

Iran and the Perceived US Pivot Away from the Middle East

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There is a growing perception in the Middle East that the United States' role in the region is undergoing a significant shift. In the early 2000s, this role was primarily shaped by the post-September 11 environment, as the Bush administration pursued its global war on terror, invading Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. In his first post-9/11 State of the Union address, former President George W. Bush named Iran as a principal threat to international peace and security, one of three countries constituting an "axis of evil."² Even though the Bush administration called for the promotion of democracy throughout the Middle East as a strategy to win the war on terror, Iranian leaders believed that their country could be the next target for a US invasion.³ The scale of the US presence, coupled with the

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2 George W. Bush, "State of the Union Address," The White House, January 29, 2002. <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>.

Bush administration's rhetoric, led Iran to believe that the US would play and maintain a dominant role in the region. Tehran's perceptions regarding the threat the United States poses have significantly changed over the past decade due to a variety of factors and geopolitical developments.

The introduction of the "pivot to Asia" under the Obama administration in 2011, which sought deeper relations with Asian and Pacific partners (increasingly viewed as the world's "political and economic center of gravity"), along with former President Donald Trump's decision to reduce the number of US troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, current President Joe Biden's withdrawal from Afghanistan, and US efforts to reduce support for the war in Yemen are but a few factors that have contributed to the perception that the United States is and has been pivoting away from the region.⁴ US-Iran relations and the occasional conflict in security priorities between the United States and its regional partners regarding Iran, Yemen, and Syria have reinforced emerging perceptions among both regional and global actors of America's waning presence and influence in the Middle East.⁵

Regardless of whether the US pivot is a reality or a myth, these growing perceptions are driving policy decisions in the region, which could create

3 "Fact Sheet: President Bush Calls for a 'Forward Strategy of Freedom' to Promote Democracy in the Middle East," The White House, November 6, 2003, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/11/20031106-11.html>.; Suzanne Maloney, "U.S. Policy Toward Iran: Missed Opportunities and Paths Forward," *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 32, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 25–44, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/summer_iran_maloney.pdf.

4 The "pivot to Asia" or "rebalancing" strategy has continued through President Trump and President Biden Administrations, as indicated in national security documents. There is an argument that while this concept was officially introduced or labeled during the Obama administration, "the United States pursued a strategy of reorientation toward Asia from the mid-2000s onward," in: Nina Silove, "The Pivot before the Pivot: U.S. Strategy to Preserve the Power Balance in Asia," *Quarterly Journal: International Security* 40, no. 4. (Spring 2016): 45–88. See also: "Fact Sheet: Advancing the Rebalance to Asia and the Pacific," The White House, November 16, 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/11/16/fact-sheet-advancing-rebalance-asia-and-pacific>. On US forces and commitments, see: Jim Garamone, "U.S. Will Draw Down Forces in Afghanistan, Iraq, Acting Secretary Says," *U.S. Department of Defense News*, November 17, 2020, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2418416/us-will-draw-down-forces-in-afghanistan-iraq-acting-secretary-says/>. And see: "Around the Halls: Brookings Experts on Biden's Performance in the Middle East," Brookings Institution, February 3, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2023/02/03/around-the-halls-brookings-experts-on-bidens-performance-in-the-middle-east/>.

a new reality in the long run. One of the key issues impacting the security strategy for Middle Eastern countries has been tensions surrounding Iran's nuclear program. In the lead-up to the implementation of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), US allies and partners in the region expressed concerns that the JCPOA would only embolden the Iranian regime since the deal failed to address their principal security concerns, namely the Islamic Republic's ballistic missile program and its network of non-state actors.⁶ Since the US withdrawal from the agreement in 2018 and former President Trump's subsequent "maximum pressure" approach, US-Iran relations have been increasingly strained, resulting in a cycle of escalatory exchanges.⁷ Iran views US partners in the region as an extension of American interests, and has thus targeted regional rivals as a means of imposing costs on America. Attacks on Saudi Arabian oil facilities, strikes on American military bases in Iraq, and confrontations and attacks in the Strait of Hormuz have all signaled the cost of US-Iran escalation for Gulf Arab states.⁸

