

# IN SAUDI-IRANIAN 'NORMALISATION', NEW CHALLENGES EMERGE IN WEST ASIA

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'India will need to engage with China in West Asia, where the two countries have shared interests' Picture is of the meeting in Beijing | Photo Credit: AP

On March 10, 2023, Saudi Arabia and Iran, represented by their national security advisers, signed an agreement in Beijing, China, to re-establish diplomatic ties, respect each other's sovereignty and maintain non-interference in the other's domestic affairs. The agreement also reinstates two previous accords: one on security cooperation signed in 2001 and the other, going back to 1998, dealing with economic, technical, scientific and cultural ties. This agreement ends seven years of diplomatic estrangement between the two Gulf neighbours. During this period, they have confronted each other in proxy wars in Syria and Yemen, carried out media campaigns of extraordinary mutual hostility, often on sectarian basis, and have on occasion come close to direct conflict, particularly in 2019 when suspected Iranian agents attacked Saudi oil facilities.

China's Foreign Affairs head, Wang Yi, who brokered the agreement, described it as a "victory for dialogue, a victory for peace". The Saudi Foreign Minister said his country "favoured political solutions and dialogue", while his Iranian counterpart affirmed that his country was pursuing "the preparation of more regional steps". The accord has been welcomed across West Asia.

There had been meetings of Saudi and Iranian officials in Baghdad and Muscat in 2021 and 2022, but perhaps little progress had been made in addressing issues that divide the two countries — the wars in Syria and Yemen, and Saudi concerns relating to Iran's mobilisation of Shia communities in the region against the Arab states.

However, these interactions had confirmed that the Arab states were prepared to pursue their interests without United States involvement. This was largely the result of increasing regional disenchantment with the U.S. as a security-provider, alongside strong messages from Washington that it was less enthusiastic about being the regional security-guarantor. The U.S.'s military failures in Iraq and Afghanistan contributed to its loss of credibility among its regional allies.

What regional states are seeking is not to disengage from the U.S. but to broaden their options and build alternative relationships to suit their interests. China is an attractive partner. It has

substantial energy, trade, investment and technology-related ties with West Asia: it is the region's largest buyer of crude oil, a major trade and investment partner, and is also rapidly expanding its role as a technology-provider in most countries.

West Asia is also crucial for the realisation of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with regional states being important for logistical connectivity, and investment, consultancy and contracting partnerships. China's interests obviously require a stable regional environment, but, till recently, China had been reluctant to engage itself with regional competitions and confrontations.

About two years ago, Chinese academics began to signal changes in this approach: they indicated that China was looking at greater political involvement with the region on the basis of "quasi-mediation diplomacy" to promote its broad commercial, diplomatic and political interests rather than its hard security concerns. It recognised that many of the ongoing rivalries would not admit of quick resolutions. China was prepared to be content with managing these differences through diplomacy so that they did not escalate into conflict.

This was the message that President Xi Jinping conveyed to his Arab interlocutors during his three summits (bilateral, Gulf and Arab League) in Riyadh in December last year: the Chinese Foreign Office described the visit as "consolidating consensus on global governance, development, security and other crucial issues". The Saudi-Iran accord is the first manifestation of this new approach.

The agreement addresses the most serious regional confrontation — it reduces regional tensions and puts in place the bases for further dialogue on improving relations and engaging on contentious issues. Saudi-Iran differences will be difficult to resolve: they result from Saudi Arabia's deep sense of strategic vulnerability vis-à-vis its northern neighbour and concerns that might destabilise regional states through the use of Shia proxies. Iran will need to play a more pro-active role to assure its neighbour of its benign intentions, an effort that would gain credibility with China's active engagement with the two regional powers.

Regional security also needs the revival of the nuclear agreement, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and linked with it, the management of Israel's aggressiveness. Soon after the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) had announced it had seen traces of uranium enrichment by Iran to 84%, just short of weapon's grade, the IAEA Director General, Rafael Grossi, visited Tehran in early March and obtained an Iranian agreement to allow verification and monitoring activities by IAEA's inspectors.

This has prepared the ground for renewed talks on the JCPOA, though doubts remain on whether the U.S.'s sharply polarised domestic scene will allow such an agreement which would dilute sanctions on Iran in the run-up to the American presidential elections. Israel's domestic politics, also deeply polarised and dominated by the extreme right wing, is also expected to obstruct the renewal of the JCPOA and maintain a hostile posture towards Iran.

Though serious problems remain with this accord, China has affirmed that its role in West Asian affairs is likely to get more active and substantial. This poses challenges for Indian diplomacy.

However, recognising that the management of its ties with China remains its diplomatic priority, India will need to engage with China in West Asia where they have a broad gamut of shared interests in energy security, free and open sea lanes, logistical connectivity, and, above all, regional stability. Here, they can work together to further mutual and regional interests.

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