

Iran-Saudi Arabia Rapprochement and China's Role in Regional Politics

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Abstract

This article examines the latest diplomatic developments between Saudi Arabia and Iran and the China's role in the regional politics. The study explores the historical context of these nations' harsh diplomatic relations the different concerns that have pursued to the latest diplomatic warmth. Moreover, it explores China's enhancing engagement in the Middle East, specifically its growing financial and strategic relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the impression of this on regional political order. This research is result of an analysis of both primary and secondary sources, involving official data, academic and media reports. The results suggest that the improvising relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran have the courage to incorporate stability to the International Politics, while China's contribution in regional order can give a new arena for support and development. This article will ensure with certain recommendations for relevant stakeholders and political actors in leading stability and peace in the region. This article involves Comparative historical analysis as theoretical framework.

Key Words: Diplomatic relations, China, Iran-Saudi relations, Middle East

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1. Introduction

The Gulf States have been a region of political uncertainty for years, with concerned interests of international and regional actors which leads to instability and conflict. Saudi Arabia and Iran have been two key actors in this political frame, with a long history of tense diplomatic relations. Moreover, latest developments have observed a diplomatic ties between two sides, interpreting a readiness to involve in productive dialogue and support. This enhancing warmth has the ability to carry out betterment and stability to this region and increase financial development.

Simultaneously, China's increasing engagements in the Gulf has achieved prominent attention from intellectuals and policy makers. With a status of World's 2nd largest economic power, China seeks to extend its worldwide impact through economic investments in important regions like Gulf States. China's strategic and financial relations Saudi Arabia and Iran have increased massively in latest years, giving both opportunities and problems for the regional politics. (Turak, 2023)

This research directs to study the enhancing diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran and China's role in the region. This research article will start with context and historical background their mutually strained and harsh relations covering the issues that have emphasized their relationship. This study will evaluate the latest developments of their bilateral and multilateral relations including the fact that pursued to diplomatic melt down. This research article will analyze its role in the Gulf States and its growing economic and strategic relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran. It will find out the result of China's penetration in the regional politics and analyze the challenges and further opportunities it exhibits for stakeholders and regional players.

The research is resulted on an analysis which is based on primary and secondary sources, involving academic statements, official reports and literature. The findings of the research will give an in-depth details of political dynamics of Iran-Saudi diplomatic relations and China's contribution in the regional politics and stability. This research article will be concluded with some productive suggestions and recommendations that will be helpful for stakeholders and policy makers to adopt and incorporate these findings in their policies.

2. Historical Background of Iran-Saudi Ties

The historical background of Iran and Saudi Arabia has been pronounced by conflicts, distrust, and occasional issues. The two states show different sects of Islam, with Iran being predominantly Shia and Saudi Arabia being predominantly Sunni. This ideological divide has performed a key role in framing their relations over the decades. The USA and the USSR were key players in the Gulf, and both Iran and Saudi Arabia were significant regional players of the United States during the Cold War. Moreover, after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which forced to step down the US-supported Shah and brought to power an Islamic Republic led by Ayatollah Khomeini, the relation between Iran and Saudi Arabia declined accordingly.

The new Iranian government under Khomeini observed itself as a revolutionary force that sought to propagate its Islamic ideology across the region. This was considered as a direct threat to the monarchy in Saudi Arabia, which considered itself as the Custodian of Islam's holy sites and the leader of the Muslim world. The conflicts between the two countries were further enhanced by their support for opposing parties in conflicts, such as the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), and the Yemeni Civil War (2015-present). Additionally, the two countries have involved in a war of blames and accusations, with each accusing the other of supporting terrorism and meddling in their internal affairs.

However, there have been gestures of a switch in their bilateral ties. Iran and Saudi Arabia interacted in high-level dialogue aimed at settling their differentiations, and both states have

interpreted a willing to involve in productive dialogue and cooperation in 2015. This increasing diplomatic warmth has the substance to bring about stability to the region and propagate financial development. During the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), Iran and Saudi Arabia supported opposing sides in the conflict. Saudi Arabia provided significant financial and military support to Iraq, while Iran received support from Syria and Libya. The war was seen as a proxy war between the two nations, with each seeking to gain influence in the region. The conflict further strained their already tense relationship and set the stage for future regional tensions.

