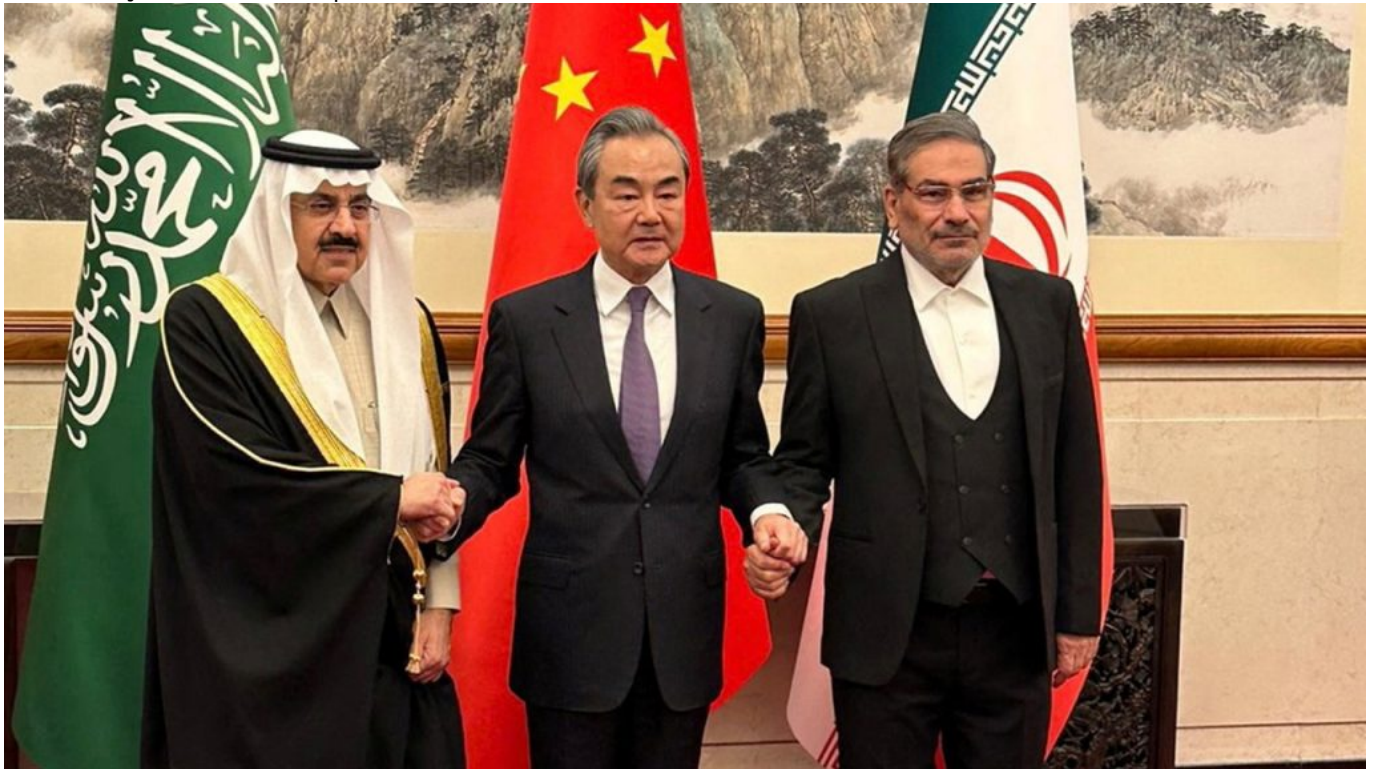


Iran-Saudi Rivalry - India's Concerns and China's Role

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Context - In an unexpected turn of events on March 10, the National Security Advisors of Iran and Saudi Arabia declared, in the presence of Chinese State Councillor Wang Yi in Beijing, that they have come to a mutual understanding to address their issues, and will reopen their embassies within a span of two months.

Background of Iran-Saudi Rivalry

- Since January 2016, when the **Saudi kingdom severed diplomatic ties with Iran after the attack on the former's embassy in Tehran**, the two countries have been engaged in a rivalry for regional geopolitical influence, prolonging conflicts in Yemen and Syria.
- Only a few months ago, Iran's top military officials were threatening Saudi Arabia with consequences unless it controlled its Persian-language media outlets zealously covering anti-government protests in Iran. Riyadh had raised alert levels citing a credible threat of attack from Iran.

Who supports whom

■ Saudi side ■ Iran side ■ Split* ■ Non-aligned



Saudi-Iran Conflicts

- **Religious Factionalism:** Relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran have been sour in part **because of religious differences**, which go back centuries. They each follow one of the two main branches of Islam.
- **Leader of Islamic World:** Historically, Saudi Arabia, a monarchy and home to the birthplace of Islam, saw itself as the **leader of the Muslim world**. However this was challenged in 1979 by the Islamic revolution in Iran which created a new type of state in the region.
- **Proxy Wars:** Iran and Saudi Arabia are not directly fighting but they are engaged in a variety of proxy wars (conflicts where they support rival sides and militias) around the region.

Iran's Strategic partnership with China

- Iran considers China its most important strategic partner, and was alarmed when the **joint statement issued at the first China-GCC Summit** in Riyadh in December 2022 called on Iran to maintain the non-proliferation regime and respect the principles of

non-interference in the internal affairs of states.

- The China-brokered agreement coming a month after Raisi's visit to Beijing shows how Beijing has successfully leveraged its ties with Iran struggling with domestic pressure, sanctions, and deteriorating ties with Europe over its military support to Russia.

Dialogue Process

- **Iran-Saudi Security Dialogue:** This refers to the ongoing talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia aimed at improving security in the region, particularly in Yemen. These talks were facilitated by then-Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi in 2021, and have continued in fits and starts since then.
- **Biden Administration's Conflict Management Measures:** The Biden administration has taken steps to end American support for offensive operations in the war in Yemen, including relevant arm sales, as a conflict management measure. This move helped to make Riyadh see the logic of dialogue with Iran.
- **Chinese Role in Brokering the Final Agreement:** China has played a key role in brokering the final agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Beijing has adopted a balanced approach of strengthening ties with all players based on common interests and mutual respect rather than geopolitical alignments with specific countries.
- **China's Growing Regional Engagement:** China's growing regional engagement in the Middle East is driven by its desire to distinguish itself from the US-led interventions in the region. Beijing has supported Gulf countries in setting up multilateral dialogue platforms and taking the initiative in regional issues, including those involving Iran.

India's Concerns in this Rivalry

- **Impact on India's Energy Security:** Any improvement in relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia could impact India's energy security. **India is heavily dependent on oil imports from both countries**, and any conflict or tension between them could lead to disruptions in oil supplies and increased prices.
- **Potential for regional destabilization:** The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia has fueled conflicts in the Middle East, including the ongoing war in Yemen. Any escalation of tensions between the two countries could lead to further destabilization in the region, which could have implications for India's security interests.
- **China's growing influence in the Middle East:** China's role in brokering the agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia highlights its growing political capital in the region, which could have implications for India's strategic interests. **India has traditionally maintained good relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia**, and any shift in the regional balance of power could impact India's interests.
- **Impact on India's Chabahar port project:** India has invested heavily in the development of the **Chabahar port in Iran as a gateway to Afghanistan** and Central Asia. Any improvement in relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia could impact India's plans for the port, which could have implications for India's strategic interests in the region.

Conclusion

India will now have to deal with the new reality where China has been able to translate its economic influence in West Asia into diplomatic heft. The agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia could have positive implications for the region's stability, but India will need to carefully monitor the evolving dynamics and assess how it can leverage its own relations with Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other regional players to secure its strategic interest.