Throughout the escalating tensions, there were still efforts to revive the JCPOA, though none meaningfully materialized. After an initial stalemate, negotiations to revive the agreement began in Spring 2021. Returning to the deal, however, proved to be more complicated. The main points of contention included guarantees on US compliance, the limitations of effective sanctions relief, and Iran's nuclear advancements, which rendered the original terms of the deal less effective due to the stockpile

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- 5 Max Boot, "As a Post-American Middle East Dawns, Iran and China Rush to Fill the Void," *Washington Post*, May 8, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/05/08/united-states-influence-middle-east-iran-china/>; Gerald M. Feierstein et al., "US-Gulf Relations at the Crossroads: Time for a Recalibration," Middle East Institute, April 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2022-04/US-Gulf%20Relations%20at%20a%20Crossroads%20-%20Time%20for%20a%20Recalibration.pdf>.
 - 6 "The Middle East After the Iran Nuclear Deal," Council on Foreign Relations, September 3, 2015, <https://www.cfr.org/expert-roundup/middle-east-after-iran-nuclear-deal>.
 - 7 "Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump is Ending United States Participation in an Unacceptable Iran Deal," The White House, May 8, 2018, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-ending-united-states-participation-unacceptable-iran-deal/>; "Confrontation with Iran," Council on Foreign Relations, January 6, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/confrontation-between-united-states-and-iran>.
 - 8 Mahsa Rouhi, "Whatever Iran's Role in the Saudi Attack, the Regional Status Quo Is Unsustainable," *The Guardian*, September 18, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/sep/18/iran-saudi-attack-nuclear-deal-us>.

Iran had acquired, its higher levels of enrichment, and the irreversible nature of research and development knowledge.⁹ More recently, both Iran's brutal crackdown on protests in the wake of Kurdish Iranian woman Mahsa Amini's death at the hands of the country's "morality police" and its support for Russia's war in Ukraine effectively dealt the final blows to the chance of reviving the nuclear deal.

The structural challenges, coupled with the political challenges, have left few alternatives to contain Iran's nuclear program in a sustainable manner and little possibility of rapprochement between the United States and Iran, at least in the short run. With no comprehensive agreement on Iran's nuclear program, there exist both a high level of uncertainty and elevated threat perceptions for countries in the region, which fear that the likely outcome of this situation is either a nuclear-armed Iran or a regional conflict between the Islamic Republic and the United States and Israel, with major consequences and costs for regional states, particularly those of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).¹⁰

This has led to US partners and allies diversifying and revising their security strategies and partnerships in the region and globally, particularly regarding Iran, Russia, and China, thereby positioning themselves to be able to adjust to this unpredictable geopolitical context. Intensifying strategic competition between great powers has been viewed by revisionists such as Iran as an opportunity to capitalize on waning US influence and to challenge the US-led liberal international order. Ultimately, perceptions about a US pivot will have major implications for future Middle East security, and could reshape alliances, partnerships, and eventually the geopolitical landscape itself.

Shifting Strategic Partnerships

After former President Trump withdrew the US from the JCPOA, the remaining parties to the deal—Europe, Russia, China, and Iran—began efforts to salvage it, seeking pathways to circumvent US sanctions and provide Iran the economic relief that was to be exchanged for its continued

9 Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj and Mahsa Rouhi, "The Iran Nuclear Deal and Sanctions Relief: Implications for US Policy." *Survival* 63, no. 4 (2021): 183–98, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2021.1956192>.

10 "Significance of the Iran-Saudi Arabia Agreement Brokered by China," Belfer Center, March 14, 2023, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/significance-iran-saudi-arabia-agreement-brokered-china>.

compliance. However, as these efforts failed to bring any substantial benefits, Tehran began gradually reducing its commitment to the deal, choosing reversible advances to keep its options open.¹¹ An opening to restore the deal seemed to come with the 2020 US presidential election, as Biden signaled his commitment to return to the agreement.¹² After Biden's election, negotiations to restore the deal began in Vienna. However, any potential progress was cut short by an initial stalling of talks, and more importantly, by the election of hardliner Ebrahim Raisi to the Iranian presidency in summer 2021.