During the Lebanese Civil War, Iran was in support of the Hezbollah, while Saudi Arabia was in support of various Sunni groups. This conflict was considered as a battle field for Iran and Saudi Arabia to propagate their domination in the region. The two countries also participated in siding opposing poles in the Syrian Civil War (2011-present), with Iran supporting the government of Bashar al-Assad and Saudi Arabia supporting the opposition. The Yemeni Civil War (2015-present) has further exacerbated tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The issue began during Houthi rebels group, who was supported by Iran, toppled the Yemeni government in 2014. Saudi Arabia penetrated in the conflict in 2015, leading towards a coalition of Arab states in favour of the Yemeni government. The war has yielded in a humanitarian crisis and has deepened the divide between Iran and Saudi Arabia. (*Timeline of Iran-Saudi Relations*, 2023)

Apart from the conflicts, there has been observed some signs of positivity in terms of exchange of warm messages, visits of delegations and mutually held phone calls among state heads. These gestures exhibits the common objective of both to resolve conflicting issues and problems peacefully. Similarly, in 2015, signing of Joint Plan of Action, also led to raise some chances to enhance trade activities between Saudi Arabia and Iran which was happened to lift economic sanctions on Iran.

3. Bilateral Engagements in Past

There have been some ceremonial multilateral pacts between Iran and Saudi Arabia in past because of their harsh relationships. Moreover, there have been few noticeable pacts and efforts aimed to promote support between two states.

1. **Establishment of Islamic Military Alliance:** Saudi Arabia formulated an alliance comprising more than of 35 Muslim countries in 2015 in order to restore peace and stability in the Gulf and to combat terrorism. Iran was feared that this alliance will be operated against itself. And Iran was not invited to join this alliance due to its harsh relations with Gulf States.
2. **Mecca Agreement:** Iran and Saudi Arabia signed a treaty called Mecca Agreement in 1987 when a clash arisen from a confrontation between Saudi security forces and Iranian pilgrimages. This agreement was carried out in order to restore normalization between these countries for better communication and diplomatic ties.
3. **Recent Diplomatic Initiatives:** In 2015, Saudi King Salman bin Abdul Aziz and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani had a phone call that shows their common interest to engage both sides positively. In recent months, Iran and Saudi Arabia both have diplomatic interactions aimed to improve and develop mutual relations.
4. **OIC:** Both Iran and Saudi Arabia are the members of OIC, which was formed in 1969 in Rabat. This is intergovernmental organization which works for the sake of rights of Muslim across the globe and to promote cooperation and solidarity among aggrieved Muslims.

4. Mutual Conflicting Interactions

Saudi Arabia and Iran have long historical context of harsh relations, with many incidents led to increase enmity and parting ways between two states. There are few examples:

1. **Grand Mosque Seizure:** A group of armed personnel seized the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979. The attackers were suspected to have been trained and supported by Iranian government. Those were radical followers which were never be supposed to be welcomed in Kingdom. This episode turn mutual diplomatic relation into cut off.
2. **Hajj Tragedy:** During Hajj Operation, a stampede resulted in causalities of over two thousand Iranian pilgrimages in 2015. This incident enhanced the animosity between Iran and Saudi Arabia and a lot more efforts consumed to restore normalization. Iran blamed Saudi officials for not having proper care and arrangements and criminal negligence.
3. **Iran-Iraq War:** This war has been prolonged over eight years and continued from 1980 to 1988. Saudi Arabia supported Iraq and Iran got support from Syria and Libya. This war imparted tensions between these two states harshly.
4. **Iranian Revolution:** Iran observed a revolt in 1979, which turned into a full-fledge revolution resulted in a setting up an Islamic state. This was considered as a threat by Saudi Arabia because Monarchy never willing to have these sort of revolutionary ideal being propagated in their population.

Anyhow, these episode along with various factors, like ideological and religious differences towards long-standing conflict and sense of misunderstanding between two countries.

