**China and the new Middle East -Part - I**

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Due to its growing role in the Middle East, China is emerging as “an economic heavyweight…a diplomatic lightweight and…a military featherweight” in the region (RAND Corporation).

There is no doubt about the conclusions asserted in one of the 2016 studies of the American think tank, although Beijing still has minimal security or military role in the region as compared with that of the US; its diplomatic position has certainly magnified than how it was in the past. The international community was certainly taken aback by how China silently but successfully brokered a truce between Saudi Arabia and Iran, two illiberal regimes which are exceptionally oil-rich countries in the volatile Middle East.

It is too early to celebrate the deal and be sanguine about the prospects of this rapprochement for the region and beyond, including its implications for Pakistan which has friendly ties with both countries. Having said that, it is expected that the mending of fences between the two countries could bring considerable ease for Pakistani policymakers as they have consistently struggled to strike a balance while choosing Riyadh over Tehran.

The recent opening of the Mand-Pishin ‘border sustenance market’, the first of the six such initiatives planned on the border of Balochistan, Pakistan’s largest province by area and the Iranian province of Sistan-Baluchestan, the country’s second largest province out of 31 provinces in terms of size after Kirman, and many other such economic and trade initiatives would at least not summon the kingdom’s wrath.

It must be emphasized that rivalry between Saudi and Iran, where the former is the largest oil producer in OPEC, and the latter is also a major player, is a decades-long tussle to gain predominance in the Middle East. This battle for regional supremacy has been shaped by multiple factors comprising the clash of their respective religious identities, political ideologies, and core national interests. In this rivalry, oil is an integral part and due to this international powers find it hard to stay away from the region.

Keeping in view their historical mistrust, the role of Beijing has been hailed by most countries – sans the US/Israel and the likes – in bringing Riyadh and Tehran to the negotiating table. Commenting about their conflict, Saudi King Fahd once lamented in 1988: “I don’t know where it will end…Iran has harmed relations not only with us but also with its neighbors and the whole world…Iran has tried many times to undermine security in the Gulf region, the Arabian Peninsula, and the world. What has Iran gained? Iran has gained nothing”. At the same time, he also added: “we cannot change the geographic reality of Iran, and Iran cannot change our geographic reality”.

This is a fact that needs to be realized not only by Riyadh and Tehran, but all countries enmeshed in endless boundary and other disputes, including Islamabad and New Delhi. Mutual coexistence should be the norm. But alas, it is not so in most cases, particularly when one party is replete with hubris, fuelled by material superiority or ideological superiority or both.

If countries and their leaderships remain mired in historical wrangles and do not want to talk to each other at all, it will be a zero-sum-game for all. Those nations can truly prosper that are able to get rid of historical baggage and move ahead. There is no doubt that both Saudi and Iran used to regard each other with immense scorn and their hatred for each other was rarely muted.

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran’s current supreme leader (in office since 1989), used to denounce the Saudi royal family as “sinful idols of arrogance and colonialism”. In a tit for tat, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, widely known as MBS, used to always assert that “if you see any problems in the Middle East, you will find Iran”. Hence, given the intensity of hatred and animosity, the current reconciliation is by no means a modest achievement of not only Beijing, but also of Riyadh and Tehran to bury the hatchet and move on.

At the same time, it must be remembered that there have been such episodes of understanding in the past too. For example, from 1998 through 2001, the leadership in both countries issued statements about collaboration that are reminiscent of today’s friendliness. Prince Nayef bin Saud, the Saudi interior minister, once declared that: “We consider Saudi Arabia’s security as Iran’s security and Iran’s security as our security”. Iran’s ambassador to Saudi Arabia went even further by stating that “Iran’s missile capabilities are at the disposal of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia”. He added that “our relations with Saudi Arabia have reached a historical stage where we are complementing one another”.

However, several ill-fated events later brought an end to the Saudi-Iran détente and resulted in renewed and fiercer rivalry. Specifically, the victory of Ahmadinejad in the 2005 presidential election reversed the course of their bilateral ties. Formerly a mayor of Tehran and a veteran of the Revolutionary Guard, he renewed his pledge to return Iran to its revolutionary course and assert itself as “the preeminent power of the region”.

Hence, old mutual suspicions and mistrust based on the fundamental incompatibility of the two governments and two systems, “one powered with revolutionary zeal and the other the status quo – one Shia, the other Sunni” were reinvigorated once again. Tehran’s interventions in Lebanon, the fall of Saddam in 2003 and the subsequent Sunni-Shia civil war once again brought the two countries on a collision path.

In another theatre, the Houthi advances in Yemen started ringing an alarm bell in Riyadh. As Saudi Arabia shares an eleven-hundred-mile porous border with Yemen, the rise of the Houthis was a big gain for Iran. One deputy of Ayatollah Khamenei declared that the capture of Sanaa was “a victory” for Tehran, jubilantly adding that Tehran now controlled four Arab capitals: Baghdad, Beirut, Damascus and Sanaa. Saudi really felt threatened because Riyadh realized that an Iranian encirclement would be an undeniable reality, something which must have given sleepless nights to the monarchy, resulting in the ill-fated Yemen war.

The implementation of Iran’s nuclear deal in January 2016, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) which led to the easing of US, EU and UN sanctions, further confounded the security dilemma of the Saudi Kingdom and its allies in the Gulf region. Two weeks before the lifting of international sanctions, Riyadh-Tehran hostility took a new turn when in January 2016, a furious mob vandalized and scorched the Saudi embassy in Tehran.

In a tit for tat, Saudi Arabia responded expeditiously, ordered its diplomats to leave Tehran and told Iranian diplomats to leave Saudi Arabia within 48 hours. This particular episode was the harbinger of another dark chapter in the increasingly deteriorating Riyadh-Tehran bilateral ties. It was also a reminder of how Saudi-Iran rifts have metastasised into various theatres including Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and elsewhere throughout the Middle East and even beyond. The Saudi-Iran hostility has had violent repercussions. And like several Middle Eastern countries, the economic and geopolitical implications of the competition are deeply felt in Pakistan as well.

To be continued

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