Under the Raisi administration, negotiations to revive the nuclear deal have stalled. From Tehran's perspective, there is a great deal of skepticism on whether there are enough gains to justify reengaging with the United States, especially in the context of the nuclear deal. This skepticism stems from a variety of factors, including the asymmetry between imposing sanctions and providing sanctions relief, where the process is not as clear-cut and implementation is not as effective.¹³ Second, part of the limitations in sanctions relief in the case of the JCPOA came from uncertainty over the US position. Just one year after the JCPOA was signed, Donald Trump, who had openly criticized the deal as a presidential candidate, was elected to office, and he signaled early on that the United States would ultimately seek to change the terms of the agreement or withdraw from it altogether. In negotiations to revive the JCPOA, Tehran sought guarantees that a future administration would not simply withdraw again, something that would be impossible for Washington to deliver.¹⁴ Finally, Iranian hardliners in general do not believe in any sustainable rapprochement with the West due to a strong belief that such an entente would be used to weaken the Islamic Republic in preparation for a forced regime change.

Absent an agreement, Iran has continued to ramp up its nuclear program as a means of building leverage and of enhancing its capabilities should it decide to weaponize. Recent reports from the International Atomic Energy

11 Mahsa Rouhi, "Iranians Will Tolerate Hardship but Not Capitulation," *Foreign Policy*, May 13, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/05/13/iranians-will-tolerate-hardship-but-not-capitulation-rouhani-trump-bolton-sanctions-eu-instext/>.

12 Joby Warrick and Anne Gearan, "Biden Has Vowed to Quickly Restore the Iran Nuclear Deal, but That May Be Easier Said than Done," *Washington Post*, December 9, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/12/09/biden-foreign-policy-iran/>.

13 Batmanghelidj and Rouhi, "The Iran Nuclear Deal."

14 Suzanne Maloney, "After the Iran Deal: A Plan B to Contain the Islamic Republic," *Foreign Affairs*, February 28, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/iran-nuclear-deal-plan-b-contain-islamic-republic>.

Agency indicate alarming results of uranium having been enriched to nearly 84 percent purity, the highest level in the history of Iran's nuclear program, and one that is approaching the 90 percent threshold for weapons-grade uranium.¹⁵ While it is unclear whether Iran will decide to weaponize its enriched uranium, there are dangerous escalatory measures at play, heightening threat perceptions and setting the stage for miscalculations.¹⁶

The nuclear issue has grown more complicated by recent developments, specifically Iran's brutal repression of protests in the wake of Mahsa Amini's death in September 2022, its support for Russia in its war in Ukraine, and its own emerging relationship with China. For the United States and Europe, however, Iran's repression of protests and its support for Russia's war present a challenge to further engagement, while the burgeoning Iran-China relationship provides Tehran with an alternative economic and strategic partner.¹⁷

Iran's crackdown on protests in the wake of Amini's death in the custody of the country's morality police put the longevity of the regime in question. The Iranian political elite considered these uprisings to be the product of a western scheme to trigger regime change, and characterized them as the most serious threat to the regime since the 1979 Revolution.¹⁸ And while it was not possible to predict the outcome and timeline of these protests, they could have represented a new framework for political change.¹⁹ There were also domestic political risks for the United States and Europe if they had offered any concessions to the Iranian regime, stemming from fears of

15 Stephanie Liechtenstein, "International Atomic Energy Agency Reports Seen by AP Say Iran Resolves 2 Inquiries by Inspectors," *Associated Press*, May 31, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/iran-nuclear-program-iaea-uranium-enrichment-dded37dd0509ff0f469478b5db771027>.

16 Mahsa Rouhi et al., "Nuclear Proliferation in the Middle East Beyond Iran," panel discussion, Stimson Center, March 14, 2023, <https://www.stimson.org/event/nuclear-proliferation-in-the-middle-east-beyond-iran/>.

17 Barak Ravid, "U.S. 'Not Going to Waste Time' on Iran Deal Right Now, Official Says," *Axios*, October 31, 2022, <https://www.axios.com/2022/10/31/iran-nuclear-deal-talks-biden>.

