

# Two cheers for China in the Middle East

It was good that Beijing stepped up to broker the Saudi-Iran deal. Whether China can continue to stabilise situations where local factors are the key drivers of conflict is an open question.



**Bilahari Kausikan**

The resumption of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, announced in a joint trilateral statement in Beijing on March 10, was undoubtedly a diplomatic coup for China. It was the first time that China had successfully leveraged its growing presence in the Middle East to assert regional (as distinct from bilateral) influence. But it is not, as some commentators have claimed, a game changer either for China or the region.

The decision to reopen embassies in Riyadh and Teheran and to implement a 1998 economic agreement and a 2001 security agreement is essentially a return to the status quo ante of seven years ago.

In January 2016, Saudi Arabia broke ties with Iran and withdrew its diplomats from Teheran after a mob attacked its embassy following Riad's execution of 47 people on terrorism charges, including a prominent Shia cleric.

The sources of the deep mistrust that has divided Saudi Arabia and Iran since the 1979 Iranian revolution that overthrew the Shah – the Sunni-Shia divide, competition for regional leadership, and the spread of the Iranian revolutionary ethos which is anti-monarchist as well as Islamist – remain untouched.

Resumption of diplomatic relations only gives Riyadh and Teheran the opportunity to address these issues; it does not guarantee that they will or even intend to do so. They did not do

so previously when they had diplomatic relations and there is no strong reason to expect that they will do so now that diplomatic relations have been restored.

Saudi-Iran differences engage the core identities of the Saudi and Iranian states. It is difficult to see them as being subject to any lasting diplomatic compromise.

#### OMAN'S QUIET DIPLOMACY

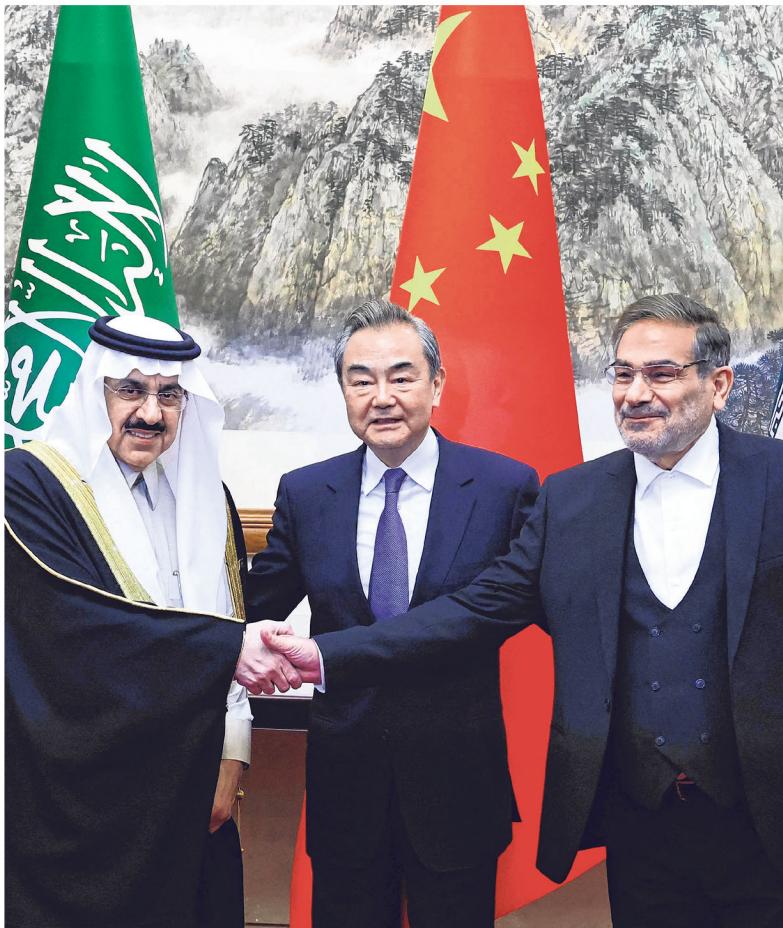
The Beijing deal was the icing on a cake that was more than two years in the baking through high-level mediation and confidence-building by Oman, assisted by Iraq. It would not have been possible without this crucial preparatory process in which regional states played the most crucial roles.

Oman never seeks credit for the quiet diplomacy it has pursued on a range of regional issues since the 1970s, but deserves congratulations. Both Riyadh and Teheran have thanked Oman for its role.

There is an unfortunate tendency for commentators – mainly but not solely in the West – to treat the Middle East as if the region were totally uninhabited and merely an arena for major powers. The states of the region are too often regarded as lacking agency.

But of all regions, the Middle East is where local dynamics most often drive major power behaviour, whether for good or ill. If Saudi Arabia and Iran had not, for their own reasons, wanted to stabilise their relationship, there would have been no deal in Beijing or anywhere else.

Iran is facing serious internal political and economic problems and the Supreme Leader is reportedly in ill health and close to going to meet the Mahdi (messiah).



