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**SEIZING THE RIPE MOMENT:  
CHINA'S MEDIATION IN THE 2023 SAUDI-IRAN  
RAPPROCHEMENT**

Master's Thesis

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I have written this master's thesis independently. All viewpoints of other authors, literary sources, and data from elsewhere used for writing this paper have been referenced.

## **Abstract**

This thesis examines why China's facilitation of the 2023 Saudi–Iran rapprochement achieved a breakthrough when Iraq's earlier mediation did not produce a final agreement. Drawing on Zartman's ripeness theory and the theory-testing process tracing method, the study analyzes Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) communiqués, leadership speeches, and policy reports covering the period from 2021 to March 2023. An eleven-indicator coding framework, designed prior to the source review, indicates that by late 2022 the two sides had reached a Mutually Hurting Stalemate (MHS) and a Mutually Perceived Way Out (MPWO) largely independently of China. China then intervened through three moves: providing a platform, an operational framework, and a co-signed guarantee. When the same framework is applied to 2021, Iran's MHS is coded as absent: the Amini protests, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) revival collapse, and the Baghdad Round 5 memorandum had not yet occurred. The difference in outcomes reflects primarily the state of the conflict rather than the capacity of the mediator, although mediator characteristics remain relevant as enabling conditions.

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# 1. Introduction

On March 10, 2023, Saudi Arabia and Iran announced in Beijing the restoration of diplomatic relations, which had been severed since January 2016. The mediator was China, a country without a previously comparable record as a Gulf security mediator (Zhang, 2024). Between April 2021 and April 2022, Iraq hosted five rounds of direct Saudi–Iran talks that produced a 10-point memorandum of understanding but did not deliver a final restoration of ties (Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, 2022). Roughly three months after China escalated to active engagement in December 2022, an agreement was signed in Beijing.

The dominant scholarly explanation focuses on China’s structural advantages. Zhang (2024) points to Beijing’s trade relations with both Riyadh and Tehran, while Sun and Zoubir (2018) characterize China’s Middle Eastern conflict engagement as selective, non-coercive, and grounded in the non-interference principle. These perspectives explain why China was accepted as a mediator, but not the timing of its emergence. Since China’s economic leverage was already comparable in 2021, the timing of this breakthrough requires further interpretation.

This gap stems from the division between disciplines: the study of Chinese foreign policy has primarily focused on capabilities and intentions, while research on the timing of mediation has developed independently within the framework of conflict resolution theory. This thesis attempts to contribute to bridging this gap.

The research question is: from the perspective of ripeness theory, how was the window of opportunity for mediation formed and seized in the 2023 Saudi–Iran case? To address this question, five hypotheses are tested. H1: by late 2022, MHS signals were present for both Saudi Arabia and Iran. H2: by late 2022, a provisional MPWO had been built through the Baghdad dialogue rounds. H3: The emergence of the ripeness conditions in H1 and H2 temporally preceded China’s escalation to active mediation in late 2022. H4: China’s three diplomatic moves functioned as catalysts converting latent ripeness into the March 2023 agreement. H5 (counterfactual): the absence of sufficient MHS and MPWO conditions in 2021 helps to explain why Iraq’s effort did not produce a final agreement. The investigation covers the period from January 2021 to March 2023. This timeframe is chosen because it includes the two analytically relevant phases: the Iraqi-mediated Baghdad rounds (April 2021 – April 2022), during which an agreement did not yet materialize, and the Chinese-facilitated phase (December 2022 – March 2023), during which it did. Restricting evidence to the period before March 10, 2023

also keeps the empirical analysis on the input side of the outcome and reduces the risk of post-hoc reasoning.

Zartman's (1985, 2000) ripeness theory suggests that conflicts become negotiable only when both parties perceive the status quo as intolerably costly (a Mutually Hurting Stalemate, or MHS) and see a credible negotiated exit (a Mutually Perceived Way Out, or MPWO). The core argument of this thesis is that both conditions were present by late 2022 but not yet in 2021, and this difference explains the different outcomes. China's role was not to create the ripeness but rather to act on it.

To test this argument, the study employs an eleven-indicator coding framework designed before any source documents were examined and applied only to pre-outcome evidence, attempting to address the tautology problem that Ramsbotham and Schiff (2018) identified as a persistent weakness in ripeness research. For late 2022, ten indicators code Present and one Inconclusive, compared to two Present in 2021, providing a principled explanation for Iraq's case.

The thesis attempts to make three contributions. First, it tests Zartman's claim that mediators tend to exploit rather than create ripe moments against a recent, well-documented case. Second, it offers a replicable operationalization of ripeness that can produce both positive and negative findings. Third, it suggests that mediator capabilities and conflict ripeness should be treated as sequential rather than competing explanations: capabilities determine whether a mediator can act, while ripeness influences whether the actions can succeed. The empirical evidence presented here is consistent with all five hypotheses, although the strength of that support varies and is qualified, especially for H3 and H4, by the limited public visibility of internal Chinese decision-making.

The remainder of this thesis is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on the Saudi–Iran rivalry, mediator capabilities, and ripeness theory. Section 3 develops the theoretical framework and derives the eleven indicators. Section 4 sets out the methodology. Section 5 presents the empirical analysis of the five hypotheses. Section 6 discusses the implications, and Section 7 concludes.

**Keywords:** Ripeness theory, China mediation, Saudi–Iran rapprochement, Timing of mediation, Process tracing.

**CERCS:** S170

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 The Saudi–Iran Rivalry and Prior Mediation**

The Saudi–Iran rivalry dates to the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which introduced a competing model of political Islam that challenged Saudi leadership claims in the Muslim world (Tian, 2015; Liu, 2023). The 2003 US invasion of Iraq shattered the Sunni-dominated buffer between the two powers, allowing Iran to extend its influence into Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen (Chen & Xiong, 2019). After 2011, both governments supported opposing factions across the region. In January 2016, they formally severed diplomatic ties following the execution of Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr and the subsequent attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran.

From April 2021 to April 2022, Iraq tried to bridge this divide through five rounds of talks at the intelligence-chief level, producing a 10-point memorandum of understanding by Round 5 (Iran Primer, 2023; Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, 2022). However, this dialogue did not result in a final restoration of diplomatic relations. Kamrava (2022) attributes the absence of a final agreement to a lack of political will, but this thesis argues that the problem was more specific: the conditions that would have made a final agreement viable had not yet been formed. Iraq’s mediation should not therefore be characterized simply as a failure. It built partial diplomatic infrastructure, including a working channel and the 10-point memorandum, on which the later Chinese-facilitated process could be assembled.

### **2.2 Mediator Capabilities versus Conflict Conditions**

Literature on the 2023 agreement splits along a familiar divide in mediation studies: does success depend primarily on what the mediator brings, or on when the mediator intervenes?

The first perspective emphasizes China’s characteristics. Zhang (2024) argues that Beijing’s trade relations with both sides gave it a unique credibility as a balanced mediator. Sun and Zoubir (2018), although writing prior to the 2023 case, describe China’s engagement in the Middle East as “quasi-mediation diplomacy,” characterized by selective participation and agenda-following rather than agenda-setting. The Global Security Initiative, first proposed by Xi Jinping at the Boao Forum in April 2022 and elaborated in a concept paper released by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in February 2023, provided a normative framework for this

engagement (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023a). These accounts explain China's acceptability as a host but not the timing.

The second perspective draws on conflict resolution theory, shifting the focus to the conflict itself. Touval and Zartman (1985) argued that even powerful mediators cannot impose settlements on parties not ready for them. Bercovitch (1997) found that conflict-stage variables predict mediation outcomes more reliably than mediator attributes. Greig and Diehl's (2012) quantitative research indicates that later interventions succeed at higher rates, because the parties have accumulated more costs and exhausted more alternatives.

These two literatures have developed in parallel but have rarely been integrated in the context of Chinese mediation. This thesis therefore attempts to contribute to bridging the gap by arguing that China's capabilities were necessary but became effective only once the conflict had crossed a ripeness threshold.

### **2.3 Ripeness Theory: Core Propositions and Critiques**

Zartman's (1985, 2000) ripeness theory rests on two propositions: conflicts become negotiable when the parties perceive a mutually hurting stalemate, and when they perceive a way out. Pruitt (2005) refined these as motivation (the sense that the status quo is unsustainable) and optimism (the belief that a negotiated exit is achievable), directing attention to leadership rhetoric and policy behavior as observable proxies.

