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 relational statement in Beijing on March 10, was undeniably a diplomatic coup for China. It was the first time that China and Iran, the two countries with the largest populations in the Middle East, have normalised relations.

But this does not mean that there is no need for China to continue to play a role in stabilising the region. The resumption of diplomatic relations is a step in the right direction, but it is not a guarantee of lasting peace. The Middle East remains a complex and volatile region, with many tensions and conflicts that need to be resolved.

The challenge for China is to ensure that the resumption of diplomatic relations is not just a one-off event, but a long-term commitment to stabilising the region. This will require China to work closely with all parties involved, including the United States, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other countries in the region, to ensure that the peace process is sustainable.

The resumption of diplomatic relations is a step forward, but it is not a guarantee of lasting peace. The Middle East remains a complex and volatile region, with many tensions and conflicts that need to be resolved.

While the latest protests over the compulsory wearing of the hijab, which could lead to political and economic pressures, have died down, signs 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 such 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 preparing to join the Abraham Accords and recognise Israel if the US provided it with security guarantees and a lower nuclear cooperation agreement that would allow it to maintain 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 push 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 seemed to be a signal to the US that Saudi Arabia has alternatives. Normalisation of relations with Iran was thus a step in an indirect bargains process between the Saudis and the US, driven, paradoxically, by continuing Saudi fears of Iran. Riyadh has made clear that it will seek its own nuclear deterrent. As early as 2018, Prime Minister 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 to maintain good relations as possible simultaneously with Jerusalem, Riyadh and Tehran. That creates diplomatic opportunities for Beijing but requires a delicate balance and also cements its role. The Middle East is a region where the limits to diplomacy are most stark and the possibility of conflict keeps most shallowly beneath surface diplomatic civility.

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

CONTINUED ON PAGE B2
Mid-East stability of concern to Singapore

FROM B1

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.

Bilahari Kausikan, a former diplomat, is chairman of the Middle East Institute at the National University of Singapore.