

Free Will Trumps Determinism in Gulf Politics

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China's mediation to normalise Saudi-Iranian diplomatic ties has been widely welcomed internationally, especially in the West Asian region. A clutch of unhappy states that do not want to see China stealing a march on any front, even if it advances the cause of world peace, mutely watched.

The US led this pack of dead souls. But the US is also on the horns of a dilemma. Can it afford to be a spoiler? Saudi Arabia is not only the fountainhead of petrodollar recycling — and, therefore, a pillar of the western banking system — but also America's number one market for arms exports. Europe is facing energy crisis and the stability of the oil market is an overriding concern.

Saudi Arabia has shown remarkable maturity to maintain that its "Look East" policy and the strategic partnership with China do not mean it is dumping the Americans. Saudis are treading softly.

After all, Jamal Khashoggi was a strategic asset of the US security establishment; the US is a stakeholder in the Saudi succession and it has a consistent record of sponsoring regime changes to create pliable regimes.

Yet, the fact remains that the Saudi-Iranian deal drives a knife into the heart of the US' West Asian strategy. The deal leaves the US and Israel badly isolated. The Jewish lobby may show its unhappiness during President Biden's bid for another term. China has stolen a march on the US with far-reaching consequences, which signifies a foreign policy disaster for Biden.

Washington has not spoken the last word and may be plotting to push back the peace process from becoming mainstream politics of the West Asian region. The American commentators are visualising that the Saudi-Iranian normalisation will be a long haul and the odds are heavily stacked against it.

However, the regional protagonists are already creating firewalls locally to preserve and foster the new spirit of recnciliation. Of course, China (and Russia) too lend a helping

hand. China has mooted the idea of a regional summit between Iran and the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council by the end of this year.

An unnamed Saudi official told the establishment daily Asharq Al-Awsat that Chinese President Xi Jinping approached Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Crown Prince and Prime Minister, last year about Beijing serving as a 'bridge' between the Kingdom and Iran and the latter welcomed it, as Riyadh sees Beijing being in a 'unique' position to wield unmatched 'leverage' in the Gulf.

"For Iran in particular, China is either No 1 or No 2 in terms of its international partners. And so the leverage is important in that regard, and you cannot have an alternative that is equal in importance," the [Saudi official added](#).

The Saudi official said China's role makes it more likely that the terms of the deal will hold. "It (China) is a major stakeholder in the security and stability of the Gulf," he noted. The official also revealed that the talks in Beijing involved "five very extensive" sessions on thorny issues. The most difficult topics were related to Yemen, the media, and China's role, the official said.

Meanwhile, there are positive tidings in the air too — the likelihood of a [foreign minister level meeting](#) between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the near future and, more importantly, the [reported letter of invitation](#) from King Salman of Saudi Arabia to Iranian President Ebrahim Raeisi to visit Riyadh. Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian remarked on Sunday with reference to the Yemeni crisis that

"We [Iran] are working with Saudi Arabia on ensuring the stability of the region. We will not accept any threat against us from neighbouring countries."

To be sure, the regional environment is improving. Signs of an overall easing of tensions have appeared. For the first visit of its kind in over a decade, the Turkish Foreign Minister was in Cairo and the [Egyptian FM has been to Turkey and Syria](#). Last week, on return from Beijing, Admiral Ali Shamkhani, secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council [headed for the UAE](#) where President Sheikh Mohammed received him.

Soon after that, on Sunday, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad [arrived in the UAE on an official visit](#).

"Syria has been absent from its brothers for too long, and the time has come for it to return to them and to its Arab surroundings," [Sheikh Mohamed told Assad](#) during their historic meeting at the presidential palace.

In an [interview with NourNews](#), Shamkhani described his 5 days' talks in Beijing leading to the deal with Saudi Arabia as "frank, transparent, comprehensive and constructive." He said,

"Clearing misunderstandings and looking to the future in Tehran-Riyadh relations will definitely lead to the development of regional stability and security and the increase of cooperation between the countries of the Persian Gulf and the Islamic world to manage the existing challenges."

Evidently, the regional states are tapping the "feel-good" generated by the Saudi-Iranian

understanding. Contrary to the western propaganda of an estrangement lately between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Sheikh Mohammed is identifying closely with the positive trends in the regional environment.

This is where China's overarching role fostering dialogue and amity becomes decisive. The regional countries regard China as a benign interlocutor and the concerted attempts by the US and its junior partners to run down China make no impact on the regional states.

China has immense economic interests in the region — especially, expansion of the Silk Road in West Asia. The region's political stability and security, therefore, is of vital interest to Beijing and prompts it to become the sponsor and guarantor of the Saudi-Iranian agreement. Clearly, the durability of the Saudi-Iranian deal should not be underestimated. The Saudi-Iranian agreement will remain West Asia's most important development for a long time.

Fundamentally, both Saudi Arabia and Iran have compulsions to shift the locus of their national strategies to development and economic growth. This has received scant attention. The Western media has deliberately ignored this and instead demonised the Saudi Crown Prince and created a doomsday scenario for Iran's Islamic regime.

That said, the known unknown is the tension building up over Iran's nuclear programme. The issue is among the most prominent points of contention between Tehran and the Kingdom. Also, Israeli threats of attacks on Iran's nuclear facilities are escalating. Significantly, Iran's FM Amirabdollahian is expected to visit Moscow this week.

A Russian-Chinese coordinated effort is needed to forestall the US from raking up the nuclear issue in tandem with Israel and ratchet up tensions, including military tensions, in such a way that a pretext becomes available to destabilise the region and marginalise the Saudi-Iran agreement as the leitmotif of regional politics.

All parties understand only too well that "If the Beijing agreement materialises, the violent and fanatical right-wing Israeli government will be the first to lose out, as respecting the agreement would give rise to a stable and prosperous regional system that sets the course for further normalisations and all the achievements that ensue from them," as a Lebanese columnist [wrote today in Asharq Al-Awsat](#) newspaper.

On balance, the regional states are acting on free will, increasingly and eschewing their determinism that was wedded to decisions and actions that were thought to be causally inevitable. The realisation has dawned now that it is within the capacity of sovereign states to make decisions or perform actions independently of any prior event or state of the universe.

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Featured image: UAE President Sheikh Mohammed (R) received Syria's President Assad on official visit at Abu Dhabi airport, March 19, 2023 (Source: Indian Punchline)

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