The theory faces two criticisms. First, the tautology problem: if ripeness is identified only after an agreement is reached, the theory explains nothing (Ramsbotham & Schiff, 2018). This thesis addresses this issue by coding indicators with pre-outcome evidence and by applying the framework to a period when mediation did not produce an agreement at the end (2021). Second, the vagueness problem: Kleiboer (1994) argued that the "ripe moment" is too imprecise unless decomposed into specific measurable components. Mitchell (1995) raised similar concerns about the definition of "stalemate." The eleven-indicator framework in Section 3.2 is a direct response, translating each concept into specific signals with explicit coding thresholds. Additionally, ripeness theory has rarely been tested on Gulf interstate rivalries and almost never on Chinese mediation. This case extends the theory into areas that have not been fully explored.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

#### 3.1 Core Concepts

A Mutually Hurting Stalemate (MHS) exists when both parties perceive that they cannot win unilaterally and that the costs of continued conflict are unsustainable. This is a perceptual condition: what matters is whether decision-makers signal, through statements or policy changes, that the status quo has become untenable (Zartman, 2000).

A Mutually Perceived Way Out (MPWO) is the shared recognition that a negotiated exit is both possible and credible. Both sides must be able to envision settlement without perceiving capitulation.

Valid Spokespersons are leaders with domestic authority to commit credibly and follow through.

The causal logic connecting these concepts runs as follows: as costs accumulate, MHS takes shape; as dialogue produces shared understandings, MPWO emerges; and when both are present alongside credible leaders, a time-limited window opens. A mediator entering at this point can close the deal. The key analytical distinction is between what opens the window (ripeness) and what acts through it (the mediator).

#### 3.2 Operationalization

All coding rules were defined before any source documents were examined. Each indicator uses only evidence predating March 2023. The framework has eleven indicators across five concepts (Table 1). Each is coded Present (P), Absent (A), or Inconclusive (I), and classified by evidence type following Bennett and Checkel (2015): straw-in-the-wind, hoop test, smoking gun, or doubly decisive.

**Aggregation rule.** A concept is confirmed present if all three indicators code P, or if two code P and one codes I. The rationale is that an I coding reflects insufficient evidence, not a finding of absence, therefore, it should not override two strong positive signals. If two or more indicators code A, the concept is coded absent, ensuring that genuine negative findings carry weight.

**Table 1. Operationalization of Ripeness Indicators**

Code	Concept	P Threshold	Evidence Type
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MHS-SA-1	SA leadership rhetoric	Saudi leader links conflict cost to Vision 2030 or frames confrontation as unsustainable, pre-Dec 2022	Smoking gun
MHS-SA-2	SA policy adjustment	Yemen ceasefire AND $\geq 3$ Baghdad rounds sustained	Hoop test
MHS-SA-3	SA alliance disappointment	Credible source documents Saudi skepticism toward US security guarantee	Straw-in-wind
MHS-IR-1	IR leadership rhetoric	Raisi or Foreign Minister links Gulf normalization to domestic stability, pre-Dec 2022	Smoking gun
MHS-IR-2	IR domestic pressure	Nationwide protests ( $\geq 100$ cities), $\geq 2$ independent sources, Sep–Dec 2022	Hoop test
MHS-IR-3	IR economic data	World Bank CPI $\geq 35\%$ for 2022 AND JCPOA no longer functioning as relief pathway	Hoop test
MPWO-1	Dialogue continuity	$\geq 3$ direct Saudi–Iran talk rounds confirmed by both parties, 2021–2022	Hoop test
MPWO-2	Framework activation	Either party references 1998/2001 agreements as baseline in pre-March 2023 context	Smoking gun
MPWO-3	De-escalation gesture	Mutual tone moderation documented, 2021–2022	Straw-in-wind
VS-SA	Valid Spokesperson SA	M.B.S. documented as consolidated decision-maker	Hoop test
VS-IR	Valid Spokesperson IR	Raisi holds mandate with Supreme Leader endorsement	Hoop test

### 3.3 Hypotheses

The five hypotheses form a logical chain. H1 and H2 establish whether ripeness conditions existed. H3 tests whether China’s shift to active engagement was temporally consistent with those conditions. H4 traces the mechanism converting latent ripeness into an agreement. H5 provides the counterfactual.

**H1:** By late 2022, MHS signals were present for both Saudi Arabia and Iran.

**H2:** By late 2022, a provisional MPWO had been built through the Baghdad dialogue rounds.

**H3:** The emergence of the ripeness conditions in H1 and H2 temporally preceded China’s escalation to active mediation in late 2022.

**H4:** China's three diplomatic moves functioned as catalysts converting latent ripeness into the March 2023 agreement.

**H5 (Counterfactual):** The absence of sufficient MHS and MPWO conditions in 2021 explains why Iraq's effort did not produce a breakthrough.

## **4. Methodology**

### **4.1 Research Design**

This is a qualitative single-case study using theory-testing process tracing method (Bennett & Checkel, 2015). The goal is to determine whether the proposed causal chain (ripeness → mediator entry → catalytic moves → agreement) holds against the evidence (George & Bennett, 2005).

The case is analytically useful because it allows mediator-capability and conflict-ripeness explanations to be assessed sequentially rather than treated as mutually exclusive. The built-in comparison between the 2021 phase, in which Iraq played the central facilitating role with Omani support, and the late-2022/early-2023 phase, in which China became the central facilitator, provides additional analytical leverage. The two phases are treated as different stages of a single mediation process rather than as a clean Iraq-versus-China contest.

### **4.2 Data Sources**

The coding rules (Appendix A) were finalized before source collection. All 21 documents were assembled and logged before coding began (Appendix B). Sources include official documents (14 Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Saudi Press Agency, and Islamic Republic News Agency statements), leadership speeches (7 interviews and addresses), mediation process records (6 reports from Iran Primer/United States Institute of Peace, Al-Bayan Center, and Rasanah International Institute for Iranian Studies), and academic and policy literature (24 works). Arabic and Persian materials were cross-checked against English releases and verified through Reuters, AFP, and Al Jazeera English.

### **4.3 Limitations**

Internal government records are unavailable, therefore inferences about leadership perceptions rely on public signals, which most directly affects H3. A single-case design can

refine the theory but cannot support broad generalizations. Some MPWO-2 evidence comes from the March 2023 joint statement, which is also the outcome under investigation. To mitigate the tautology problem, the coding relies primarily on the Iraqi Foreign Minister's April 2022 confirmation of the 10-point memorandum and on Rasanah IIIS (2023) reporting. Additionally, the eleven-indicator framework itself: the indicators are not all of the same evidentiary type. Smoking-gun indicators such as MHS-SA-1 impose a relatively demanding observational threshold, whereas straw-in-wind indicators such as MPWO-3 and MHS-SA-3 rest on softer contextual signals. Treating all indicators as fully equivalent in the aggregation rule therefore risks overstating the precision of the framework. The reader should regard the eleven-indicator coding as a structured interpretation of the available evidence rather than as a deterministic measurement. A more weighted reading would treat MHS-SA-1, MHS-IR-3, and MPWO-2 as core indicators and MHS-SA-3, MPWO-3, and parts of MHS-IR-1 as supporting. Under either reading, the substantive conclusions in this thesis are unchanged, but the level of confidence varies across indicators.

A further conceptual qualification concerns the relationship between observed pressure and perceived stalemate. Several MHS indicators, in particular MHS-IR-2 (the Amini protests) and MHS-IR-3 (inflation and JCPOA collapse), capture domestic and economic pressure rather than direct evidence that the leadership perceived the Saudi rivalry itself as stalemated and unsustainable. The thesis treats accumulating pressure as making bilateral accommodation more attractive to decision-makers, since reducing external commitments helps to free resources for managing domestic crises. The move from documented pressure to inferred MHS is, however, an interpretive step rather than a direct observation of leadership perception, and readers should treat the MHS-IR coding as a structured inference about plausible motivation rather than as proof of internal calculation.

The evidentiary hierarchy across sources is also uneven. Official documents (Chinese MFA communiqués, leadership speeches, and the trilateral joint statement) carry the strongest weight for claims about state positions and formal commitments. Mediation-process narratives (Iran Primer, Al-Bayan Center, Rasanah IIIS) and analytic commentaries (Stimson Center, Soufan Center, Akbarzadeh, Calabrese) are used as supporting evidence, particularly for claims about diplomatic sequencing and intent where official records are not public. Where these secondary sources are the primary basis for a claim, especially in the discussion of China's timing in §5.5 and Move 2 in §5.6, the level of confidence is correspondingly lower, and the relevant claims are presented as plausible interpretations rather than established facts.

## 5. Empirical Analysis

### 5.1 MHS in Saudi Arabia (H1)

#### *MHS-SA-1: Leadership Rhetoric — P (Smoking Gun)*

Two public statements from Mohammed bin Salman (M.B.S.), roughly one year apart, together provide strong evidence that the Saudi leadership had come to view continued confrontation with Iran as incompatible with the kingdom's central goals.

