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Bilateral relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia: Implications for Regional Stability in the Middle East and North Africa

Abstract *The Middle East's geopolitical terrain has historically been marked by tensions and conflicts, with the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran being one of the most consequential factors. The global powers, particularly the US and China, should mediate the potential rapprochement between these regional powers. A study of the US and China's potential role as facilitators in the Iran-Saudi Arabian reconciliation reveals a complicated web of geopolitical, strategic, and economic variables. The changing global power structure and the possible alteration of regional dynamics are both significant. The paper delves into the changing relationships between Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey in Northeast Africa. It explores the historical connections, recent developments, and each country's motivations in the region. Explaining the future course of Middle Eastern politics and the larger field of international relations requires understanding the subtleties of the policies formulated by the US, China, Saudi Arabia, and Iran.*

Key Words: Middle East, North Africa, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Regional Stability.

Introduction

Following a period of estrangement in Iran-Saudi Arabian relations since 2016, there is a need for a shift in the Middle East's geopolitical landscape. Any diplomatic breakthrough would be significant for its historical background and global power as a mediator. This study explores the complex dynamics of a rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, analyzing China's and Russia's role in mediating the breakthrough and the ramifications for US and EU foreign policies.

Long a source of regional instability, the historical tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran impact alliances, conflicts, and the overall geopolitical balance in the Middle East. The renewal of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia would form a complex tapestry of diplomatic maneuvers with far-reaching implications. This paper endeavors to unravel these complexities, providing a nuanced understanding of this critical issue's historical, regional, and global dimensions. The first section of this article focuses on the history of what happened between Saudi Arabia and Iran, why they became bitter rivals, and why the situation worsened. After analyzing history, the article discusses the role of China and the benefits it can gain from the rapprochement between these two regional powers.

What is the US policy toward the region, being an ally of Saudi Arabia and a powerful hegemon in the Indo-Pacific region? Does the position of the US need to be more assertive and stronger in the Middle East? How powerful is China in the Middle East? In the case of a rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, what are the positive and negative impacts on regional geopolitics? Any rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia could have a transformative effect on the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East.

A change in the volatile Middle Eastern dynamics is indicated by the difficulties experienced by Saudi Arabia and Iran, two longstanding regional rivals, in efforts to mend their relations. Any rapprochement would affect the interests of two major players, China and the United States. It would have far-reaching implications for the immediate region and globally. The present work aims to investigate the reasons behind the Saudi Arabia and Iran conflict, evaluate any possibility of

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rapprochement between the two major economies, and investigate how any diplomatic breakthrough could impact the strategic planning of regional and global powers in the broader framework of international affairs.

The following queries prompted this study:

1. i. What circumstances call for a rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran following the severance of ties in 2016?
2. ii. What role can the global powers, particularly China and the US, play in mediating the breakthrough between SaudiArabia and Iran?
3. iii. How will a rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran affect global power's influence in the Middle East, and how would it impact relations among the global powers themselves?

The central hypothesis of this study is that any diplomatic development, seen in a larger context, emphasizes how the dynamics of global power are changing and how emerging powers, such as China, Russia, and the EU, are influencing international relations. Saudi Arabia and Iran's reconciliation efforts and the positive role played by the US highlight the significance of diplomacy and cooperation in tackling intricate regional issues, particularly in light of global geopolitical shifts.

The method used in this research includes both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Moreover, the analytical approach is used to analyze this critical global issue through a broader perspective and a larger lens. The changing global dynamics and the role of two global powers in the Middle East, i.e., China and the US, demand an extensive study and analytical approach to research the possibility of Iran-Saudi Arabia détente. The global power motives and the benefits that can accrue through this rapprochement and the changing foreign policies of regional states align with US efforts to regain its predominant position and Chinese efforts to make an entry into the Middle Eastern political milieu.

Regional rivalries in the Middle East and the role of global powers

The Middle East's geopolitical terrain has historically been marked by tensions and conflicts, with the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia being one of the most prominent factors (Bleie, 2016). Given the prevailing situation, if China acts as a mediator in any possible rapprochement between these regional powers, the United States' response to this changing situation would be of considerable interest.

The study of the role of China, Russia, or the EU as mediators in the Iran-Saudi Arabian rapprochement is bound to reveal a complicated web of geopolitical, strategic, and economic variables. The changing global power structure and the possible alteration of regional dynamics remain significant. Understanding the future course of Middle Eastern politics amidst the larger field of international relations would require a deeper analysis of the subtleties and contours of great power politics in the Middle East, particularly the US and China.

An opening of relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, two regional powerhouses frequently embroiled in political tensions, would mark a significant development in the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East (McLean, 2001). This paper examines the possible dynamics of this diplomatic reconciliation and the crucial role that great powers could play in mediating it.

The international community at large and the immediate stakeholders value the reconciliation efforts. A more stable Middle East would have global ramifications for energy markets, trade routes, and geopolitics. Therefore, it is crucial to comprehend the interests and motives of the world powers in any conflict resolution efforts in the Middle East.

