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Saudi Arabia – Iran: An “Unfriendly” Diplomatic Approach

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publication date: 25 March 2023

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The Iran-Saudi Arabia agreement, signed in Beijing, promises to shake old alignments and reshape the region’s geopolitics as it marks a huge de-escalation between the two strategic adversaries. What makes the agreement historic is the Chinese connection. The very fact of China’s involvement is likely to make Beijing a significant player in the Middle East’s geopolitical equations.

The United States has been either a mediator or a sponsor of most of the peace accords in the Middle East, but the absence of Washington from the latest accord between Iran and Saudi Arabia threatens to harm the US influence in the region. The Iran-Saudi deal marks a power shift, with China emerging as a significant player in the Middle East.

The apparent convergence of the strategic interests of Iran, Saudi Arabia and China signals that Beijing’s diplomatic breakthrough with Tehran and Riyadh could lay the foundation of a new geopolitical reality. While the resumption of diplomatic ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia will not lead to any immediate dramatic change in the regional security equations, this development presents a huge challenge for the US. If the deal becomes a mid-term success, some other countries in the region could gradually approach China for playing a similar mediatory role, boosting Beijing’s overall regional status.

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The deal also confirms this fact that Saudi Arabia does not view itself as a facilitator of American policies in the Middle East, but as an independent player. Saudi Arabia still values close ties with the US, but not at the cost of its strategic autonomy in maintaining ties with both China and Russia. For Iran, China's growing diplomatic influence in the Middle East is welcome because it undermines America's sanctions regime.

For India, the Iranian-Saudi rapprochement is significant. However, the most disturbing dimension of the rapprochement is the role played by China. It coincides with the beginning of Xi Jinping's third term as the supreme Chinese leader. Xi has already firmed his grip on China's state and party institutions. It simultaneously reflects China's growing ambitions of seeking geopolitical influence in the Middle East. China has been careful to avoid diplomatic or military entanglement in the Middle East. However, it is now only a matter of time before it decides to establish a military presence in the Gulf region. This particular aspect could be disturbing for India as New Delhi and China are currently locked in fierce geopolitical competition for influence and resources.

It remains to be seen how the deal will impact India's economic and commercial interests in the region. Like India, China is a major importer of oil from Saudi Arabia. Moreover, Chinese energy imports from Iran are also substantial. Beijing has been steadily expanding China's economic role in Iran, and it also supports Russian plans to develop a transit corridor through Iran. Hence, a region which is China-friendly would always give Beijing an asymmetrical leverage to harm India's interests, while boosting China's Belt and Road initiative in the region. This is just the beginning of Beijing's preparations to challenge the traditional American influence in the Middle East.

There is another factor which Indian policy-makers cannot forget. In the short run, New Delhi must welcome the lowering of geopolitical tensions in the Middle East. But China's increasing influence in the Middle East could also help Pakistan economically and strategically. Gradually, Beijing will be tempted to support Islamabad's cause among Gulf countries in order to bail Pakistan out of its current financial mess. Seen from this perspective, China's expanding sphere of influence in the Middle East has the potential to fundamentally undermine India's influence.

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Any Indian reassessment of its regional strategy should begin with understanding the pressures and opportunities that brought Saudi Arabia's leadership to Beijing. Washington's reluctance in spending political capital in mediating regional conflicts has created a fertile ground for other players to fill a crucial void. If China has demonstrated its intention to fill this vacuum, then India should also think of becoming a reliable partner and mediator given its long-standing relationships with many Gulf countries. India's soft power influence in the Middle East, through a strong Diaspora presence and Bollywood, could act as a dedicated anchor in playing this role.

India should seriously think of encouraging its Gulf allies to explore a more sustainable regional security architecture that could reduce the risk of military conflict in the region and provide for maritime security. As China is trying to tilt the balance of power in its favor, any Indian initiative is likely to receive American support. India and the US enjoy a strong strategic partnership, which is also aimed at countering China-led efforts to build an alternative to the US-led liberal global order.

One may also speculate how Iran's calculus regarding Israel could be impacted by its rapprochement with Saudi Arabia. The deal has a great potential to bring Iran closer to its Arab neighbors. Under the Abraham Accords, many Muslim countries such as the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco have joined Jordan and Egypt in making formal relations with Israel. Saudi Arabia may also join them later when conditions are ripe. Israel has repeatedly affirmed its commitment to broaden the Abraham Accords and reach a peace agreement with Saudi Arabia. Therefore, any improvement in the Saudi-Israeli relationship could diminish Iran's proclivity to remain perpetually hostile toward Israel.

India's strong defence relationship with Israel is an advantage which needs to be harnessed for its renewed diplomatic push in the Middle East. It needs to be remembered that the I2U2 partnership (India, Israel, the UAE, and the US) has already expanded New Delhi's footprint in the Middle East region. If India shows a great deal of confidence in becoming a bridge between Arab nations and Israel, it will significantly restrict China's ambition. Summing up, India needs to formulate its policies that are in sync with how the Middle East region visualizes its own interests.