5. What USA want Saudi Arabia about Iran?

United States of America has a long-standing presence in the Middle East and has various purposes over different objectives. Saudi Arabia and Iran have two key positions in USA foreign policy regarding Middle East. Firstly, America want to contain Iran's enhancing influence over its neighbors like Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Libya. USA is willing to collaborate with Saudi Arabia and its like-minded Gulf States to limit Iran ambitious influence in terms of economic and military power. Secondly, the U.S seeks to pressurize Iran through diplomatic

isolation and by imposing massive economic sanctions over Iran's global transactions. This initiative has badly affect Iran's economy and caused hikes in inflation and lower the currency rates unprecedentedly.

Thirdly, USA and Saudi Arabia have both common concerns regarding counter terrorism in the Gulf. They both sought to develop mutual framework to combat terrorism in the region completely. USA is willing to disrupt terror financing and break their networks in the region to avoid extremism. Lastly, USA wants to bring stability and peace in the Gulf which is in favor of every sincere state. Regional stability can only be possible and be assured when these regional rivals will sit and have constructive dialogue despite of useless and endless blame game from either side.

6. Why Does the USA not like Iran?

United States has a complicated and fraught ties with Iran, inspired through a number of facts.

There are some vital problems due to its historical harsh relations:

1. Nuclear Program: Along with global powers, United States has been keenly concerned about Iran and its nuclear program because USA is fearing to have another nuclear power in Gulf in front of Israel. USA has imposed series of economic and strategic sanctions on Iran to form Iran to give up its nuclear program.
2. Human Rights Abuses: Iran has observed intolerant in its dealings with human rights. Iran is criticized for its record in human rights, covering aggression of political dissidents, sanctions on free press, free speech and mishandling of religious and ethnic minorities.
3. The 1979 Iranian Revolution: A popular revolt led towards the setting up of an Islamic Revolution that was confrontational to the USA and its western partners. Government had seized American's embassy in Iran and made around 50 US citizens hostage for more than a year that enhanced tensions between these two countries.

4. **Terror-Supporting:** Iran has always been accused of supporting terror financing and terror related activities. These accusations are about Hamas and Hezbollah.

Mostly, Iran and United States have a complicated ties inspired by a variety of issues, covering geopolitical fights, ideological disputes and historical injustices. There have been some initiatives at harmonization in latest years, harsh relations between two states continue to bubble.

7. USA and Saudi Arabia relations during recent Diplomatic Developments

The current status of mutual relation of United States and Saudi Arabia during Russian invasion in Ukraine, has remained a complex. On one's fingertips, both Saudi Arabia and United States have announced cooperation for Ukraine in front of Russia's aggression. The US state department issued an assertion of condemnation of Russian invasion in February 2016 and asked for a peaceful affirmation to resolve this dispute. In the same way, the Saudi Arabian government shown her support for territorial integrity of Ukraine in March 2016.

In the same while, the diplomatic relation between US and Saudi Arabia has been complicated by Saudi's ties with Russia. Recent years shown an abrupt rise in their mutual relations, especially in energy collaboration. These rising ties is leading towards tensions between U.S and Saudi Arabia, over the problem of oil pricing and production during Russian invasion in Ukraine. Somehow, United States has also taken a keen and critical notice of human right's issue in perspective of Saudi Arabia in recent years that also has ignited harshness between these states. Particularly, Joe Biden administration is not favored Saudi stance over Yemen conflict alongside her treatment with human rights activists and dissidents.

However diplomatic relations between U.S and Saudi Arabia remained complex and cold during Russian-Ukrainian war. Although both countries are willing to promote peace and

stability in the region, and have common strategic interests, yet they have disagreements and difference of stances over many issues like energy production, pricing and human rights controversies.

During Trump administration, their mutual relations observed ups and downs particularly after murders of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Saudi Consulate in Turkey, when CIA held serious concerns over brutal murder and allegations by Turkish government on Prince Muhammad Bin Salman. Afterward, President Trump paid an official visit in Saudi Arabia and did a deal comprising 110 billion dollars. Thereafter, mutual ties started improving and normalized lately. Trump administration ignored kingdom's treatment of human rights activists and many other initiatives in Yemen. Trump avoided to criticize kingdom's allegedly wrong policies. Biden administration took things more keenly and critically in contrast and abstained from supporting Saudi Arabia in Yemen and stopping arms sale to Kingdom. (China and the Saudi-Iran rapprochement: Implications for Yemen, z.d.)

