

# Chas Freeman: Chinese Diplomacy Replaces U.S. Militarism in the Mideast

*March 31—Chas Freeman, a former United States Ambassador to Saudi Arabia and a former Chargé d’Affaires and Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, among many other high-level diplomatic posts, gave the following statement to EIR on March 19, 2023, on the historic Chinese negotiation of an accord between Saudi Arabia and Iran.*

Having exhausted all the alternatives—including covert action directed at regime change, sabotage, proxy warfare, support for U.S. policies of “maximum pressure” on Iran, and ostracism of both Iran and Qatar—Saudi Arabia turned to diplomacy with Iran. The United States could not help it in this effort as, unlike Beijing, Washington is committed to exclusive reliance on coercive approaches to international relations rather than dialogue and mutual accommodation, and has no relationship with Tehran. Riyadh began to explore rapprochement, détente, and ways to end the Saudi-Iranian proxy war in Yemen, with Tehran, in meetings under Iraqi and Omani auspices. These talks yielded some progress but not enough to close a deal.

Beijing had some years earlier put forward principles for conflict resolution and a cooperative security system in the Persian Gulf. It had also maintained a balanced relationship with both Riyadh and Tehran. This made China the only great power capable of mediating between them. Beijing had long treated the Middle East as an American sphere of influence in which it



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Chas Freeman

could play no active political role. But mounting U.S. efforts to oppose China’s economic and technological development, or a settlement of the ongoing Chinese civil war between Beijing and Taipei, caused Beijing progressively to set aside its deference to American primacy in the region, and eliminated its reluctance to assert its own influence there.

In the event, China showed that its newly established global reach and diplomatic capabilities were up to the formidable challenge of supporting a serious peace process in the Middle East. The contrast with decades of American failure to do so in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

is striking. This has raised the global prestige of Chinese diplomacy to the point that China seems willing to attempt peacemaking in the even more difficult context of the Ukraine war, which combines civil war among Ukrainians with war between Kiev and Moscow, a proxy war between the United States and the Russian Federation, and a contest for a non-confrontational European security architecture.

China has made it clear that it intends to remain engaged in support of concrete arrangements to implement the principles it helped Riyadh and Tehran to agree on. All this marks the effective end of American hegemony in the Middle East and the emergence of Chinese influence as a credible and constructive factor in the region. It would be in the interest of both the United States, Europe, and other external powers to assist China’s enablement of Saudi-Iranian negotiations to produce a sustainable peace in the Persian Gulf.