In an April 2021 televised interview with the Saudi MBC channel on the fifth anniversary of Vision 2030, M.B.S. stated that Saudi Arabia aspires to have “a good and distinguished relationship with Iran” and that the kingdom does not want the situation with Iran to be difficult. On the contrary, it hopes that Iran will prosper and grow (Al Arabiya, 2021; Newsweek, 2021). Since 2016, Saudi official rhetoric toward Iran had been consistently hostile, framing Tehran as the major source of regional instability. The MBC interview was the first time one of Saudi Arabia's most powerful political figures publicly expressed a preference for normalization. Despite its cautious wording, this interview signified a marked shift in the official Saudi tone.

The second statement came in the April 2022 issue of *The Atlantic*, based on interviews conducted by Graeme Wood and Jeffrey Goldberg in March 2022, in which M.B.S. connected regional instability to the investment needs of Vision 2030 (Wood, 2022). This statement is more revealing because it directly links external conflict to Saudi Arabia's top domestic priorities. Vision 2030 relies on attracting hundreds of billions of dollars in foreign investment for projects such as NEOM, The Line, and the Red Sea tourism corridor. Sustained regional tension directly threatens this investment environment. By articulating this connection publicly, M.B.S. effectively demonstrated that the conflict with Iran had become a domestic economic liability, not just a foreign-policy issue. This is precisely the kind of cost-reframing that defines MHS in Zartman's (2000) framework.

Both statements independently satisfy the MHS-SA-1 P threshold. The Atlantic interview in particular meets the smoking-gun standard most fully: the content is specific (linking regional instability to Vision 2030 investment needs), the speaker authoritative, and the implication relatively unambiguous. The April 2021 MBC interview is better characterized as straw-in-the-wind in isolation, but the two statements taken together support the P coding for MHS-SA-1 with strong confidence.

### ***MHS-SA-2: Policy Adjustment — P (Hoop Test)***

Behavioral evidence aligns with the rhetorical record. On 1 April 2022, Saudi Arabia accepted and supported the UN-brokered two-month Yemen truce, which entered into force on 2 April 2022. Although the April 2022 arrangement was an UN-mediated truce accepted by the conflict parties, Saudi consent to and support of the truce represented the most significant de-escalation move since the start of the military intervention in 2015. The truce was extended twice and continued to hold in practice even after its formal expiration in October 2022. The coalition refrained from major offensive operations throughout the critical September–December 2022 period when the ripeness conditions were consolidating (Arab Center Washington DC, 2024).

Separately, Saudi Arabia sustained its participation through all five rounds of the Baghdad dialogue. The intelligence chief attended each session. The fifth round, held on April 21, 2022, was particularly significant: it occurred just three weeks after the April 1 Yemen ceasefire declaration, suggesting a coordinated de-escalation strategy rather than isolated gestures. When Iran temporarily paused the talks in March 2022 due to internal political scheduling, Saudi Arabia did not withdraw from the process, it waited and returned when the dialogue resumed.

This combination of a formal ceasefire and sustained high-level dialogue participation meets both sub-conditions of the coding rule, passing the hoop test: if either element were absent, the MHS-SA determination would be substantially weakened.

### ***MHS-SA-3: Alliance Disappointment — P (Straw-in-wind)***

The Biden administration’s 2021 decisions to suspend certain offensive arms transfers to Saudi Arabia and to declassify the intelligence assessment of the Khashoggi killing introduced a degree of uncertainty into the US–Saudi security partnership that had not existed under the previous administration (Soufan Center, 2022). For a country that had relied on US security guarantees as the cornerstone of its defense posture for decades, these signals were strategically significant. They did not undermine the US–Saudi alliance, but they did cast doubt on its unconditional character.

In his April 2021 MBC interview, M.B.S. described the US–Saudi relationship as remaining aligned with Washington on “about 90%” of issues while actively working to manage the remaining differences (Newsweek, 2021). Previous Saudi leaders had consistently avoided quantifying the relationship in wording that suggested any divide. While this is a softer

signal than the first two indicators, it aligns with the overall pattern of a leadership recalculating its strategic options.

As straw-in-wind evidence, this indicator supports MHS-SA determination without being required for it, the concept determination depends primarily on the stronger signals from MHS-SA-1 and MHS-SA-2.

**MHS-SA concept: P (3/3).** The strongest evidence dates to March–April 2022, roughly eight months before China’s December 2022 engagement. Temporal precedence is satisfied.

## 5.2 MHS in Iran (H1)

### *MHS-IR-1: Leadership Rhetoric — I (Inconclusive)*

On September 21, 2022, at the 77th session of the United Nations General Assembly, Iranian President Raisi declared that Iran sought “extensive relations with all our neighbors” and emphasized that “dialogue, not war, is the solution” to regional crises, adding that Iran was ready to help resolve regional issues through dialogue with its regional counterparts (PBS NewsHour, 2022; Anadolu Agency, 2022). Although Raisi did not name Saudi Arabia explicitly, the wording was widely read as a clear opening toward Gulf normalization. Two features made the statement significant. First, the timing was crucial: just five days earlier on September 16, Mahsa Amini died in custody, and protests were already erupting in multiple Iranian cities. Raisi’s choice to use the UNGA platform to call for regional dialogue at a moment when a domestic crisis was consuming the government’s attention reveals strategic prioritization. Second, the statement was consistent with the “Neighbors First” foreign policy that the Raisi administration had emphasized since his August 2021 inauguration (Cafiero, 2024).

The coding rule for MHS-IR-1 requires Raisi or the Foreign Minister to link Gulf normalization to domestic economic or political stability. Raisi calls for dialogue rather than war and signals willingness to engage regional counterparts, but he does not explicitly state that Gulf tensions threaten Iran’s domestic stability. This indicator therefore codes I. The contextual signals around the statement: an explicit call for regional dialogue, made on a major international platform five days after the death of Mahsa Amini and as nationwide protests were beginning, are consistent with a perception of MHS in Iran, but they are inferential and do not by themselves satisfy the smoking-gun standard the rule specifies. The MHS-IR concept nevertheless still codes P under the aggregation rule (2P + 1I, with MHS-IR-2 and MHS-IR-3

both coding P), therefore the substantive finding for H1 holds without reliance on this single indicator.

### ***MHS-IR-2: Domestic Pressure — P (Hoop Test)***

The protests following Amini’s death were the most extensive domestic challenge to the Islamic Republic since the 2009 Green Movement, spreading across all 31 Iranian provinces (ACLEDE, 2022; HRANA, 2022). By December 2022, Iran Human Rights (IHR) had documented at least 476 protest-related deaths, including dozens of children, while Human Rights Activists News Agency reported more than 14,000 detentions during the same period (Iran Human Rights, 2022; HRANA, 2022). Amnesty International (2022) documented severe unlawful repression and lethal force during the crackdown.

The coding rule requires documentation by at least two independent sources of nationwide protest activity, and three independent sources confirm it, passing the hoop test with margin. For a government already shouldering the costs of regional proxy engagements in Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon, the addition of a major domestic crisis substantially intensified the pressure to reduce external commitments.

### ***MHS-IR-3: Economic Data — P (Hoop Test)***

Iran’s economic condition in 2022 was severe by any standard. World Bank (2024) data record annual consumer price inflation at 43.5%, well above the 35% threshold specified in the pre-registered coding rule. This was not a short-term fluctuation but the continuation of a long-term trend: since 2019, affected by factors such as US sanctions, the COVID-19 pandemic, and government mismanagement, Iran’s inflation rate has consistently exceeded 30%.

The second sub-condition concerns the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Revival talks, which had been ongoing in Vienna since April 2021, effectively collapsed in August–September 2022. The immediate cause was Iran’s demand that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps be removed from the US terrorism designation, a condition that the US and the European negotiators declined (Reuters, 2022b; Iran Primer, 2023). This was not a temporary pause but an effective end to the process. With the principal near-term pathway to sanctions relief closed, the leadership needed an alternative route to economic stabilization. Regional normalization offered one such avenue. Improved relations with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states could facilitate trade, ease travel restrictions, attract investment, and reduce the diplomatic isolation that compounded the sanctions’ effect.

Both sub-conditions are met, and the hoop test is passed.

**MHS-IR concept: P** (2P + 1I, via the aggregation rule's 2P+1I fallback). The MHS conditions on the Saudi and Iranian sides arose from structurally different sources. Saudi Arabia's MHS was driven by war exhaustion in Yemen and growing uncertainty about US reliability. Iran's MHS was driven by economic crisis and domestic political upheaval, evidenced most strongly by MHS-IR-2 (the Amini protests) and MHS-IR-3 (43.5% inflation and the JCPOA collapse), with MHS-IR-1 providing only contextual support. These two sets of pressures developed independently of each other and converged in late 2022 through separate causal pathways. This independence strengthens the ripeness argument, as it means the MHS was not the product of one party's strategic maneuvering but a genuine convergence of bilateral costs.