The outcomes of a diplomatic thaw or any similar peacebuilding efforts would be influenced by the US, which is simultaneously a significant player in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) of 2015 with Iran and a longstanding ally of Saudi Arabia. The US response to reconciliation efforts between Iran and Saudi Arabia would be complex, balancing its allegiances with more general strategic considerations. The foundation of US Middle East policy has always been its close alliance with Saudi

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Arabia. Shared security concerns, geopolitical alignment, and economic interests are the foundation of this longstanding partnership.

The US response to Iran and Saudi Arabia's rapprochement would be shaped by its commitment to counterterrorism, regional stability, and the grand geopolitical chessboard. However, the JCPOA complicates the American position even further. The US withdrawalduring the Trump administration made the nuclear deal with Iran contentious (Gater-Smith, 2020). The US faces a balancing act as a result of the region's changing dynamics, which include terrorism, failed or failing states, the Israel-Palestine conflict, and the Iran-Saudi Arabia region-wide standoff. It must maintain its alliances while adjusting its strategy toward the JCPOA and overall regional stability.

China has established itself as a major player capable of exercising diplomatic influence in the region thanks to its expanding outreach brought about by its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and economic interests. This paper examines global power's reasons for getting involved and the approach adopted to get Saudi Arabia and Iran to the negotiating table. A noteworthy development in the shifting geopolitical landscape of the Middle East is the effort to restore ties between longtime rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran. Complex dynamics surround any peacebuilding efforts; the critical role global powers play as mediators, and the international and regional responses to these changing regional dynamics. China's economic interests and the ambitious BRI have been the main drivers of the steady increase in Middle Eastern involvement.

China is in a position to become an essential mediator in promoting communication between Saudi Arabia and Iran, realizing the strategic significance of maintaining regional stability. China has several reasons for getting involved, from protecting its energy investments to increasing its influence internationally. This paper examines the approach China can employ to persuade these two dominant regional powers to participate in the negotiation table. China can employ nuanced engagement and careful balancing in its diplomatic initiatives. China can act as a mediator by providing Saudi Arabia and Iran with financial incentives while using its economic clout. By using trade agreements, infrastructure development, and economic cooperation as rewards for dialogue, Beijing can deftly avoid taking a side in the long-running geopolitical and sectarian conflicts.

Regional and Global Implications of Stability/Instability in the Middle East

Once the most significant actor in the Middle East, the US faces a reshaped region as SaudiArabia and Iran engage in a power-of-influence tussle (Aarts & Van Duijne, 2012). The US's reaction to this competition, shaped by its historical allies, security considerations, and economic goals, is complex.

Motivated by pragmatic diplomacy and economic interests, the prospect of a more stable Middle East has far-reaching implications. The international community is observing this delicate Kabuki dance of diplomacy. At the same time, the complexities of power, influence, and cooperation continue to reshape the boundaries of a new global order and determine the fate of individual nations.

Fundamental differences between China and the US on a wide range of issues, including trade and economic policies, Taiwan's status, and mutual approaches to the conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East will complicate the operating environment in Asia. Asian countries would generally like the superpowers to get along better, as direct military conflict would be devastating for the region economically. However, some markets will benefit from playing the two sides against each other (for instance, for development aid or debt restructurings) or by providing investors with a more neutral place to operate.

The Middle Eastern geopolitical landscape has significant effects on world politics. If China makes an entry and gains power in the Middle East, then Pakistan, with the correct cards played, may benefit. The unchallenged influence of the United States on the region is waning. Though frequently perceived as a religious and sectarian dispute, the longstanding hostility between Saudi Arabia and Iran is more about geopolitics. Drone assaults on Saudi oil facilities and other recent events have caused Saudi

Arabia to reconsider its reliance on the United States. China can be expected to increase its involvement in the Middle East under the prevailing circumstances.

China, a rising economic giant with a voracious appetite for energy resources, is increasing its diplomatic involvement in the Middle East. A rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia as a result of global power's involvement can result in ratifying previous trade and economic agreements and reviving the security cooperation pact dating from 2001. The rapprochement could affect regional stability, particularly in Yemen, where both countries have backed opposing parties in crises. While Pakistan and other regional countries view the rapprochement as a move in the right direction toward regional peace and stability, the international community led by the United States should also support it.

A smooth relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran will ease tensions in Iraq and Lebanon and bring peace to the Muslim world. Yemen's War might also decelerate. They ought to settle their territorial disputes amicably. Though historical animosity would not go away overnight, things can turn around if personal diplomacy is established. However, the possible hurdles include the United States' dissatisfaction and Israel's capacity to sabotage the peace process.

Influence of Saudi Arabia and Iran in Northeast Africa

Respecting one another's sovereignty must be emphasized in any future bilateral agreement. The danger of conflict in the region can be decreased by normalizing relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Instability in the Middle East underscores a change in the global order since the United States' involvement in regional conflicts has diminished its credibility as a mediator. Improved relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia would offer business opportunities. This section delves into the changing relationships between Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey in Northeast Africa. It explores the historical connections, recent developments, and each country's motivations in the region.

