[**A game changer?**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1743151/a-game-changer)

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THE Middle East’s security landscape could be transformed by an unanticipated development that took place earlier this month. Long-standing regional rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran [agreed to restore bilateral relations](https://www.dawn.com/news/1741433) after seven years of bitter confrontation and a diplomatic hiatus. The deal was signed in Beijing, which mediated the agreement.

In the joint trilateral statement, the two countries pledged to respect the “sovereignty of states” and “non-interference in the internal affairs of states”. They agreed to revive their 2001 security cooperation pact and renew their general cooperation agreement of 1998, which ranges over trade, economy and investment.

The breakthrough followed several days of talks in China, which were preceded by two key high-level visits — by Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi to Beijing in February 2023 and Chinese President Xi Jinping’s trip to Saudi Arabia in December 2022. These summit-level meetings and Saudi-Iranian exchanges in the region laid the necessary groundwork for the March 10 agreement.

The thaw in Saudi-Iran relations is a potential game changer for the region — provided it gathers steam and lasts. It has far-reaching implications for the Middle East and beyond, which could pave the way for a more stable and peaceful region. Both countries had strong motivations to seek détente.

Iran’s interest was to break out of the diplomatic isolation imposed on it by the US-led West. It was also deeply apprehensive about the likelihood of Saudi-Israeli diplomatic relations being established at Washington’s prodding and behest. That would have deepened Tehran’s isolation and gravely aggravated its security challenges.

The Saudi motive emanated from its security anxieties over escalation in tensions with Iran. In recent years, Saudi Arabia has faced several attacks including on its oil facilities and infrastructure. Over half of the kingdom’s oil production was affected by a missile and drone attack on its oil-processing installations in 2019, for which Riyadh blamed Tehran.

For Riyadh, reduced tensions with Iran aims to address these security threats. Other factors have also been at work. America’s diminished diplomatic and military footprint in the Middle East as it switched focus to its strategic priority of countering China as well as strained relations between the Biden administration and the Saudi leadership seemed to convince Riyadh that Washington was no longer a reliable or consistent ally, much less a guarantor of its security.

The agreement is a tentative first step towards détente but it can pave the way for a more stable region.

Domestic considerations also figured prominently for the Saudi government which is pursuing an ambitious Vision 2030 plan that envisages diversifying the economy and enhanced spending on infrastructure and social sectors to make the country a global investment hub. Its domestic reform agenda urges lowering of regional tensions and a stable and predictable environment.

Under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia has not only seen significant reforms in the country but also initiatives abroad that have set a new direction for its foreign policy.

It has moved to mend ties with Qatar and Turkiye. And it has shown it can distance itself from Washington, which has prompted many experts to note that MBS is pursuing a foreign policy increasingly independent of the West.

The rapprochement has raised the question of how this will affect conflicts, proxy wars and issues in the region on which the two countries have been at loggerheads, especially Yemen but also Syria, Lebanon and Iraq. Will de-escalation follow on these regional fronts?

If the two countries are able to implement their new understandings, it is likely that the sources of regional instability are reduced. Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saudcast the agreement as indication of his country’s emphasis on “political solutions and dialogue”. Progress in talks on Yemen could be the first test of whether a peace dividend can result from the rapprochement.

Of course, this is only a tentative, opening act of a challenging process. Détente after all is a process, not an event. There are many questions about the follow-up and scope of the reconciliation. Is it tactical? Will it endure? Can decades of mistrust be overcome?

Will they be able address each other’s security concerns? Will the West try to undermine the deal? Can the two countries deal with underlying issues and transcend the Shia-Sunni schism that has historically been a driver of their enmity? Comments in the Saudi media have focused on whether Iranian behaviour would change to make détente meaningful.

China’s role is seen as critical. According to Faisal Abbas, editor in chief of Arab News, China as guarantor of the agreement has a high stake in ensuring that the détente makes headway.

In fact, China has scored a major diplomatic victory by its mediation. It has demonstrated its growing global influence and established itself as a major player in the Middle East. China is the biggest trading partner of both countries and, unlike the US, has good relations with both to play peacemaker. The region accounts for 40 per cent of China’s oil imports which underlines its stakes in the region.

On the other hand, the US has been diplomatically marginalised by the development — for now. Its effort to isolate Iran has suffered a major setback at a time of rising tensions between Washington and Tehran over Iran’s nuclear programme.

The US plan to normalise Saudi-Israel relations has also been scuttled for the immediate future. Israel faces a major reversal in seeking to build a regional coalition against Iran. Israel’s former prime minister Naftali Bennett called the agreement a “serious and dangerous” development and a “fatal blow to the effort to create a regional alliance” against Iran.

Washington’s muted response indicates its unease and concern over the rapprochement. Many Western commentators however saw the thaw for what it is. Peter Baker [wrote](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/11/us/politics/saudi-arabia-iran-china-biden.html) in *The New York Times* that the Chinese-brokered deal had “upended US diplomacy in the Middle East”.

Jeffrey Feltman, a well-respected former senior UN and US official, was quoted in news reports as saying the agreement “will be interpreted — probably accurately — as a slap at the Biden administration and as evidence that China is the rising power”.

Many tests lie ahead for the rapprochement to gather momentum but for now it holds the hope of regional powers seeking regional solutions to their disputes.

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