### **5.3 The Mutually Perceived Way Out (H2)**

#### ***MPWO-1: Dialogue Continuity — P (Hoop Test)***

Five rounds of direct Saudi–Iran talks took place in Baghdad between April 2021 and April 2022 (Iran Primer, 2023; Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, 2022; The National News, 2023). Round 1 (April 9, 2021) was exploratory and held at the deputy level. By the third round, both sides had escalated to the intelligence-chief level, Khalid al-Humaidan for Saudi Arabia and Saeed Iravani for Iran, indicating that the talks had moved from informal contact to structured negotiations. Round 4 was held in September 2021, and Round 5 took place on April 21, 2022. The March 2023 joint statement later acknowledged these channels by expressing appreciation to “the Republic of Iraq and the Sultanate of Oman for hosting rounds of dialogue that took place between both sides during the years 2021–2022” (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023b).

The coding threshold requires at least three rounds confirmed by both parties, and five rounds exceed the threshold.

#### ***MPWO-2: Framework Activation — P (Smoking Gun)***

On April 25, 2022, four days after the conclusion of Baghdad Round 5 (April 21, 2022), Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein publicly confirmed that the talks had produced a 10-point memorandum of understanding and that the parties had also discussed continuation of the Yemen ceasefire (Iran Primer, 2023; Calabrese, 2024; Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, 2022). Rasanah IIIS (2023), drawing on regional diplomatic sources, further

documents that both parties had incorporated the 1998 Economic Cooperation Agreement and the 2001 Security Cooperation Agreement as templates in the Round 5 discussions and subsequently. These agreements had been dormant since 2016, but they provided a ready-made legal and diplomatic framework that neither party needed to construct from scratch. They covered economic cooperation, trade, investment, technology, science, culture, and security, giving the parties a comprehensive baseline for what a restored relationship might look like.

The March 2023 joint statement later activated both agreements by their Hijri dates (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023b). This is treated as corroboration, not primary evidence, to avoid tautology.

The pre-outcome evidence from Baghdad Round 5 and the Rasanah analysis is sufficient for P coding. This constitutes smoking-gun evidence: explicit reference to the 1998/2001 agreements as a negotiating baseline, documented before the outcome, in the context of bilateral talks.

### ***MPWO-3: De-escalation Gesture — P (Straw-in-wind)***

On May 26, 2022, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian publicly described relations with Saudi Arabia as having made “minimal but good progress” (Reuters, 2022a). On December 20, 2022, on the sidelines of the second Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership held in Amman, Jordan, Amir-Abdollahian held what he described as “friendly talks” with Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan, the highest-level direct contact between the two foreign ministers since the 2016 rupture (Daily Sabah, 2022; International Crisis Group, 2023). The Amman meeting is particularly noteworthy because it occurred at a time when Iran was accusing Saudi Arabia of supporting domestic protests and Saudi-funded media were covering the unrest extensively. Despite the heated rhetoric, both sides chose to maintain diplomatic channels, indicating their intention to separate the protests from the process of normalizing bilateral relations.

As straw-in-wind evidence, this indicator is supportive but not decisive, the MPWO determination rests primarily on the stronger signals from MPWO-1 and MPWO-2.

**MPWO concept: P (3/3).** The conditions were fragile, with no formal commitments made and hostile rhetoric coexisting with diplomatic engagement. However, the infrastructure for a deal was in place, what was missing was someone to assemble it into a concrete proposal, which was what China later provided.

## 5.4 Valid Spokespersons

On the Saudi side, M.B.S. was Crown Prince and, from September 2022, Prime Minister. He had previously served as Minister of Defense and remained Saudi Arabia's de facto central decision-maker.

On the Iranian side, Raisi's political profile was important. His close alignment with Supreme Leader Khamenei and his own conservative stance gave him negotiating room that reformist predecessors lacked. When reformist presidents such as Rouhani had pursued foreign-policy openings, hardline elements within the IRGC and the judiciary had sometimes undermined or constrained those initiatives. Raisi's own conservative standing shielded him from this kind of internal opposition.

## 5.5 China's Timing (H3)

Internal Chinese decision-making records are not publicly available, therefore, any account of when and why Beijing decided to escalate must rely on indirect signals. A gradual shift can be observed in Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson statements between July and November 2022. Earlier in the year, the standard formulation on Gulf affairs called for dialogue and consultation among regional parties. By October and November, this language had been supplemented by more evaluative expressions such as references to "positive signals" and opportunities for diplomatic engagement. This characterization is the author's reading of public press briefings rather than a documented internal decision, and it should be treated as a contextual indicator rather than as direct evidence. The observed shift occurred six to eight weeks before President Xi Jinping's visit to Riyadh from December 7 to 9, which is consistent with, although it does not on its own prove, a connection between the maturing ripeness conditions and Beijing's willingness to take a more visible role.

Moreover, during the "Middle East Week" event held in Wuxi in January 2022, Wang Yi met with the foreign ministers of six Gulf states and emphasized that China stood ready to assist regional actors in establishing a Gulf security framework (Stimson Center, 2024). This indicates that Beijing's interest in Gulf dynamics was sustained well before the ripeness conditions fully materialized.

It should be emphasized that the available evidence supports temporal consistency between ripeness and Chinese intervention, but not direct evidence of Chinese strategic diagnosis of ripeness. The MFA language shift is the author's reading of public press briefings

and cannot substitute for internal records. On the more specific temporal claim required by H3, the evidence is clearer. By the time of Xi's Riyadh visit on 7–9 December 2022, nine of the eleven indicators were already coded P on the basis of pre-7 December evidence, with MHS-IR-1 coding I and MPWO-3 not yet at its strongest signal. MPWO-3 reached that signal with the 20 December 2022 Amman meeting between Foreign Ministers Amir-Abdollahian and Prince Faisal bin Farhan, therefore, the late-2022 reading stabilizes at 10 P + 1 I by that date. Either way, ripeness conditions formed before, rather than because of, China's three catalytic actions, all of which occurred from December 2022 onward. On this temporal point, Hypothesis 3 is supported. The stronger claim that China recognized and acted on the ripe moment is plausible but cannot be directly demonstrated from the public record.

## **5.6 China's Three Catalytic Moves (H4)**

### ***Move 1: Platform Provision (December 7–9, 2022)***

President Xi Jinping's visit to Riyadh, attending the first China–Arab States Summit and the China–Gulf Cooperation Council Summit, played a tangible role. By publicly committing China to a constructive role in regional affairs alongside fourteen Arab leaders, Beijing demonstrated that its engagement was substantive and sustained rather than opportunistic (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). This mitigated the reputational cost of both Saudi Arabia and Iran agreeing to Chinese-hosted negotiations. Participating in such talks could be presented domestically and regionally as part of a broader multilateral engagement, rather than a bilateral concession to the other side.

The summit also allowed China to engage with both parties in the same setting. While there is no public evidence that Saudi and Iranian officials held direct side meetings in Riyadh, the multilateral format enabled indirect communication and signaling. The bilateral talks between Xi Jinping and Mohammed bin Salman on December 8, which discussed regional security issues (Stimson Center, 2024), provided China with an opportunity to assess Saudi Arabia's receptiveness to a more formal process.

### ***Move 2: Framework Activation (February 14–16, 2023)***

During Raisi's state visit to Beijing, available reporting indicates that Chinese officials proposed holding direct negotiations on the restoration of diplomatic relations, using the 1998 and 2001 agreements as the working framework (Akbarzadeh, 2023). On public record, this is

the move with the clearest causal connection to the March agreement, although attribution remains qualified for reasons discussed below.

The MPWO had been developing through the Baghdad process, but in a fragmented and implicit way. While the 10-point memorandum and the references to the 1998/2001 agreements existed, no party had publicly assembled them into a specific, operational proposal with a venue, a legal template, and a timeline. China appears to have consolidated or operationalized terms already developed through the Baghdad process, rather than inventing them from scratch. Its contribution is best described as synthesis and activation: transforming existing elements into sufficiently specific, negotiable content with a designated venue and a co-signing host.

Attribution should be qualified. Reports from Akbarzadeh (2023) credit the initiative to the Chinese side, but internal records that might reveal whether Saudi Arabia or Iran had privately proposed this formulation before China formalized it remain unavailable. The analysis treats the Chinese initiative as the most likely account given available evidence, while acknowledging the possibility that one or both parties played a larger role in shaping the proposal than public reporting suggests.

### ***Move 3: Guarantee Provision (March 6–10, 2023)***

The Beijing talks facilitated a meeting between Saudi National Security Adviser Musaed al-Aiban and Iranian Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Shamkhani, presided over by Wang Yi. During the four-day talks, the three delegations negotiated the terms of the tripartite joint statement, which was co-signed by all three parties on March 10 (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023b).

