Norton & Company.

Zartman, I.W. and Touval, S. (1985), International Mediation: Conflict Resolution and Power Politics. *Journal of Social Issues, 41*, 27-45.

Zyck, S. A., and Muggah, R. (2012). Preventive Diplomacy and Conflict Prevention: Obstacles and Opportunities. *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development, 1*(1), 68-75.

Appendix:

Original Chinese	Translated words
合作	Cooperation
发展	Development
双方	Bilateral
国际	International
共同	Collaborative
安全	Security
和平	Peace
稳定	Stable
经济	Economy
对话	Dialogue