(From far left) Saudi Minister of State and national security adviser Masaad bin Mohammed Al-Alban, China's top diplomat Wang Yi and Iran's Supreme National Security Council secretary Ali Shamkhani when they met in Beijing on March 10. The resumption of diplomatic ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran was announced in a joint trilateral statement in Beijing that day. PHOTO: REUTERS

While the latest protests over the compulsory wearing of the hijab, which coalesced political, economic and social grievances, have died down, sporadic acts of defiance continue. Significantly, even when the protests were at their height, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard acted with relative restraint. It had previously reacted much more violently to crush protests. It may be protecting its own institutional interests and public image ahead of a leadership transition.

#### SAUDI CALCULATIONS

Even more significantly, on March 9, the day before the Beijing statement, The Wall Street Journal reported, obviously from a Saudi leak, that Riyadh was prepared to join the Abraham Accords and recognise Israel if the US provided it with security guarantees and a looser nuclear cooperation agreement that would allow it to master the nuclear fuel cycle. Both

conditions are clearly driven by concerns about Iran.

It will not be easy for the custodian of the two holiest Muslim sites to recognise Israel. But it is not impossible – the two countries are already working together behind the scenes on a range of issues, including security – and the fact that Riyadh was willing to put the prospect of such a sensitive matter on the table, albeit in a deniable manner, is itself a measure of the depth of their concerns over Iran.

The Beijing deal should be regarded as a signal to the US that Saudi Arabia has alternatives. Normalisation of relations with Iran was thus a step in an indirect bargaining process between the Saudis and the US, driven, paradoxically, by continuing Saudi fears of Iran.

Riyadh has made clear that if Iran goes nuclear, it will seek its own nuclear deterrent. As early as 2018, Prince Mohammed bin Salman said on the American network, CBS: "Saudi Arabia does

not want to acquire any nuclear bomb, but without a doubt, if Iran developed a nuclear bomb, we will follow suit as soon as possible."

China's fundamental approach to the Middle East is to avoid geopolitical entanglements and maintain as good relations as possible simultaneously with Jerusalem, Riyadh and Teheran. That creates diplomatic opportunities for Beijing but requires a delicate balance and also circumscribes its role.

The Middle East is a region where the limits to diplomacy are most stark and the possibility of conflict lurks most shallowly beneath surface diplomatic civilities.

The Saudi-Iran deal may – for now – mitigate their mutual distrust but will not erase it. China cannot provide Saudi Arabia with credible security guarantees or technology of the sort Riyadh seeks from the US without upsetting the balance on which its engagement of the

Middle East rests.

#### CHINA'S CHOICE

If Saudi-Iran tensions flare up again or, worse still, suspicion generates conflict and if China is forced to choose, it is unlikely to choose Israel or Saudi Arabia because, together with Russia, Iran is Beijing's only partner of any strategic weight that shares its deep distrust of the US and the West generally.

Stability in the Middle East should in fact be a shared interest between the US and China, although it will be difficult in the current poisoned atmosphere of US-China relations for either to acknowledge this, let alone work together to achieve it.

Still, it is not necessarily a zero-sum game and until the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy develops the blue-water capability to continually sustain patrols in the vast area between

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the Persian Gulf and China, China's energy routes are in effect being protected by the US 5th and 7th Fleets. The PLA Navy will sooner or later develop such a capability. But when it does, Beijing could face difficult choices as the main threats to these sea-lanes in the Gulf have historically been from Iran and its proxies, not all of which are under Teheran's full control.

None of this is to denigrate China's current achievement, only to put it in perspective.

The regional states would probably have not been able to go the last hundred yards to conclude the deal without the strategic weight of a major power behind them. There was really no other choice than China.

A Russia that is embroiled in war against Ukraine and the chief prop of the pro-Iran Assad regime in Syria was a non-starter; the US with the burden of more than 40 years of hostility with Iran since the hostage crisis was also a non-starter. The two European states that have traditionally been most engaged in the Middle East, Britain and France, lack sufficient strategic weight and carry too much colonial baggage.

It was good that China stepped up. What was unusual was only that Beijing had not earlier played a significant diplomatic role to try to stabilise a region that is so important to its energy security.

### THE YEMEN TEST

Whether China can continue to stabilise situations where local factors – often tribal dynamics that are not under the full control of any state actor – are the key drivers of conflict is an open question.

Yemen will be an early and key test. Riyadh reportedly wants Iran to stop supplying the Houthis with arms. But Iran has denied doing so and Yemen has been in an almost continuous state of internal conflict since the 1960s. If Yemenis are determined to kill each other, there is no dearth of channels through which arms can continue to flow regardless of whatever Teheran formally agrees to do.

Why should Singaporeans care about any of this? The stability of the Middle East and its effects on the world economy must be of concern to us.

Our expectations should be realistic. Still, anything that contributes to stability is in our interest, even if it is transitory as this deal, alas, is likely to be. So, two cheers for China and let's be thankful for small mercies because in the Middle East, small mercies are all anyone is likely to get.

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