The co-signature is an analytically significant element. Iraq had hosted the Baghdad talks but had never formally underwritten the agreement, meaning that the facilitating host bore no formal responsibility if commitments were broken. By co-signing, China fundamentally changed this dynamic: it committed its own diplomatic reputation to implementation. For both Saudi Arabia and Iran, defection now meant not only breaking a commitment to the other party but also embarrassing a major trade partner that had staked its credibility on the process. This implementation stake addressed a persistent obstacle throughout the Baghdad rounds, the concern on each side that the other would not honor its promises.

**H4: supported with varying levels of confidence across the three moves.** Of the three moves, the strongest claim is that of Move 3 (guarantee provision through co-signature): China's formal co-signature of the trilateral statement on 10 March 2023 is a documented event

whose connection to the implementation stake of the agreement is direct. The claim attached to Move 2 (framework activation during the February 2023 Raisi visit) rests on more limited public reporting and is therefore advanced with medium confidence. The claim attached to Move 1 (the December 2022 Riyadh summit as a platform for Saudi–Iran rapprochement) is the most indirect: the summit clearly created favorable diplomatic context, but the specific link from that context to the Saudi–Iran rapprochement is more inferential than documented. Across all three, the moves addressed three plausible obstacles in sequence: reputational exposure (Move 1), operational ambiguity (Move 2), and implementation uncertainty (Move 3). This sequencing is consistent with recognized principles of effective mediation (Touval & Zartman, 1985), but the stronger version of H4, which would attribute decisive causal weight to all three moves equally, exceeds what the public evidence can demonstrate.

## 5.7 Counterfactual Test (H5)

When the same coding rules applied to the year 2021, the result is two P, four A, and five I (Table D1, Appendix D). The contrast with late 2022 (ten P and one I) is substantial. Each of the four A coding traces to a specific, independently verifiable development that occurred in 2022.

**MHS-SA-2 codes A.** The Yemen ceasefire was not declared until April 1, 2022. Through 2021, Saudi Arabia was still conducting offensive military operations. Without a ceasefire, the behavioral evidence for MHS was absent even if the rhetorical signals were emerging.

**MHS-IR-2 codes A.** The Amini protests began in September 2022. In 2021, Iran faced economic hardship and periodic localized unrest, but nothing comparable in scale or geographic spread to the nationwide mobilization that followed Amini’s death. The domestic pressure indicator requires protest activity in at least 100 cities documented by at least two independent sources, 2021 does not come close.

**MHS-IR-1 codes I (in both periods).** Raisi’s “Neighbors First” framing has been broadly stable since his August 2021 inauguration but does not, in either 2021 or 2022, contain the explicit linkage between Gulf normalization and Iranian domestic stability that the smoking-gun coding rule requires. This indicator therefore does not contribute to the contrast between the two periods. The shift between 2021 and 2022 in the MHS-IR concept comes from MHS-IR-2 and MHS-IR-3, which together move that concept from absent (2A + 1I) in 2021 to present (2P + 1I) in late 2022.

**MHS-IR-3 codes A.** JCPOA revival talks were actively under way in Vienna through 2021. Several rounds of indirect US–Iran negotiations took place, and there was genuine diplomatic momentum toward a restored nuclear deal. Under the coding rule, the indicator codes A if the nuclear deal is still functioning as an active sanctions-relief pathway. In 2021, it was.

**MPWO-2 codes A.** The explicit use of the 1998 and 2001 agreements as a negotiating template is documented only from Baghdad Round 5 in April 2022. In 2021, the Baghdad talks were still in their earlier stages, and the level of specificity required for MPWO-2 had not yet been reached.

With two A coding within MHS-IR (MHS-IR-2 and MHS-IR-3), that concept codes absent at the concept level for 2021, failing not only the three-of-three threshold but also the two-of-three fallback. MPWO likewise fails its threshold: although MPWO-1 codes P for 2021 (four rounds had been held by the end of the year), MPWO-2 codes A, therefore the concept cannot be coded present.

This profile helps to explain why Iraq’s mediation phase did not result in a final agreement. It was not primarily a capability failure, as Iraq possessed genuine regional connections and accumulated experience over five rounds of dialogue. Rather, the early phase engaged a conflict that had not yet crossed the ripeness threshold. The contrast that the analysis draws is therefore better described as one between an earlier phase of the same overall mediation process (Iraqi-led with Omani support, 2021 – mid-2022) and a later phase (Chinese-facilitated, late 2022 – March 2023), rather than as a clean Iraq-versus-China comparison. Iraq’s contribution and the later Chinese contribution are sequential rather than substitutable.

#### **Alternative explanations as enabling conditions.**

Three alternative explanations are commonly offered for the 2023 outcome. The US retrenchment account holds that declining American engagement created space for China. The domestic politics account credits Raisi’s conservative profile, which arguably gave him room to negotiate that reformist predecessors lacked. And the capability account emphasizes China’s economic ties with both states.

Each variable was already present in 2021 but did not by itself produce a final agreement, therefore, none can fully account for the timing of the breakthrough. However, this does not mean these factors are irrelevant. They are better treated as enabling or scope conditions that became causally effective once they combined with other developments.

US–Saudi tensions deepened after the early Biden administration’s decisions and the OPEC+ disputes of 2022. Raisi’s conservative profile arguably mattered more after the JCPOA collapse and the Amini protests, when the Iranian leadership needed an external stabilizer. And China’s capability became politically salient as a mediator after Xi’s December 2022 Riyadh visit and the broader diplomatic activism associated with the Global Security Initiative.

On this reading, ripeness explains the timing of the agreement, while the alternative factors help explain why China rather than Iraq, Oman, or another actor was positioned to close the deal.

## **6. Discussion**

### **6.1 Summary of Findings**

The research question asked how, from the perspective of ripeness theory, the window of opportunity for mediation was formed and seized in the 2023 Saudi–Iran case. The analysis suggests that the window was formed primarily by developments inside the conflict itself rather than by Chinese action. By late 2022, Saudi Arabia was managing exhaustion from the Yemen war, had accommodated the UN-brokered April 2022 truce, and was recalibrating its security relationship with the United States. Iran, for its part, faced 43.5% annual inflation, the effective collapse of the JCPOA revival process, and the largest domestic unrest since the 2009 Green Movement. Five rounds of dialogue mediated by Iraq with Omani support had assembled the partial framework on which a future agreement could be built, including a 10-point memorandum of understanding and explicit reference to the dormant 1998 and 2001 cooperation agreements. The window was then seized by China through three sequential moves: providing a high-profile platform via the December 2022 Riyadh visit, operationalizing the 1998 and 2001 agreements as the working framework during Raisi’s February 2023 Beijing visit, and co-signing the 10 March 2023 trilateral statement.

With respect to the five hypotheses, the evidence supports H1 and H2 with relatively high confidence. The main caveat for H1 concerns MHS-IR-1, which codes Inconclusive because Raisi’s September 2022 UNGA address calls for regional dialogue but does not explicitly link Gulf normalization to Iranian domestic stability. The MHS-IR concept nonetheless still codes Present via the 2P+1I aggregation rule, with MHS-IR-2 (the Amini protests) and MHS-IR-3 (inflation and the JCPOA collapse) carrying the principal weight. H3 is supported on its more modest temporal claim, namely that ripeness conditions formed before, rather than because of,

China's catalytic moves. The stronger claim that China consciously diagnosed the ripe moment is plausible but cannot be directly demonstrated from the public record. H4 is supported with varying confidence across the three moves: highest for Move 3 (co-signature), medium for Move 2 (framework activation), and lowest for Move 1 (the Riyadh summit as a platform for Saudi–Iran rapprochement specifically). H5 is supported in the qualified sense that the early phase of the mediation process operated under unripe conditions, which contributes to explaining why no final agreement emerged in 2021–2022, while preserving the broader role of Iraq and Oman in constructing the channel that the later phase activated. Of the eleven indicators, ten code Present and one Inconclusive for late 2022, compared with only four Present for 2021.

## **6.2 Implications for Ripeness Theory**

Three theoretical implications follow from this evidence. First, the case supports Zartman's (1985, 2000) core argument that mediators exploit ripe moments rather than create them. The Yemen ceasefire, the Amini protests, and the JCPOA collapse were not products of Chinese action, China's engagement followed these conditions. Iraq, despite possessing genuine regional connections and accumulating experience over five rounds of dialogue, engaged the conflict before it had crossed the ripeness threshold. The capability/timing distinction therefore appears empirically substantive rather than merely conceptual.

Second, the operationalization strategy responds to the tautology and vagueness critiques of ripeness theory (Ramsbotham & Schiff, 2018; Kleiboer, 1994). The 2021 counterfactual is central in this respect: by coding MHS-IR as absent for that year, the framework demonstrates its capacity to produce negative results, and without that capacity, the positive late-2022 findings would carry no analytical weight. Designing the indicators before source review and restricting evidence to the pre-outcome period reduces, although does not eliminate, the risk that the analysis simply reproduces ripeness wherever an agreement is found.