Apart from differences, diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and United States is of significant worth. Both states continue to have common strategic concerns, including oil trade and counterterrorism. However, Biden government has pointed that it is wrongly conceived that U.S is sever of its relations with Saudi Arabia absolutely, rather to propagate transparency and fairness in mutual ties. As a whole, the US-Saudi relations remains rough and tough in recent times and likely to evolve during Biden government. Although there are some phases of tensions there, yet both states are willing to share significant common developments in politics and economic fronts. (What you need to know about China's Saudi-Iran deal, z.d.)

United States has a variety of strategic policies for securing its concerns in the Gulf States. These covers: United States maintains an important power presence in the Gulf States, with air bases in various countries in this region. This permits the United States to sustain military presence and react quickly towards security concerns. The United States wants to propagate

stability in the Gulf through cooperating governments, promoting financial initiatives, and trying to settle conflicts. It is observed as significant for avoiding the propagation of terrorism and assuring independent oil flow.

The United States has formulated handling terrorism as first priority in the Gulf. This covers holding operation to put an end to terrorism, giving cooperate to governments, and doing on throw into confusion in terror-financing. The United States has a strong ally Israel, in the Gulf and US is always very much caring and keen to secure and protect Israel diplomatically amongst its neighbors. The US is greatly dependent on Oil supplies from Middle East and eager to continue these flows independently without any disruption. As a whole, United States is seeking to balance an active role in the Gulf to secure its concerns and propagate peace and stability in this region. This covers a variety of policies, covering military power presence, financial and foreign interactions and counter-terrorism initiatives.

8. Chinese interests in Middle East

China has a variety of concerns in the Gulf, that have rooted in decades as China's financial and demographical influence has extended globally. These concerns include:

1. Trade and Route Infrastructure: Middle East has been remained alive in global political powers due to its immense resources and geographical location.
2. Strategic Relations: China is taking interest in developing close and strategic relations with Gulf States to commemorate its vision into sustainable reality.
3. Energy Security: Oil and Gas imports have become necessarily integral part of development due massive reliance on non-renewable resources.
4. BRI: It is China's flagship projects which that aims to have connectivity through trade-routes and infrastructure. It also includes many other projects like energy corridors, economic and industrial zones etc.

5. **Geographical Stability:** China is most concerned and relevant stakeholder in making this region stable. Although this region is remained alive in global politics through its petroleum resources, but recent developments indicates a little shift in bloc politics by Saudi Arabia and China's role in bringing Iran and Saudi Arabia together.

However, China's concerns are concentrates on various aspects including energy, infrastructure, economic corridors and regional connectivity. (Ebrahim, 2023)

8.1 Chinese diplomatic relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia

China has cultured better foreign relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran, apart from long-established conflicts and disputes in the Gulf. China has historical relationship with Iran for decades from late 1970s, and these two states have supported on different sides including strategic and economic sectors. China is remained a partner of Iran and has greatly spent in Iran's infrastructure and energy related initiatives. In 2020, Iran and China have signed a 25-Year plan in form of strategic cooperation agreement that involves support in trade, infrastructure, and energy. (Bassam, 2023)

China has built a well-fortified diplomatic and financial relations with Saudi Arabia. China has remained a trading partner and hugely invested in Saudi Arabian petroleum industry. Saudi Arabia and China have announced an establishment of a detailed strategic closeness in 2016 that involves support on infrastructure, energy and trade. China has developed strong diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran. China is found to have a balanced approach in maintaining a facilitator's role to settle their disputes by reconciliatory measures and has carried for stability and security in the Gulf. (Gadzo, 2023)

8.2 China's Mediation and Impacts

China has not been successful in bridging of Saudi Arabia and Iran's mutual relations. Actually, their mutual diplomatic relations remains tensed, along with long-established political regional opposition and rivalries. Moreover, China has tried to find maintained good foreign relations

with Gulf States and it has involved in strategic and financial support with each other. China's advancement towards Gulf States has been marked through a concentration on strategic and financial concerns, rather than political and ideological interests. China has searched to abstain from taking side in regional political disputes and has carried out for stabilized resolution of conflicts. This engagement has permitted China to balance good diplomatic ties with neighboring states, including Saudi Arabia and Iran. (Chubin & Tripp, 2014)

