

Saudi-Iran Rapprochement: Implications for Pakistan

Abstract

The recent rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran is the latest development in the major geopolitical shifts of the Gulf region. The agreement may potentially drive the region on a steady road toward peace. As a nation fostering friendly relations with both countries, Pakistan has the potential to strengthen its diplomatic ties with both parties and move away from the challenge of navigating delicate situations that may arise. However, it is important to consider whether this approach aligns with Pakistan's socio-economic and political objectives. Extensive analysis is ongoing, and it appears that the outcome may be leaning towards a limited positive impact.

I. Introduction

Since its establishment in 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia have experienced divergent interests, resulting in a competition for influence in the Middle East. This rivalry has had far-reaching consequences for the entire region, particularly for states embroiled in their proxy conflicts. However, in March 2023, a significant milestone was achieved as Iran and Saudi Arabia signed an agreement to restore diplomatic relations, thereby taking a constructive stride towards fostering regional stability. Facilitated by China, this positive development holds promising prospects for promoting economic and security cooperation within the region. China's recognised role as a mediator in the Middle East is driven by its pursuit of expanding its interests and fostering connectivity to ensure overall regional stability.

For Pakistan, this agreement brings a sense of solace as it paves the way for a smoother navigation of its relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia. Pakistan has encountered challenges in maintaining a delicate balance between the two nations in the past. However, with their renewed cooperation, Pakistan can now discern a clearer path forward. As Muslim-majority countries, Pakistan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia possess the potential to establish trilateral relations and collaborate on mainly crucial areas such as energy and security. This convergence of interests can establish a solid foundation for fruitful cooperation among the three nations in the

long run, if Pakistan is seen as a significant trade partner, contributing significantly to regional stability and prosperity.

II. Implications for the Middle East

The security situation in the Middle East has been a matter of concern for regional stability. Past events, such as the Iranian revolution in 1979, the subsequent severing of ties with the US in 1980, and subsequent sanctions related to Iran's uranium enrichment program, have highlighted the need for the country to maintain relevance in the region. As a result, Iran has provided support to proxies involved in the Yemeni and Syrian Civil Wars. Saudi Arabia has expressed concerns regarding Iranian-backed militias targeting key industrial areas of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members. However, recent developments, particularly the Chinese-brokered deal, have brought these issues to the brink of peaceful resolution.

Efforts are underway for Riyadh and Tehran to enhance security cooperation, promoting peace in the region. However, this can be under threat by possible Saudi-Israeli backdoor channeling. Nevertheless, it is important to consider the potential for increased hostility from Israel following these developments. Given the existing tensions between Iran and Israel, combined with Iran pursuing legitimacy in international politics, Israel already feels provoked and may perceive a need to pursue an arms race under the pretext of safeguarding its sovereignty as the only Jewish state in a predominantly Arab region. This could potentially undermine efforts to stabilize the security situation in the Middle East.

A potential outcome of these developments could be Iran's inclusion in the GCC. Qatar has already shown support for Iran's membership, and Kuwait has been engaged in efforts since early 2017 to cooperate with Iran. This would be further accelerated by China's support for Iran's inclusion with its growing influence in Arab states. Although Saudi Arabia welcomed the Trump administration's isolationist approach towards Iran, backchannel talks between Saudi-Iran and UAE-Iran, as well as Chinese influence, paved the way for a deal between these longstanding Gulf rivals. The GCC is currently monitoring Iran's behavior towards the region, and based on that assessment, it will determine a joint plan of action, either towards Iran's membership in the GCC or towards resolving regional conflicts such as the Yemeni and Syrian Civil Wars.

However, a huge factor to consider is Saudi Arabia's unpredictability regarding the state of Israel due to US influence, which may be a source of contention for Iran.