Third, the case reveals that ripeness can build incrementally through dialogue without the parties recognizing it. The Baghdad rounds constructed an MPWO that neither Saudi Arabia nor Iran articulated as such. China's contribution lay in integrating these fragmented elements into an operational proposal. China did not create the ripeness, but rather made existing ripeness legible and actionable. This suggests a refinement to Zartman's framework: between the latent emergence of ripeness and the formal recognition of a "ripe moment," there is an

intermediate stage in which a mediator must translate diffuse signals into a workable proposal. The thesis would describe this stage as one of activation rather than exploitation.

### **6.3 Mediator Capabilities and Conflict Timing**

The capability-based and timing-based explanations are not mutually exclusive, they address different questions. Capabilities determine whether a mediator can act, while ripeness determines whether the actions will work. The practical implication is that capable mediators should invest in assessing conflict readiness before committing resources, and the indicator framework developed here can be applied using publicly available sources.

This distinction also helps to explain why Sun and Zoubir's (2018) concept of "quasi-mediation" applies more straightforwardly to China's behavior before 2023 than to the 2023 case itself. In the Saudi–Iran rapprochement, China hosted negotiations on its own territory and co-signed the resulting trilateral statement, both of which depart from a strictly agenda-following posture. Whether China also originated the substantive terms of the agreement, as opposed to operationalizing terms developed through the Baghdad process, cannot be determined conclusively from the public record. The shift from quasi-mediation to active mediation appears to have been driven less by a change in China's strategy than by a change in the conflict's readiness for resolution, combined with China's growing willingness to take on a more visible regional role.

This reading also adjusts the analytical weight typically assigned to alternative explanations. US retrenchment, Raisi's conservative profile, and China's economic ties were all present in 2021 but did not by themselves produce a final agreement. Treating these as enabling rather than driving conditions captures the empirical pattern more accurately: they shaped which mediator was positioned to close the deal, but not whether the deal could be closed.

### **6.4 Policy Implications**

Two practical lessons follow. First, sequential mediation requires deliberate planning. Iraq built the MPWO infrastructure and China activated it. This indicates that preliminary mediators who lack the resources for a final-stage guarantee should not be evaluated as failures but as essential groundwork layers in a longer process. Recognizing this could change how international actors design and fund mediation efforts: rather than expecting any single

mediator to deliver an agreement, designs could explicitly anticipate handoffs between actors with complementary capabilities.

Second, the co-signature element appears to have been consequential. Iraq had hosted the Baghdad talks but never formally underwrote the agreement, meaning that the facilitating host bore no formal responsibility if commitments were broken. By co-signing, China committed its own diplomatic reputation to implementation. For mediators with the prestige to use this mechanism, employing it at the appropriate moment, once parties have indicated genuine willingness to settle, may add real value beyond what hosting alone provides.

## **6.5 Limitations**

The study has limitations that condition the strength of its claims. Most fundamentally, internal government records of Saudi, Iranian, and Chinese decision-making remain unavailable, therefore inferences about leadership perceptions rely on public signals. This most directly affects H3, where the question of whether China consciously diagnosed ripeness cannot be answered from press briefings alone. The eleven-indicator framework also varies in evidentiary type: smoking-gun indicators such as MHS-SA-1 impose a relatively demanding observational threshold, whereas straw-in-the-wind indicators such as MPWO-3 and MHS-SA-3 rest on softer contextual signals. Treating all indicators as fully equivalent in the aggregation rule risks overstating the precision of the framework. The reader should therefore regard the coding as a structured interpretation of the available evidence rather than as a deterministic measurement.

A second-order limitation concerns the design itself. A single-case study can refine the theory and identify the mechanism, but it cannot support broad generalizations. The argument that timing dominates capability in the 2023 case does not establish that timing dominates in every case. The relative weight of the two factors may depend on the type of conflict, the identity of the mediator, and the regional context. Some MPWO-2 evidence also derives from the March 2023 joint statement, which is itself the outcome under investigation. The analysis mitigates this tautology by relying primarily on the Iraqi Foreign Minister's April 2022 confirmation and on Rasanah IIIS (2023) reporting, but the issue cannot be eliminated entirely.

## **6.6 Avenues for Future Research**

First, the indicator framework should be applied to other mediation efforts to test its travel across cases. China's involvement in the Fatah– Hamas talks in Beijing, China's support for

mediation efforts in Sudan, and various diplomatic initiatives involving Pakistan, Turkey, and Egypt during the 2026 US–Iran conflict all offer comparison points where ripeness conditions and mediator characteristics combined differently and produced different outcomes. Cases of non-agreement deserve particular attention, since ripeness theory is most often tested on successful settlements and therefore most vulnerable to selection bias.

Second, more refined methodological strategies could complement the current framework. Quantitative research could develop measurable MHS and MPWO proxies from existing conflict-event data (ACLED, UCDP), generating indicator scores that could be compared across cases at scale. Practitioner interviews with Iraqi, Omani, and Chinese officials, once politically feasible, would add the perceptual dimension that public documents cannot fully provide and would offer the strongest available test of H3.

## **7. Conclusion**

This thesis has examined why China's facilitation of the 2023 Saudi–Iran rapprochement produced a final agreement when Iraq's earlier mediation did not. Drawing on Zartman's ripeness theory and theory-testing process tracing method, it has argued that the difference is best understood not as a competition between mediators of unequal capability, but as a difference between two phases of a single mediation process operating under different conflict conditions. By late 2022, both Saudi Arabia and Iran had come to perceive the costs of continued estrangement as unsustainable, and the Baghdad dialogues had assembled the diplomatic infrastructure on which a final agreement could be built. China's three catalytic moves, platform provision, framework activation, and guarantee, converted these latent conditions into the March 2023 trilateral statement. Iraq's earlier effort, conducted before ripeness conditions had matured, was therefore not a failure but the indispensable first phase of a longer process whose later phase a different mediator was positioned to complete.

The broader theoretical claim is that mediator capabilities and conflict ripeness should be treated as sequential and mutually reinforcing rather than as competing explanations. Capabilities determine whether a mediator can act, ripeness determines whether the actions will work. Applied to the 2023 case, this framing assigns explanatory weight both to the structural advantages that made China an acceptable host and to the contingent developments inside the Saudi–Iranian bilateral relationship that made the conflict negotiable when it had not previously been so. Neither family of explanation is sufficient on its own. The capability

literature explains why China rather than another actor was positioned to host the final round, the ripeness literature explains why 2023 rather than 2021 was when the round produced an agreement. Reading the two literatures together produces an account that neither could deliver alone.

The thesis also offers a methodological contribution. The eleven-indicator framework, designed before source review and applied symmetrically to both the 2021 and 2023 phase, attempts to address two longstanding critiques of ripeness theory: the tautology problem (that ripeness is identified only retrospectively, from the same outcome it is supposed to explain) and the vagueness problem (that the concept resists operational definition). The framework is not a finished instrument, and its evidentiary thresholds vary in stringency, but it generates an explicit, replicable, and falsifiable reading of the case. Whether the same approach yields plausible coding in cases of non-agreement, and in cases where the mediator's role is less central, is an empirical question that further studies can address.

Beyond its specific findings, the case is a useful data point for thinking about China's evolving role in international conflict management. Sun and Zoubir's (2018) characterization of Chinese engagement as "quasi-mediation" captured the pattern before 2023, but the Saudi–Iran case exceeds that characterization in three respects: China hosted negotiations on its own territory, helped operationalize the substantive terms of the deal, and co-signed the resulting statement. Whether this expansion of role represents a durable shift in Chinese mediation practice or a case-specific response to a particularly favorable configuration is a question that the subsequent regional record begins to answer.

The empirical evidence presented here is consistent with all five hypotheses, but the strength of that support varies and is qualified by the limited public visibility of internal Chinese decision-making, especially for H3 and H4. Therefore, the thesis offers a carefully supported interpretation rather than a fully demonstrated causal chain. Within those limits, the analysis suggests that the 2023 Saudi–Iran rapprochement is more readily explained by the timing of intervention than by mediator capability alone. The two families of explanation are best regarded as sequential and complementary rather than as competing. In Zartman's terms, the moment was ripe. In the terms of the broader literature on mediation, the moment was also seized.

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## Appendix A: Indicator Coding Rules

All rules were finalized before source collection.

**Aggregation rule.** A concept is coded P if all three indicators are P, or if two are P and one is I. It is coded absent if  $\geq 2$  indicators are A.

**MHS-SA-1 (Leadership Rhetoric).** P if a Saudi leader (King, Crown Prince, or Foreign Minister) in a public statement before December 7, 2022 explicitly frames ongoing conflict with Iran as economically unsustainable, links regional normalization to Vision 2030, or expresses conditional readiness for dialogue. A if no such statement found. I if language too ambiguous. Evidence type: smoking gun.