China has been able to grip its financial strength and investment to intensify relations with both Saudi Arabia and Iran. China has spent heavily in this region's infrastructures and energy's sector. And it has given a sign to various strategic and financial agreements. Anyhow, apart from China's initiatives to balance good diplomatic ties with both states, their running conflicts and tension, which have confined China's capability to carry them within close range and together. Finally, any intention to their disputes would require to be operated by regional players, rather than foreign powers. (Jcookson, 2023)

Through China's help, both Saudi Arabian and Iranian governments reached a foreign beginning that involves the reopening of their foreign missions in each capitals within few months. The standardization of diplomatic relations is considered a significant breakthrough which could impart towards prosperity and stability in the Gulf. Accompanied by diplomatic relations being preserved, Pakistan can now keep alive stabilize diplomatic relations with Gulf States that give opportunities for commerce related activities. The diplomatic relations that have been improved between Iran and Saudi Arabia could pursue to a peaceful and stable Middle East, that will be constructive for Pakistan as well as other states in this region. (Baker, 2023)

8.3 China's Penetration in Regional Politics

China has an increasing interest in the Middle East and searching to extend its financial impact in this area. Through facilitating the latest diplomatic initiatives between Saudi Arabia and Iran,

China is locating itself as a facilitator and a vital contributor in Gulf politics. China could substantially use its impact to propagate stability in the regional politics and protect from conflicts that could lead to economic disruption. With both Iran and Saudi Arabia being major oil-producing countries, China is keen to ensure stable and uninterrupted energy supplies from the region. (Burton, 2020)

Moreover, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) includes several projects in the Middle East, including the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which connects western China to the Arabian Sea via Pakistan. Improved regional stability resulting from the normalization of ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia could benefit Chinese investments in the region, especially if the two countries can cooperate on projects that contribute to regional connectivity. Overall, China's growing influence in the region could be facilitated by its role as a mediator between Iran and Saudi Arabia, allowing it to expand its economic interests and promote regional stability. (The impact of the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement on Middle East conflicts, 2023)

9. Western Reaction on China's Diplomatic Penetration

China's assistance of the reacting of foreign relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran conveys a message to the western bloc that it can perform a productive role in settling conflicts in the Gulf. It also described China's enhancing impact in this region and its capability to act as a facilitator between regional rivals. Through promotion of stability and peace in the Gulf, China can preserve its strategic and financial concerns in this region, like its expenditures in energy sector and its BRI projects. Moreover, through positioning itself with region rivals like Saudi Arabia and Iran, China can counter-force the influence of the U.S in this region. (Ali, 2023)

10. Conclusion

For conclusion, the latest foreign initiatives between Saudi Arabia and Iran have exhibited promising vibes of reconciliation and put an end to the historical and lasting rivalry between

two regional states. China helped in this regard and both states have enabled themselves to engage in productive deliberations and carry alongside various steps to restore diplomatic relations. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran can be in good position in different ways. First of all, they are major contributor of OPEC, China is world's one of the largest buyer of petroleum products. A prosperous and stable Gulf, with advancing strategic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran will ensure an authentic and uninterrupted supply of petroleum products for China's growing economy. Secondly, both states have prominent populations and significant markets for Chinese goods and services. Boosted financial relations between China and these two states will end up in enhanced trade and investment.

Thirdly, a prosperous and stable Middle East suits China's interests and BRI as USA has long-standing and unbending ties with Gulf States. BRI is a project with massive investments and beneficial infrastructure which aims to connect China and rest of the world through trade routes, industrial zones, and economic corridors among like-minded and territorially connected countries. It connects China with Middle East, Central Asia, Europe and Africa in many ways. A peaceful and politically stable region helps the successful and complete implementation of China's conceived BRI in true sense. Lastly, by performing a reconciliatory role among regional opponents, China finds more trustworthy and influential role in both fronts as they open handedly accept China a common partner. (Zhou, 2023)

China's contribution during this process cannot be neglected, as it performed a vital role in taking place a dialogue among two nations and has interpreted its capability to emphasize regional order. Anyhow, the consequences are seemed obvious that how these moves will affect Middle Eastern regions and adjacent political territories. The enhancing diplomatic ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia can be directed towards peaceful co-existence and stability. However, these developments required a close and consistent oversight as volatile regional circumstances can proceed in either way.

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