The possibility of resolving the Yemeni Civil War is now a subject of debate, particularly as the rival factions funding the war are moving towards peace. Efforts to resolve the issue may be more feasible than anticipated, especially with the Biden administration actively seeking to end the conflict through policy initiatives. It is crucial to address the grievances of both the Houthi leadership and the UN-recognized government in Yemen and find mutually agreeable solutions. Iran should cease providing ammunition and funding to the rebels, while the Saudi-led coalition should discontinue active support for factions opposing Iran. These measures will facilitate the containment of militia groups that disrupt regional peace, as it will curb support for proxies and radical organizations.

III. Implications for Pakistan

Pakistan has a significant stake in the successful improvement of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia for various reasons. This development presents an opportunity for Pakistan to maintain a balanced and constructive diplomatic relationship with both countries. Dr. Maleeha Lodhi, Pakistan's former representative to the UN, has emphasized the potential benefits, highlighting that this agreement opens up new avenues for Pakistan in terms of diplomacy and economic cooperation. Pakistan has traditionally pursued a policy of delicately balancing its relations between Saudi Arabia, its strategic ally, and Iran, its neighbor. With the recent rapprochement between these former rivals, Pakistan now has the diplomatic flexibility to explore new initiatives and strengthen ties with Iran.

Furthermore, Pakistan has a strong interest in promoting stability and security in the Middle East. In fact, Pakistan was one of the first countries to welcome this move towards reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia. "Pakistan firmly believes that this important diplomatic breakthrough will contribute to peace and stability in the region and beyond," the Foreign Office said in a statement hours after the landmark development. The country has often found itself caught in the crossfire of proxy conflicts between Saudi Arabia and Iran. By maintaining balanced relations, Pakistan seeks to contribute to regional stability and avoid being entangled in

these conflicts. Pakistan can potentially play a constructive role as a partner for both Iran and Saudi Arabia, fostering trilateral cooperation to address issues such as cross-border terrorism and ensuring the protection of interstate trading routes. Cooperation in countering terrorism could increase with intelligence sharing and joint efforts against active terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda, Taliban and ISIS. Such endeavors would contribute to enhancing Pakistan's image from a potentially volatile nation to an active participant in promoting regional peace and security in South East Asia. It will also help Pakistan to improve its security situation which is much needed for its national development.

However, it is important to note that the Saudi-Iran rapprochement may have limited direct socio-political impact on Pakistan, other than the positive alleviation of sectarian violence in border regions such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) and Balochistan provinces. Pakistan must carefully assess its security interests vis-à-vis its neighboring countries before taking firm positions on diplomatic forums. This thoughtful approach will enable Pakistan to effectively navigate regional dynamics and safeguard its own stability and national interests. Furthermore, the deal may even have negative implications for Pakistan. While reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran could lead to peace in the region and may result in a decrease in sectarian violence in Pakistan, it could also have the opposite effect. There is a possibility of an increase in sectarian violence as both Sunni and Shia militant groups would be against the idea of peace with each other. In addition, an ease of tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran could result in Iran becoming more assertive towards its interests abroad which could have severely negative effects for Pakistan, including security challenges and a loss of regional influence.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Saudi-Iran rapprochement presents a positive step towards regional peace, offering Pakistan the chance to strengthen its diplomatic ties and contribute to stability. It provides an opportunity for Pakistan to strengthen its diplomatic ties with both countries and move away from navigating delicate situations. By maintaining balanced relations, Pakistan aims to contribute to regional stability and avoid getting entangled in proxy conflicts. While Pakistan does not stand to gain much more from the deal, there is a possibility of a trilateral security initiative which could have a significant impact in fostering regional stability and countering terrorism threats. As Pakistan faces security issues standing in the way of its development, a counter-terrorism initiative could greatly benefit Pakistan in improving its security situation.

While the Saudi-Iran rapprochement holds significant potential for regional peace and stability, its ultimate impact on Pakistan remains to be seen. Pakistan must tread cautiously, balancing its diplomatic engagements with a keen assessment of its security interests. It is essential for all parties involved to continue engaging in constructive dialogue and cooperative efforts to ensure lasting peace and security in the Gulf region. Pakistan needs to continue playing a supportive role in the restoration of diplomatic ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia to contribute to a stable and peaceful Middle East while strengthening its own position in the region.