**MHS-SA-2 (Policy Adjustment).** P if Saudi Arabia declares a formal ceasefire in Yemen AND sustains Baghdad dialogue across  $\geq 3$  rounds, both before December 7, 2022. A if neither met. I if one met but not both. Evidence type: hoop test.

**MHS-SA-3 (Alliance Disappointment).** P if a credible source documents Saudi skepticism toward US security guarantee reliability, before December 7, 2022. A if no signals found. I if mixed signals. Evidence type: straw-in-wind.

**MHS-IR-1 (Leadership Rhetoric).** P if Raisi or the Iranian Foreign Minister links Gulf normalization to domestic economic or political stability in a public statement before December 7, 2022. A if no such statement found. I if linkage implicit but not explicit. Evidence type: smoking gun. Application in this case: Raisi's September 2022 UNGA address signals readiness for regional dialogue but does not explicitly link Gulf normalization to Iranian domestic stability, therefore, this indicator codes I (inconclusive). The MHS-IR concept still codes P via the  $2P + 1I$  aggregation rule.

**MHS-IR-2 (Domestic Pressure).** P if large-scale protests ( $\geq 100$  locations or nationwide spread) are documented by  $\geq 2$  independent organizations, September–December 2022. A if no documentation. I if protests localized or single source. Evidence type: hoop test.

**MHS-IR-3 (Economic Data).** P if World Bank or IMF CPI inflation  $\geq 35\%$  for 2022 AND JCPOA revival is no longer active as a sanctions-relief pathway, confirmed by  $\geq 2$  sources. A if inflation below threshold or nuclear deal still active. I if data disputed. Evidence type: hoop test.

**MPWO-1 (Dialogue Continuity).** P if  $\geq 3$  rounds of direct Saudi–Iran talks are confirmed by both parties or authorized proxies, 2021–2022. A if fewer than 3 or one-sided confirmation. I if rounds held but cross-confirmation absent. Evidence type: hoop test.

**MPWO-2 (Framework Activation).** P if either party or a credible analyst documents explicit reference to the 1998 or 2001 agreements as a negotiating baseline in a pre-March 2023 context. A if no reference found. I if reference indirect or ambiguous. Evidence type: smoking gun.

**MPWO-3 (De-escalation Gesture).** P if credible reporting documents mutual tone moderation or humanitarian exchange, 2021–2022. A if no reporting found. I if single-source or disputed. Evidence type: straw-in-wind.

**VS-SA (Valid Spokesperson).** P if M.B.S. is documented as sole or primary foreign/defense decision-maker by a scholarly source before December 2022. A if contested authority. I if ambiguous. Evidence type: hoop test.

**VS-IR (Valid Spokesperson).** P if Raisi holds a negotiating mandate with Supreme Leader endorsement documented by a credible source. A if active blocking by IRGC or conservatives is documented. I if authority present but endorsement incomplete. Evidence type: hoop test.

## Appendix B: Data Collection Log

**Table B1. Document Log**

ID	Document	Source	Date	Indicators	Evidence Type
D01	M.B.S./MBC interview	Al Arabiya; Newsweek	Apr 2021	MHS-SA-1, MHS-SA-3	Straw-in-wind
D02	Baghdad Rounds 1–3	Iran Primer	Apr–Aug 2021	MPWO-1	Hoop test
D03	M.B.S./The Atlantic	The Atlantic (Wood)	Mar 2022	MHS-SA-1	Smoking gun
D04	Yemen ceasefire	Soufan Center; Iran Primer	Apr 1, 2022	MHS-SA-2	Hoop test
D05	Baghdad Round 4	Iran Primer; Al- Bayan	Sep 2021	MPWO-1	Hoop test
D06	Baghdad Round 5 MOU	Iran Primer; Al- Bayan; Rasanah; Calabrese	Apr 21, 2022	MPWO-1, MPWO-2	Smoking gun
D07	Ceasefire extended	Arab Center DC	2022	MHS-SA-2	Hoop test
D08	Amir-Abdollahian statement	Reuters	May 26, 2022	MPWO-3	Straw-in-wind
D09	WB CPI Iran 2022	World Bank	2022	MHS-IR-3	Hoop test
D10	JCPOA collapse	Reuters; Iran Primer	Aug–Sep 2022	MHS-IR-3	Hoop test
D11	Raisi UNGA	PBS; Anadolu	Sep 21, 2022	MHS-IR-1	Smoking gun
D12	Amini protests	ACLED; IHR; HRANA; Amnesty	Sep–Dec 2022	MHS-IR-2	Hoop test
D13	Iran–Saudi tensions	Iran Primer; The National	Oct–Nov 2022	H3	Straw-in-wind
D14	Amman FM meeting	Daily Sabah; ICG	Dec 20, 2022	MPWO-3, H3	Smoking gun
D15	Wang Yi Wuxi	Stimson Center	Jan 2022	H3	Straw-in-wind
D16	MFA language shift	Chinese MFA	Jul–Nov 2022	H3	Straw-in-wind
D17	Xi Riyadh summit	Chinese MFA; Georgetown GJIA	Dec 7–9, 2022	H4 Move 1	Hoop test
D18	Xi–M.B.S. bilateral	Chinese MFA; Stimson	Dec 8, 2022	H4 Move 1, H3	Smoking gun
D19	Raisi Beijing visit	Akbarzadeh	Feb 14–16, 2023	H4 Move 2	Hoop test
D20	Beijing talks	Chinese MFA; Al Jazeera	Mar 6–10, 2023	H4 Move 3	Doubly decisive
D21	Trilateral statement	Chinese MFA	Mar 10, 2023	H4 Move 3, MPWO-2	Doubly decisive

## Appendix C: Indicator Coding Record

**Table C1. Indicator Coding with Source Attribution**

Code	Coding	Key Evidence
MHS-SA-1	P	D01: M.B.S./MBC Apr 2021 (straw-in-wind); D03: M.B.S./The Atlantic Mar 2022, Vision 2030 cost linkage (smoking gun)
MHS-SA-2	P	D04: Yemen ceasefire Apr 2022; D07: extended, holds post-Oct; D02/D05/D06: five Baghdad rounds sustained
MHS-SA-3	P	D01: M.B.S./MBC Apr 2021 “90% alignment” framing; Soufan Center Apr 2022
MHS-IR-1	I	D11: Raisi UNGA Sep 21, 2022 (PBS; Anadolu) — calls for regional dialogue but does not explicitly link Gulf normalization to Iranian domestic stability. MHS-IR concept still codes P (2P + 1I via aggregation fallback; see §5.2).
MHS-IR-2	P	D12: ACLED documented protest activity across all 31 provinces; IHR 476+ killed by Dec 2022; HRANA 14,000+ detained; Amnesty documentation of severe unlawful repression and lethal force
MHS-IR-3	P	D09: WB CPI 43.5%; D10: JCPOA talks effectively collapsed Aug–Sep 2022
MPWO-1	P	D02/D05/D06: five Baghdad rounds (Apr 2021 – Apr 2022); D21: trilateral statement thanks Iraq/Oman
MPWO-2	P	D06: Round 5 (April 21, 2022) 10-point MOU; Rasanah IIIS 1998/2001 references; D21: corroboration
MPWO-3	P	D08: Amir-Abdollahian “minimal but good progress” (Reuters, May 26, 2022); D14: Amman FM meeting Dec 20, 2022
VS-SA	P	Georgetown GJIA (2023): M.B.S. as Crown Prince since 2017, Prime Minister from Sep 2022, former Minister of Defense (portfolio passed to Khalid bin Salman in Sep 2022 reshuffle), PIF Chair
VS-IR	P	Stimson Center (2024); Cafiero (2024): Raisi–Khamenei alignment; conservative credentials

**Late 2022: 9 P + 1 I + 1 not yet at strongest signal on the basis of pre-7 December 2022 evidence (MHS-IR-1 = I; MPWO-3 reaches its strongest signal with the 20 December 2022 Amman foreign-ministers meeting). Coding stabilizes at 10 P + 1 I (MHS-IR-1) by 20 December 2022. The MHS-IR concept still codes P via the 2P + 1I aggregation fallback.**

