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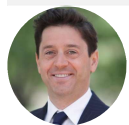
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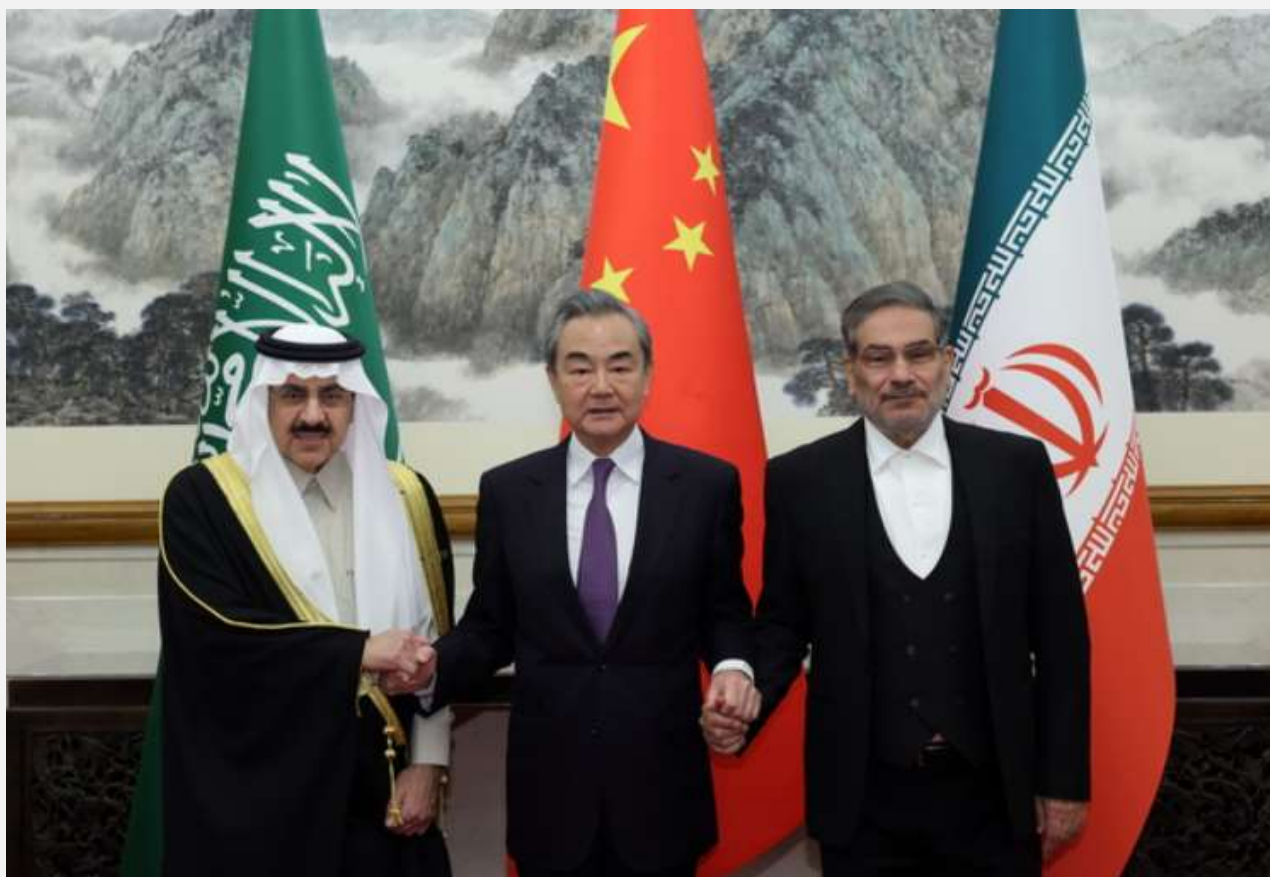
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The Butterfly Effect has taken flight. China's diplomatic accomplishment in reconciling Saudi Arabia and Iran could have far-reaching consequences, with Ukraine's future caught in its wake. The unexpected nature of this historic move means that its ramifications are rapidly gaining momentum and could unleash a tidal wave of global proportions, particularly in Europe.

Reshaping Power Dynamics from the Gulf to Ukraine

A stunning reversal of fortune has left European leaders reeling. Once having summarily rejected China's political plan for Ukraine, they now find themselves mesmerized by the prospect of a phoenix rising from the ashes of conflict. An imaginative connection between Riyadh, Tehran, and Kyiv has seized their attention, and they now ponder whether Beijing's newfound influence could decisively alter the course of the war. As they grapple with this seismic shift in power dynamics, the world is watching how this game-changing development will play out.

The shift started in the Middle East when China facilitated a historic détente between Saudi and Iran on March 10, 2023. This achievement, which coincided with the ratification of President Xi's third term, has enormous geopolitical implications. In a region where deep-seated animosities and power struggles have thwarted diplomatic efforts, this breakthrough should ease long-standing tensions that have fueled conflicts from Yemen to Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain.

China's diplomatic feat has highlighted the transformative potential of an outsider's perspective in resolving enduring disputes, especially when there are established friendly relationships, particularly in the business realm. The move has underscored the Chinese Global Security Initiative (GSI), which emphasizes the importance of constructive engagement. Now the attention turns from the sands of the Middle East to the golden fields of Ukraine.

Why the U.S. and EU Dismissed the Chinese Plan for Ukraine

Following a year of pressure from European chancelleries, China released the "Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis" on February 24, advocating for a cessation of hostilities and the preservation of "sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity." The plan was accepted by Russia and Ukraine, setting the stage for potential collaboration. However, it failed to meet the U.S. and EU's expectations, resulting in criticism. While some might view their comments as overly severe, it is essential to conduct a thorough analysis of the underlying factors.