Since June 2017, there has been growing tension between Turkey and Saudi Arabia due to their conflicting interests in Northeast Africa, particularly regarding sea lanes and countering Israeli involvement in the region. Iran, too, seeks open sea lanes, reminiscent of the era under Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi. While Turkey has increased its influence in Northeast Africa, Saudi Arabia has gained the upper hand in its rivalry with Iran.

Historically, political, economic, and cultural ties have existed between the Middle East and Northeast Africa. This includes Middle Eastern influence in Egypt, Southwest Asia, Sudan, South Sudan, and the Horn of Africa. Amongst the Middle Eastern countries, Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia have been actively engaged in the Northeast African region.

Turkey, under the AKP government since 2002, has expanded its influence beyond the Middle East, driven by political, economic, and cultural considerations. Iran, especially during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency (2005–2013), sought ties with African countries to counter Western isolation. In its geopolitical and sectarian rivalry with Iran, Saudi Arabia has extended its influence to Northeast Africa (Oruc, 2019). Turkey's interest in Africa has increased since the end of the Cold War, especially under the AKP government. Turkey and Iran view Northeast and East Africa as gateways to enhance relations with the entire continent. After the Islamic Revolution, Iran initially did not prioritize Africa but shifted its focus after the JCPOA in 2015.

The Ottoman Empire established diplomatic relations with Ethiopia in 1896, and the Republic of Turkey continued diplomatic ties after its establishment in 1923. Saudi Arabia and Yemen maintained neutrality during Italy's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935. In the post-Cold War era, Turkey's involvement in Africa expanded, particularly with peacekeeping efforts in Somalia (Unified Task Force/UN Operation in Somalia II).

Turkey's interest in Africa intensified post-Cold War as it sought to demonstrate its strategic value to Western partners. Political, economic, and cultural ties with African countries, especially with Sunni

Muslim populations, became a priority. Turkey positioned itself as a significant regional actor, involving itself in peacekeeping efforts, hosting conferences, and expanding economic relations.

While Saudi Arabia gained influence in Northeast Africa, concerns arose about Turkey's involvement. Saudi Arabia and Iran had cooperated in the North Yemen Civil War (1962–1970) against Gamal Abdul Nasser's Egypt (1956-1970). However, Iran seeks stronger economic relations with Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda. These East African countries are also expanding ties, including security connections, with Israel. In the post-Cold War era, Turkey participated in international efforts, including anti-piracy operations in the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Aden. President Erdogan's visits to African countries increased, emphasizing humanitarian and strategic interests. Turkey's involvement in Somalia, including assistance and economic initiatives, symbolized its commitment to the region (Özkan, 2017).

Turkey's bilateral trade with African countries significantly increased, particularly in Northeast Africa. Erdogan's numerous visits and establishment of new embassies demonstrated Turkey's commitment to the continent. The country's economic engagements, such as the African Agricultural Development Program, showcased its multifaceted approach.

While Turkey aimed to avoid direct involvement in the Saudi-Iranian rivalry in Africa, potential tensions emerged. Saudi Arabia, disturbed by Turkey's defense of Qatar and accusations of establishing a military base in Sudan, expressed concerns about Turkey's expanding influence on the African continent.

The intricate web of historical connections, geopolitical motivations, and economic interests shapes the relationships between Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran in Northeast Africa. As these countries assert their influence in the region, the potential for increased tensions and strategic maneuvering remains a worrisome aspect of Middle Eastern and North African geopolitics. Therefore, most commentators recommend a Saudi Arabia-Iran rapprochement to stabilize the geopolitical conditions in the Middle East as well as North Africa, i.e., the MENA region.

Conclusion

The role of global powers as mediators can enable Saudi Arabia and Iran to reestablish their diplomatic ties, which would be a significant development in an unstable Middle East. The entire region's stability has been impacted by geopolitical tensions resulting from the historically tense relations between the two dominant regional powers. The role of global powers as mediators in this relationship can show how vital stability is and how much global powers are committed to maintaining stability internationally. China can play a variety of roles in mediating the Saudi-Iranian reconciliation. China should encourage stability in the region due to its economic interests, especially given its reliance on oil imports. China can get the two countries to the negotiating table using its diplomatic and economic ties. This would illustrate how China's influence as a diplomatic power has grown within Asia and the larger international relations framework.

Several variables may complicate and influence the United States policy toward the Iran-Saudi Arabia rapprochement. A rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran is a step in the right direction toward regional stability, even though the United States has historically played a significant role in the Middle East and has strategic alliances with Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, given its longstanding partnerships and alliances, the US may also exercise caution. The sincerity of both sides in addressing the underlying causes of their disputes and striving for a durable peace will determine whether the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement is possible and sustainable.

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