**The China/Saudi Arabia/Iran Agreement**

**The US is increasin-gly viewed as erratic and unreliable.**

[**Dr James J Zogby**](https://www.nation.com.pk/columnist/dr-james-j-zogby)

March 28, 2023

After four days of negotiations in Beijing, an agree­ment has been reached between [Saudi Arabia](https://www.nation.com.pk/tag/saudi%20arabia) and Iran to restore diplomatic ties. While reactions from pundits and politicians have ranged from euphoria to cyni­cism to outright hostility, reality dictates that cautious optimism is the better course. Here are a few obser­vations on what just happened and why, and what needs to happen next:

It’s significant that China brought the parties togeth­er. For domestic political reasons, the US could not and would not play that role, and the diplomatic vacuum opened the door for Beijing. The stage was set with US miscues in the region, beginning with the Bush administra­tion’s disastrous war in Iraq, the Obama administration’s short-sighted approach to the Iran nuclear deal, and the Trump ad­ministration’s unpredictable actions. American hubris, erratic behaviour, and lack of concern for allies’ needs led one Arab in­tellectual to describe the past two decades of US policy as “a diz­zying roller coaster ride and we want to get off.”

[President Alvi condemns Israeli aggression against Palestinians](https://www.nation.com.pk/05-Apr-2023/president-alvi-condemns-israeli-aggression-against-palestinians)

No longer confident of US support, some Arab states drew closer to China and Russia and even began inching their way toward normalising relations with Iran. UAE restored diplo­matic ties and [Saudi Arabia](https://www.nation.com.pk/tag/saudi%20arabia) began exploratory meetings in Baghdad with Iranian counterparts. It fell to China, which has been expanding economic ties with both Iran and Arab Gulf countries, to close the deal by playing the needed diplomatic role to facilitate an agreement. The China/Saudi Arabia/Iran pact not only envisions restored diplomatic ties, non-inter­vention, and respect for sovereignty but also sets the stage for a regional economic summit later this year.

Recent polling across the Middle East demonstrates China’s enhanced role at the expense of the US. While still considered a more powerful ally, the US is increasingly viewed as errat­ic and unreliable. Strong majorities in most Arab countries see China as the emergent power that will eclipse the US in the next 20 years. We’ve sold Arab states weapons, invested heavily in the region, and, at times, provided needed security, but we’ve also been demeaning and demanding and too often failed to address the concerns of Arab regional partners. As Saudi Arabian leaders have told US presidents going back to Bush: “If you insist on acting according to your interests, even when they conflict with ours, then we will act according to our interests, even when they conflict with yours.”

[Foreign vets give new lease of life to ailing elephant at Karachi Zoo](https://www.nation.com.pk/05-Apr-2023/foreign-vets-give-new-lease-of-life-to-ailing-elephant-at-karachi-zoo)

As this China/Saudi Arabia/Iran agreement illustrates, as a result of our hubris we may no longer be, as Madeline Al­bright often declared, “the indispensable nation.” That said, declarations that “peace is at hand” are premature. Iran and [Saudi Arabia](https://www.nation.com.pk/tag/saudi%20arabia) will establish relations and China will parlay its economic ties with both countries and others in the region to broaden the framework, but the big remaining question is whether Iran will and can reduce regional tensions by rein­ing in its regional allies. Iran has invested heavily in support­ing proxy militias in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. If will­ing, Iran may be able to exercise some restraint and control. But even if they reduce financial and military support, it’s un­clear whether the destabilising groups they’ve backed will submit to their dictates. Deep-seated sectarian and structural conflicts remain in each of these countries—which Iran didn’t create, but instead exploited and helped to exacerbate. One measure of how serious Iran is about peaceful coexistence and focusing on trade, development, and promoting prosper­ity for its own people and the region, is its willingness to par­ticipate in regional efforts to stabilise the countries in conflict by ending support for its militias and working with Saudi Ara­bia and others to achieve political solutions.

[Imran decides against appearing before IHC tomorrow](https://www.nation.com.pk/05-Apr-2023/imran-decides-against-appearing-before-ihc-tomorrow)

If the China/Saudi Arabia/Iran pact can be built upon, it could represent a major transformation of the region. This outcome is far from assured and will require heavy lifting and good faith of all parties, especially Iran. If the US were smart, it would recognise the new game afoot. We can either remain on the sidelines, like Israel—shell-shocked, finger-pointing, and bad-mouthing this development—or we can seize this opportunity and offer to support and participate in expanding a regional peacemaking effort. I hope we choose the latter option, but fear we’ll choose the former

Dr. James J. Zogby

The writer is the President of Arab American Institute.