

Diplomacy, with a change in terms of reference

The Chinese-brokered agreement between the Saudi Arabia and Iran reflects a new sort of regional alignment amidst America's declining influence

Hamid Ansari was the Vice President of India (2007-2017)

Mediation is rarely a spontaneous act; more often than not it is preceded by quiet efforts to seek a meeting point between differing viewpoints of individuals or organisations. It figures in Article 33 of the United Nations Charter among means of 'Pacific Settlement of Disputes'. but in legal terms is different from Good Offices and Arbitration.

A good instance of this was recently witnessed on the global stage. The question of motivation can be debated.

In a joint statement on March 10, 2023, by Iran, Saudi Arabia, and China (sitting at a table in the shape of an isosceles triangle), the three countries announced that an agreement has been reached between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran covering a resumption of diplomatic relations between them and a re-opening of their embassies and missions within a period not exceeding two months. The agreement affirmed their respect for the sovereignty of states, non-interference in the internal affairs of states and said the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of both countries shall meet to implement this, arrange for the return of their Ambassadors, and discuss means of enhancing bilateral relations.

Iranian National Security Adviser Ali Shamkhani (who is seen in the official photograph of the ceremony) is from the Office of the Supreme Leader in Iran and lends credibility to the accord.

A commentary in an Iranian newspaper on March 11 depicted the event as 'One agreement and seven achievements'; it listed the latter as Tehran's willingness to engage in dialogue; failure of U.S.'s effort to isolate Iran; strengthening of the alliance of Islamic Countries; failure of Israeli efforts against this agreement; failure of U.S. effort to show the Iranian public that it has no choice but to agree to the JCPOA with America; Beijing's successful entry in West Asian relations, and failure of dreams of 'regime change'.

American and Israeli reactions

Later that month — and writing with a good deal of caution — a Chinese academic observed in the Global Times that 'China's diplomacy as a major power is just getting started' and may even result in some marked changes in the regional situation.

U.S. reactions, apart from unconcealed surprise, reflected the change in terms of reference in international diplomacy. Equally surprised was Israel, the other major

player in the region, which saw it as a fatal blow to the effort to build a regional coalition against Iran. One commentator said ‘China brought Saudi Arabia together with Iran at a time when Israel had hoped that the United States would bring it together with Saudi Arabia’. Henry Kissinger told David Ignatius of The Washington Post that ‘I see it as a substantial change in the strategic situation in the Middle East. The Saudis are now balancing their security by playing off the U.S. against China.’

Aaron Miller, who served for long as a State Department adviser on Middle East, said the development ‘demonstrates that [the] U.S.’s influence and credibility in the region has [have] diminished and a new sort of international regional alignment is taking place which has empowered and given both Russia and China newfound influence and status’.

The background

The backdrop to the event is noteworthy. Bilateral efforts have been underway since early 2016 to ease tensions that had developed specifically between Tehran, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, and generally within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in relation to Yemen and Syria. The Emir of Kuwait and the Sultan of Oman initiated steps that were responded to by Iran. Talks were also held in Baghdad and during Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi’s visit to China in February. All concerned were worried about the attacks on shipping and energy facilities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the United Arab Emirates and the longer term implications of the regional conflicts that were underway. These together ‘brought home the risks of being on the front line of confrontation’.

The official visit by China’s President Xi Jinping to Saudi Arabia in December 2022, also saw him attending the first China-Arab States Summit and the China-GCC Summit. The theme of his address was ‘Building on Past Achievements and Jointly Creating a Brighter Future of China-GCC Relations’. China and the GCC, he stressed, should be partners for common security: China will continue to firmly support GCC countries in safeguarding their security, and support the efforts by countries of the region to resolve differences through dialogue and consultations and to build a gulf security architecture. China, he said, ‘welcomes the participation of GCC countries in the Global Security Initiative (GSI) in a joint effort to uphold regional peace and stability’.

The speech laid stress on five priority areas: ‘energy cooperation’; ‘finance and investment cooperation’; ‘innovation, science and technology’; ‘aerospace cooperation’ and ‘Chinese language and cultural cooperation’. An Action Plan for 2023-2027 was agreed upon. A comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement with specific agreements and some memoranda of understanding were also signed. It said the two supported ‘each other’s core interests’. The Chinese side ‘commended the efforts made’ by the Kingdom to serve Chinese Haj and Umrah

pilgrims. The statement stressed the importance of deepening joint cooperation with regard to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and on attracting Chinese expertise in Saudi megaprojects. The two sides signed ‘a harmonizing plan’ between the KSA’s Vision 2030 and the BRI. It is reported that a China-GCC summit in Beijing is being scheduled.

The Indian stand

India’s reaction to this development has been restrained. Apart from historical linkages, the region is in India’s proximate neighbourhood and within its security parameters. It is the principal source of hydrocarbon imports, and increasingly of investments. It is also an important destination for manpower exports apart from being a major trading partner including projects. The official policy has focused on bilateral relations and avoidance of involvement in bilateral and regional disputes. Given these priorities, India has consciously refrained from speculative ventures in alternate security architectures apart from supporting cooperative security and freedom of waterways and of navigation. The region should not be viewed in competition with China without the latter’s economic and military capacity nor should India consider itself a surrogate for those who have been outplayed, at least for the moment, in power games for transitory affections.

...