18 Mohammad Ali Kadivar, "Are Iran's Hijab Protests Different from Past Protest Waves?," *Washington Post*, September 23, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/09/23/amini-hijab-morality-police-iran/>; David Gritten, "Iran Protests: Ex-president Khatami Says Rulers Must Heed Protesters' Demands," *BBC News*, December 6, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-63871863>; "President Raisi Says Iran Thwarted U.S. Destabilisation," *Reuters*, November 5, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/president-raisi-says-iran-thwarted-us-destabilisation-2022-11-05/>.

empowering it and, in turn, suppressing or delegitimizing the protests.²⁰ In previous political climates, the gravity of nuclear nonproliferation surpassed other concerns, but today there is less latitude for unproductive conversations at the expense of human rights violations.

In a House Armed Services Committee hearing, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl said that the JCPOA was “on ice” due to changes in Iran’s behavior, particularly noting the issue of the war in Ukraine.²¹ Since Russia’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Tehran and Moscow have cultivated deeper ties, forging a strategic alliance with cooperation in the political, economic, and military spheres. Though Russia is not Iran’s largest trading partner, bilateral trade between Moscow and Tehran increased by 20 percent in 2022, and both sides have signaled an interest in further economic cooperation.²² In the war effort, Tehran has provided Russia with hundreds of drones, and Russia is reportedly seeking more.²³ Tehran’s decision to support the war in Ukraine both rhetorically and with provisions is grounded primarily in its desire to challenge US hegemony. The tangible benefits of limited economic relief and access to Russian weapons and technology are important as well, but are secondary.

Iran’s strategic relationship with China, which is fostered by a common skepticism of US hegemony, has been a priority for Tehran since the introduction of its “look East” policy in 2005.²⁴ Economic ties between Tehran and Beijing are extensive, though China’s significant role in the world economy and its US trade relationship limit its willingness to invest

19 Mahsa Rouhi, “Woman, Life, Freedom in Iran,” *Survival Online*, November 29, 2022, <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/survival-blog/2022/11/woman-life-freedom-in-iran>.

20 Nahal Toosi, “‘Everyone Thinks We Have Magic Powers’: Biden Seeks a Balance on Iran,” *Politico*, October 25, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/10/25/biden-iran-regime-change-protests-nuclear-weapons-00063312>.

21 Jennifer Hansler, “Top US Defense Official Says Iran Could Produce ‘One Bomb’s Worth of Fissile Material’ in ‘About 12 Days,’” *CNN*, February 28, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/02/28/politics/kahl-iran-nuclear-deal/index.html>.

22 Alex Vatanka, “Russia and Iran Have High Hopes for Each Other,” *Foreign Policy*, May 2, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/05/02/russia-iran-grain-trade-china-investment-bri/>.

23 Aamer Madhani et al., “Russia Is Seeking More Attack Drones from Iran after Depleting Stockpile, White House Says,” *PBS News Hour*, May 15, 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/russia-is-seeking-more-attack-drones-from-iran-after-depleting-stockpile-white-house-says>.

24 Mahsa Rouhi and Clement Therme, “Could Iran’s Eastern Ambitions Pave the Way for Future Prosperity?,” International Institute for Strategic Studies, March 28, 2019, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2019/03/iran-look-east>.

in Iran.²⁵ Leaders in Iran have also pursued membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which they view as a means of boosting legitimacy, as it is both an “anti-western” organization and an opportunity to challenge US hegemony.²⁶ After 15 years of observer status, Iran is expected to become a full member of the SCO in 2023, after having signed its memorandum of obligations in September 2022.²⁷

Because of the potential role that deepening strategic partnerships among Russia, China, and Iran could play in challenging US hegemony, Iran will remain vested in its partnerships with Moscow and Beijing. But this may present some significant challenges in dealing with the nuclear issue. Much of the success of the JCPOA was due to unity among the P5+1 group of nations on the issue of nuclear nonproliferation. However, Iranian leaders now believe that Moscow and Beijing have greater tolerance of a nuclear-armed Iran given Russia’s isolation and China’s perception of shifting power structures, a fact that will shape Tehran’s cost-benefit calculations as it moves forward. Military cooperation between Russia and Iran, including access to Russian technology and weapons, also undermines security in an already fraught situation.