## Appendix D: Counterfactual Coding (2021 vs Late 2022)

**Table D1. Parallel Indicator Coding**

Code	Concept	2021	Late 2022	Explanation
MHS-SA-1	SA leadership rhetoric	I	P	M.B.S. conciliatory in Apr 2021 (D01) but no explicit Vision 2030 linkage until Mar 2022 (D03)
MHS-SA-2	SA policy adjustment	A	P	No Yemen ceasefire in 2021; coalition still conducting offensive operations
MHS-SA-3	SA alliance disappointment	I	P	Biden policy shifts under way, but Saudi response ambiguous through 2021
MHS-IR-1	IR leadership rhetoric	I	I	Raisi “Neighbors First” from Aug 2021 inauguration; rhetoric stable across periods (Cafiero, 2024) but no explicit linkage between Gulf normalization and Iranian domestic stability in either period
MHS-IR-2	IR domestic pressure	A	P	Amini protests did not begin until Sep 2022; nothing comparable in 2021
MHS-IR-3	IR economic data	A	P	JCPOA revival talks active through 2021 (Vienna rounds ongoing)
MPWO-1	Dialogue continuity	P	P	Four rounds held by end of 2021 (Rounds 1–4), meeting the $\geq 3$ threshold
MPWO-2	Framework activation	A	P	1998/2001 agreement references documented only from Baghdad Round 5 (Apr 2022)
MPWO-3	De-escalation gesture	I	P	Limited de-escalation signals through 2021
VS-SA	Valid Spokesperson SA	P	P	M.B.S. authority stable across both periods
VS-IR	Valid Spokesperson IR	I	P	Raisi took office Aug 2021; insufficient track record by end of 2021

**2021: 2 P, 4 A, 5 I.**

MHS-IR carries two A codings (MHS-IR-2, MHS-IR-3) and one I coding (MHS-IR-1), so the concept codes absent at the concept level for 2021, failing both the 3/3 threshold and the 2P+1I fallback (the threshold for absence is met because two indicators are A). MPWO carries one A coding (MPWO-2) with MPWO-1 at P and MPWO-3 at I, so the concept fails both the 3/3 and the 2P+1I thresholds and is coded inconclusive. H5 is supported in the qualified sense that the conditions for a final agreement were not yet in place in 2021. This finding does not imply that the Iraq-led mediation phase was without value: it built dialogue continuity (MPWO-1 was already P in 2021) and the working channel later activated by China.

## Appendix E: Event Timeline 2016–2023

**Table E1. Key Events and Ripeness Relevance**

Date	Event	Ripeness Relevance
Jan 2016	Saudi–Iran diplomatic rupture	Conflict baseline
Apr 9, 2021	Baghdad Round 1	MPWO accumulation begins
Apr 27, 2021	M.B.S./MBC conciliatory interview	MHS-SA-1 first signal; MHS-SA-3 “90%” framing
Aug 2021	Raisi inaugurated; “Neighbors First” policy	MHS-IR-1 baseline; VS-IR developing
Sep 2021	Baghdad Round 4	MPWO-1 strengthened
Mar 2022	M.B.S./The Atlantic interview	MHS-SA-1 smoking gun (Vision 2030)
Apr 1, 2022	Yemen ceasefire declared	MHS-SA-2 sub-condition met
Apr 21, 2022	Baghdad Round 5: 10-point MOU agreed	MPWO-2 confirmed
May 26, 2022	Amir-Abdollahian “minimal but good progress”	MPWO-3 signal
Aug–Sep 2022	JCPOA talks effectively collapse	MHS-IR-3 sub-condition met
Sep 16, 2022	Mahsa Amini dies in custody	MHS-IR-2 triggered
Sep 21, 2022	Raisi UNGA statement	MHS-IR-1 inconclusive (does not meet strict P threshold; see §5.2)
Oct–Nov 2022	Chinese MFA language shift	H3 evidence
Dec 7–9, 2022	Xi Jinping visit to Riyadh	Move 1: platform provision
Dec 20, 2022	Amir-Abdollahian–Faisal meeting in Amman	MPWO-3 strongest signal; coding stabilises at 10 P + 1 I
Feb 14–16, 2023	Raisi state visit to Beijing	Move 2: framework activation
Mar 6–10, 2023	Beijing talks	Move 3: guarantee provision
Mar 10, 2023	Trilateral statement signed	Agreement reached

## Resümees

### Küpse hetke tabamine:

#### Hiina vahendav roll 2023. aasta Saudi Araabia ja Iraani suhete taastamisel

Käesolev magistr töö uurib, miks Hiina vahendustegevus tõi 2023. aasta märtsis kaasa läbimurde Saudi Araabia ja Iraani diplomaatiliste suhete taastamisel, samas kui Iraagi varasemad vahenduskatsed aastatel 2021–2022 lõpliku kokkuleppeni ei jõudnud. Töö tugineb William Zartmani küpsusteooriale (ripeness theory) ja kohandab teooriale testiva protsessi jälgimise meetodit (theory-testing process tracing). Empiiriline analüüs põhineb Hiina Välisministeeriumi ametlikel teadatel, tippjuhtide kõnedel ja poliitikaaruannetel ajavahemikus jaanuar 2021 kuni märts 2023.

Töö keskne uurimisküsimus on: kuidas tekkis 2023. aastal Hiina vahendustegevuseks Saudi Araabia–Iraani juhtumise vajalik tegutsemise aken ja kuidas seda (ära) kasutati? Vastuse leidmiseks töötas autor välja üheteistkümnest indikaatorist koosneva kodeerimisraamistiku ning rakendas seda ainult Saudi Araabia–Iraani kokkuleppele eelnenud tõenditele. Selline lähenemine püüab vältida küpsusteooria kahte traditsioonilist puudust: tautoloogilisust ja mõistelist ähmasust.

Töös testiti viit hüpoteesi. H1: 2022. aasta lõpuks olid mõlemad pooled jõudnud ennast kahjustavasse patiseisu (mutually hurting stalemate, MHS). H2: 2022. aasta lõpuks oli Bagdadi dialoogivoorude kaudu loodud väljapääs, mida mõlemad pooled tajusid lahendusena. (mutually perceived way out, MPWO). H3: küpsuse tingimused kujunesid välja 2022. aasta lõpus, enne Hiina aktiivset vahendustegevust. H4: Hiina tehtud kolm diplomaatilist sammu – platvormi pakkumine, raamistiku aktiveerimine ja kaasallkirjastaja tagatis – toimised katalüsaatoritena. H5: 2021. aastal puudusid piisavad MHS- ja MPWO-tingimused, mis selgitab, miks Iraagi algatatud vahendustegevus ei jõudnud lõpliku kokkuleppeni.

Analüüs näitab, et 2022. aasta lõpuks saab Hiina vahendustegevust kodeerida kokku kümme indikaatoriga “esinevaks” (Present) ja ühega “määramatuks” (Inconclusive). Seevastu 2021. aastal Iraani ja Omaani vahendustegevust saab kodeerida „esinevaks” ainult kahe indikaatoriga. Saudi Araabia küpsus sõlmida kokkulepe tulenes Jeemeni sõjast tingitud kurnatusest ja kasvavast skepsisest USA julgeolekugarantii suhtes. Iraan seisis silmitsi 43,5-protsendise inflatsiooniga, JCPOA taaselustamiskõneluste läbikukkumisega ning Mahsa Amini surma järgsete ulatuslike protestidega. Kõik need erinevad tegurid kujunesid teineteisest sõltumatult ning langesid omavahel kokku 2022. aasta lõpuks.

Hiina roll kokkuleppe sõlmimisel seisnes pigem olemasolevate tingimuste ära kasutamises kui nende loomises. 2022. aasta detsembris Rijaadi tippkohtumisel lõi Xi Jinping suhete vahendamiseks diplomaatilise platvormi; 2023. aasta veebruaris Raisi Pekingi visiidi käigus muudeti 1998. ja 2001. aastal sõlmitud koostöölepingud toimivaks ning need moodustasid läbirääkimiste raamistiku; 10. märtsil 2023 kaasallkirjastas Hiina kolmepoolse avalduse, pannes sealjuures kaalule oma diplomaatilise manine, mis esitati kokkuleppe garantiina.

Tööl on kolm olulist panust. Esiteks toetab kirjeldatud juhtum Zartmani argumenti, et vahendajad pigem kasutavad ära küpseid hetki kui loovad neid. Teiseks pakub töö korratava ja falsifitseeritava raamistiku, mis suudab anda teiste sarnaste analüüsise juures nii positiivseid kui negatiivseid tulemusi. Kolmandaks viitab analüüs, et vahendaja võimekust ja konflikti küpsust tuleks käsitleda järjestikku, mitte konkureerivalt: võimekus määrab, kas vahendaja saab tegutseda ning küpsus mõjutab tegevuse edukust. Empiirilised tõendid on kooskõlas kõigi viie hüpoteesiga, kuigi nende tugevus varieerub. Analüüsi peamisteks kitsaskohtadeks on Hiina sisemise otsustusprotsessi vähene avalik nähtavus ja esmaste allikate kasin kättesaadavus.

**Märksõnad:** küpsusteooria, Hiina vahendustegevus, Saudi Araabia–Iraani lähenemine, vahendustegevuse ajastus, protsessi jälgimine.

**CERCS:** S170

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