Firstly, the plan does not address the fundamental source of the war in Ukraine: Putin's invasion, as it fails to demand him to assume responsibility and cease aggression. This omission is concerning, particularly because there are no Ukrainian troops present in Russia.

Secondly, China's ambiguous approach to the war has generated apprehension. Xi's failure to publicly endorse Ukraine and his absence of communication with Zelensky, coupled with his reiterated expressions of "unlimited friendship" towards Putin, has made many believe that Beijing lacks the indispensable neutrality. Furthermore, both Saudi and Iran acknowledged the pivotal role played by Xi's personal involvement, yet such direct intervention has not been observed in the case of Ukraine.

Thirdly, Beijing's apparent inconsistency upholding principles of sovereignty while denouncing perceived 'imperialistic' actions by other powers, particularly given its silence on Russia's recent actions, has led other powers to view China's Ukraine plan as a tactical maneuver, or, at the very least, a perplexing departure from its previous foreign policy strategy.

Xi's 2023 visit to Russia

Xi's visit to Russia on March 20-22, 2023, was anticipated as an opportunity to further solidify China's diplomatic achievements in the Mideast. [Xi told Putin](#) that "on the Ukraine issue, voices for peace and rationality are building. Most countries stand for peace talks, and are against adding fuel to the fire."

Notwithstanding the gravity of the conflict, Xi's diplomatic efforts towards Putin lacked resoluteness. The visit ultimately fell short of expectations as Xi prioritized commercial agreements such as increasing Russian payments in renminbi and constructing the 'Power of Siberia 2' pipeline. Consequently, the pursuit of an armistice may have to wait as diplomatic efforts remain focused on economic interests rather than resolving the war.

Europe Reconsiders the Ukraine Peace Proposal

The perceived misstep in the plan for Ukraine may yet be rectified, especially following the historic Saudi-Iran accord, which has brought renewed attention and thrust the plan onto the EU's agenda. China's role in promoting peace has prompted Europe to reevaluate perceptions of its potential as a mediator beyond the Middle East. Xi's ability to bring long-time adversaries to the negotiating table has been lauded as an exceptional achievement. Although the EU does not have a unified approach towards China, leaders are closely monitoring Beijing's foreign policy advances with interest, as they represent an innovative approach to conflict resolution.

In the wake of this development, several European leaders will be visiting Zhongnanhai in the coming weeks, intending to voice their stance on the war in Ukraine. However, they will be primarily prioritizing their domestic interests, which are closely tied to their substantial trade relations with China - their largest partner - while attempting not to upset the U.S., which serves as security guarantor via NATO.

The stark reality is that the war has inflicted far more pronounced damage on Europe than the U.S., thwarting its economic growth, stymying developmental goals, and impeding progress on the geopolitical ambitions. As a result, Europe may be veering away from two key issues of the U.S. foreign policy agenda - one that seeks to contain China through strategies like 'decoupling,' and the other which considers that the war in Ukraine can only be resolved through a resounding triumph, leaving scant leeway for diplomatic intervention.

The current state of affairs could also be a wake-up call for the U.S. President to acknowledge the diplomatic success of his Chinese counterpart, and potentially reorient his foreign policy focus to other regions. By doing so, he may help alleviate tensions in the Middle East, where the U.S. had been grappling with a loss of credibility, allowing other actors to step up and pursue peace negotiations. We are currently observing the emergence of this new critical juncture in power dynamics.

China's Foreign Policy: Will the Realist Perspective Stand?

China's shift towards cooperation and mutual development, marked by a balanced distribution of power, could serve as a catalyst for reconciliation and elevate its role as an arbitrator. This approach would mitigate the likelihood of economic upheaval and nuclear escalation, provided that said policies are not primarily opposed towards the U.S., as has frequently been observed before. The unexpected transition, despite raising concerns and inviting criticism, also highlights Xi's pragmatism, marking a significant departure from his previous hardline approach at the 20th CCP National Congress held last October.

In the coming weeks, China's commitment to promoting peace will be put to the test, particularly in terms of the willingness to take a more active role in Ukraine. Given the absence of a viable peace plan from the U.S., the EU and other powers, China's proposal stands today as the only chance to secure a ceasefire.

China could use its strategic advantages to exert influence and assert agency, including its favorable relationship with Putin (despite facing criticism) and the Saudi-Iran hesitance to break the deal provoking China's displeasure, and potentially jeopardizing their trade relationship. This approach could be equally effective in resolving the conflicts between Russia and Ukraine, given their reliance on China's trade. Ultimately, China will need to persuade Russia to comply with international law and restore the *statu quo ante bellum*.

The ultimate proof of China's commitment to peace lies in the sensitive issues of Taiwan 'reunification' and pursuing hegemony in the South China Sea. These actions will address whether Beijing's pivot towards a peaceful foreign policy represents a fundamental shift or merely a tactical maneuver. Furthermore, this will impact perceptions regarding which power, Beijing or Washington, will emerge as architect of the global order, and whether future international relations will be based on economic interdependence rather than military might.

Global powers should focus on achieving tangible, resilient outcomes that transcend political or historical predilections in their endeavors to establish a substantial contribution to international relations. Incidentally, a successful opening of de-escalation talks by the 'Dragon of Peace' and the eventual achievement of an armistice in Ukraine would constitute a monumental feat, likely to be remembered and celebrated on a global scale for years to come.

[Saudi Arabia](#) | [China-Iran Relations](#) | [Ukraine Crisis](#) | [China-Middle East Relations](#) | [U.S.-Middle East Relations](#) | [China-U.S.-Europe Relations](#) | [China-Russia Relations](#) | [NATO](#) | [Regional Security](#)