Navigating the Post-JCPOA Environment and Emerging Scenarios

The window for a diplomatic resolution to the nuclear issue has narrowed. In an October 2022 statement, US Special Envoy for Iran Robert Malley declared that the US would not “waste our time” on the stalled talks with an Iran that was unwilling to meaningfully participate, and cited the protests and the Ukraine war as the primary focus of the administration, comments that were later echoed by a White House National Security Council spokesperson.²⁸ With a now defunct JCPOA, the region and the

25 Vatanka, “Russia and Iran Have High Hopes.”

26 Nicole Grajewski, “Iranian Membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Motivations and Implications,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 15, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iranian-membership-shanghai-cooperation-organization-motivations-and-implications>.

27 Parisa Hafezi, “Iran to Join Asian Security Body Led by Russia, China,” *Reuters*, September 15, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-signs-memorandum-joining-shanghai-cooperation-organisation-tass-2022-09-15/>.

28 Barak Ravid, “U.S. ‘Not Going to Waste Time’ on Iran Deal Right Now.”; Barak Ravid and Hans Nichols, “Biden in Newly Surfaced Video: Iran Nuclear Deal Is ‘Dead,’” *Axios*, December 20, 2022, <https://www.axios.com/2022/12/20/biden-iran-nuclear-deal-dead-video>.

world are faced with navigating an environment that provides little clarity on how to contain Iran's nuclear program.

Some officials in Iran dangerously underestimate the possibility of US military action given that the US has no desire to engage in another war in the Middle East. While there are elements of truth to this assessment, options to curb Iran's nuclear program are increasingly limited, giving more credence to military options. Moreover, from Tehran's perspective, an attack would further underscore its need to pursue a nuclear weapon as the only solution for long-term security.²⁹ Overconfident in its assumptions of Russian and Chinese support and in the United States' lack of willingness to go to war, Iran is likely to continue advancing its nuclear program and taking more risks. As negotiations to restore the deal have failed to materialize, Iran has continued to ramp up its nuclear program as a means of building leverage and has also threatened to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty if snapback sanctions are triggered.³⁰

One of the core underlying issues in this post-JCPOA environment is misperceptions regarding "red lines." US officials have declared that America will not allow Iran to obtain a nuclear weapon.³¹ The threshold of this red line, however, is unclear. There is no universal definition for the threshold of weaponization; nor is there consensus on how long that process takes, which indicates that determining when Iran has "weaponized" will not be easily predictable for planning.

The Future of the Region: Strategies for Engagement

Despite the serious risk of conflict and strategic competition in the region, there are also important opportunities to manage the possibility of escalation. The US has sought to reassure partners of its commitment to the region, but there is also a need for a redefinition of the partnership, commitment, and expectations between the GCC states and the United States. Some of these relationships have been under strain due to diverging

29 Julien Barnes-Dacey and Ellie Geranmayeh, "The West Must Do More to Prevent Conflict with Iran," *Foreign Policy*, March 3, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/03/biden-eu-iran-nuclear-prevent-war/>.

30 Henry Rome and Louis Dugit-Gros, "Snapback Sanctions on Iran: More Bark than Bite?," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 25, 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/snapback-sanctions-iran-more-bark-bite>.

31 Jim Garamone, "Milley Tells House Panel Joint Force is at 'Inflection Point,'" *U.S. Department of Defense News*, March 23, 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3339444/milley-tells-house-panel-joint-force-is-at-inflection-point/>.

strategic interests.³² The wars in Yemen and Syria, the attack on Saudi oil facilities, and a long list of other issues over the past decade or so indicate that there is a growing view among GCC states that the US must reassess the balance between its commitments and its expectations. Saudi Arabia and other GCC states believe that the US will not compromise its own interests for the sake of those of its partners in the region, even while it expects its partners to put America's concerns above their own when asked.

