**Triangular Diplomacy**

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In recent years, China has significantly bolstered its mediatory influence in the Middle East, earning itself a commendable reputation as a peace broker. The country is widely regarded as a neutral party that refrains from aligning with any particular power bloc, granting China a distinctive edge over the United States and Europe in cultivating trustworthy alliances. Employing a pragmatic approach, China adeptly engages with all involved parties, fostering relationships founded on mutual interests.

The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia is driven by geopolitical and ideological factors. The recent agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia showcases China’s remarkable capacity to facilitate dialogue between two historically opposed nations and help them discover mutual understanding. With approximately 30 per cent of Iran’s foreign trade and being Saudi Arabia’s primary oil export market, China’s expanding economic ties have granted it significant leverage and influence on the global stage, enabling it to serve as a mediator for peace. Notably, this development coincides with the start of President Xi Jinping’s third term, signalling China’s consistent pursuit of foreign policy goals centred around fostering cooperation among nations.

Despite the presence of a political will, the normalization of Iran-Saudi relations by the United States may have been impracticable due to its prior entanglements in the Middle East. The absence of diplomatic ties between the U.S. and Iran, coupled with its alliance with Saudi Arabia, would have hindered the U.S. from being perceived as an impartial mediator in Saudi-Iran negotiations.

Furthermore, there were tensions among the United States, Saudi Arabia, and the U.A.E. Their long-established alliance, based on an arrangement of oil exchange for military protection while avoiding involvement in Saudi royal matters, faced a significant setback in 2018. This was triggered by the assassination of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi and critical comments made by then-President Trump regarding the Kingdom.

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As a consequence, the U.S. scaled back its support for the Arab coalition’s Yemen war efforts, leading to strained regional relations. In response, Saudi Arabia began seeking alternative partners, turning to countries like Russia and China. These nations were willing to invest in Saudi Arabia without attempting to impose their values on the Kingdom.

To reduce reliance on oil exports and strengthen its geopolitical position, the Saudi government initiated numerous initiatives under the Vision 2030 development plan. This strategic move aimed at reducing dependency on the U.S. and diversifying the Saudi economy. The dynamic between Saudi Arabia and Iran has been in a constant state of change, carrying considerable ramifications both regionally and globally. While religious disparities have played a prominent role in shaping their relations, they do not solely define the complexity of their interactions. Other crucial factors include their diverse ethnic backgrounds, the struggle for influence between Arab and Persian powers, and conflicting interests involving regional and international actors. As the two dominant forces in the region, their actions have prompted neighbouring states to form diverse alliances with varying degrees of cooperation. The evolving Saudi-Iran relations have significant implications for Pakistan, affecting its security, economic interests, and religious and sectarian fault lines. However, there are encouraging signs in the current political climate that offer opportunities to mend ties. Pakistan has made previous attempts at reconciliation, and now, Iraq has taken the initiative to facilitate arbitration in their ongoing efforts to improve relations.

The recent diplomatic breakthrough will bestow substantial advantages upon Pakistan, given its proximity to Iran, partnership with Saudi Arabia, and crucial alliance with China.

The improvement of Saudi-Iran relations presents a significant opportunity for Pakistan to revitalize its economy by fostering trade and energy connections. Pakistan has historically enjoyed a close trade alliance with Iran and strong economic ties with Saudi Arabia, where a considerable number of Pakistani citizens are employed. While the relations with both countries have experienced ups and downs, the potential restoration of their ties offers promising prospects for Pakistan.

Reducing tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran can also create a unique opportunity for Pakistan to rally the Muslim world in support of the Kashmir Cause. The strengthening of ties between China, Iran, and Pakistan is of paramount importance for the successful realization of projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Additionally, such cooperation has the potential to enhance regional security. Moreover, if relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia normalize, it could have a positive impact on Pakistan by potentially alleviating religious tensions.

Pakistan’s Shia population constitutes approximately 20% to 25% of its total population and maintains significant religious and cultural connections with both Tehran and Riyadh. By fostering engagement with both countries and facilitating dialogue and cooperation, Pakistan can play a pivotal role in reducing regional tensions and promoting stability and peace.

To effectively sustain this role, Pakistan must adopt a balanced approach that takes into account the interests and concerns of all parties involved. Engaging in meaningful dialogue with both Iran and Saudi Arabia will be crucial in seizing these opportunities and contributing to regional harmony.

The triangular relationship between Pakistan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia holds immense significance, but it also presents growing challenges for Pakistan as it seeks to balance its ties between the two countries amidst their ongoing rivalry. Pakistan’s constitution, particularly Article 40, mandates the strengthening of fraternal relations among Muslim nations, making it imperative for Pakistan not to take sides or divide the Muslim world in the face of intra-Muslim disputes. So, Pakistan has been trying to obey this article for a long time.

Historically, Pakistan’s relations with Saudi Arabia have been transactional, with each nation possessing assets that complement the other–Saudi Arabia’s economic prowess and Pakistan’s robust military capabilities. In contrast, Pakistan’s interactions with Iran have been characterized by mutual forbearance, especially during times of border-related tensions. This reflects a relationship where both countries demonstrate restraint in not taking actions that could harm the other.

Pakistan’s history of playing a constructive role in the Middle East, consistently supporting and facilitating efforts to bridge gaps between regional countries, deserves commendation. With the recent restoration of diplomatic ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia, Pakistan’s mediating role takes on even greater significance, as it holds the potential to foster positive momentum and contribute to a stable and peaceful Middle East. Concurrently, Pakistan must reinforce its position as a prominent regional player.

To achieve this, a nuanced and balanced approach is imperative, taking into account the interests and concerns of all countries involved. By doing so, Pakistan can reap substantial benefits for itself and the broader region, promoting cooperation and stability in the Middle East. In the face of persisting challenges, Pakistan’s commitment to upholding its constitutional obligations and promoting harmony among Muslim nations will be instrumental in successfully navigating the complexities of this triangular relationship.

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