Changing perceptions in a highly uncertain security environment produce a significant impact on policies, partnerships, and alliances in the region. This unpredictable environment is ripe for miscalculations and misperceptions that could potentially increase the risk of conflict. US-Iran relations are being closely watched by actors in the region because escalating tensions over the nuclear program could lead to highly consequential scenarios of change in the region, such as living with a nuclear-armed Iran and accompanying proliferation risks or widespread military conflict between the US and Israel, and Iran.³³

The confluence of the pivot toward Asia and differences in security and economic priorities have increased pressure on Saudi Arabia and other GCC states to move toward strategic diversification. These principles and pressures have resulted in opportunities for a rise in regionalism and parallel great-power relationships that could more substantially address long-term security concerns. Regional actors have sought to hedge their bets and expand partnerships with Iran, Russia, and China. For GCC states, China is a particularly important partner on the economic front, but there is also an attempt to maintain ties with Russia. The GCC states believe that more diverse strategic partnerships, especially with Russia and China, will provide a means of mitigating the security risks of the current situation.

The so-called Abraham Accords of 2020 and the recent Saudi-Iran détente represent regional breakthroughs. The US was the primary broker of the accords, and this normalization of relations was particularly important because of these countries' shared threat perceptions regarding Iran.³⁴

32 "Fact Sheet: The United States Strengthens Cooperation with Middle East Partners to Address 21st Century Challenges," The White House, July 16, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/07/16/fact-sheet-the-united-states-strengthens-cooperation-with-middle-east-partners-to-address-21st-century-challenges/>.

33 Rouhi et al., "Nuclear Proliferation."

34 Gerald M. Feierstein and Yoel Guzansky, "Two Years On, What Is the State of the Abraham Accords?," Middle East Institute, September 14, 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/two-years-what-state-abraham-accords>.

In a January 2023 meeting in Israel, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu discussed the potential expansion of the Abraham Accords to include the normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel.³⁵ While such an effort faces serious obstacles, the Biden administration is negotiating to identify possible opportunities, which it believes would support allies in countering Iran's influence and behavior in the region.³⁶

Similarly, Iran also has interests in regional rapprochement with a changing world afoot. The absence of sanctions relief and the growing risk of conflict with the United States and Israel give Iran greater incentive to rely on regional bilateral and multilateral efforts.³⁷ A deal with Saudi Arabia provides limited economic relief and reduces both brewing regional tensions and the risk of conflict as a result. Iran has also engaged with the UAE and Iraq for similar reasons.³⁸ Since Iran benefits from these regional partnerships, it is less likely to jeopardize the economic gains it reaps, particularly in the face of US sanctions.³⁹

This rise in regionalism provides another means of de-escalating tensions and lowering the temperature. The recent Saudi-Iran rapprochement brokered by China indicates that both Tehran and Riyadh have a vested interest in alleviating escalatory pressures with the US and its regional allies. The attacks on Saudi oil facilities demonstrated Iran's ability to inflict significant damage despite limited conventional military capabilities. And the risk of conflict and the need for economic relief have motivated Tehran to build relations with its rivals in the region. In the long run, these developments could facilitate efforts to address security concerns and provide a foundation for future engagement.

35 Rina Bassist, "Iran, Expanding Abraham Accords Top Netanyahu's Meeting with Jake Sullivan," *Al-Monitor*, January 19, 2023, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/01/iran-expanding-abraham-accords-top-netanyahus-meeting-jake-sullivan>.

36 Michael Crowley et al., "Saudi Arabia Offers Its Price to Normalize Relations with Israel," *New York Times*, March 9, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/09/us/politics/saudi-arabia-israel-united-states.html>.

37 Mahsa Rouhi, "China's Saudi-Iran Deal Clouded by Uncertainty on Protests, Nuclear Talks," *Al-Monitor*, April 15, 2023, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/04/chinas-saudi-iran-deal-clouded-uncertainty-protests-nuclear-talks>.

38 "Inside Story: After Deal with Saudi Arabia, Top Iranian Security Official 'Due in UAE,'" *Amwaj Media*, March 15, 2023, <https://amwaj.media/article/inside-story-after-deal-with-saudi-arabia-top-iranian-security-official-due-in-ua>.

39 Rouhi et al., "Nuclear Proliferation."