

Saudi-Iran Deal: Towards the De-Americanisation of the Middle East?

Does the Chinese diplomatic breakthrough mark a new era for the Middle East and North Africa to finally exit the US sphere of influence?

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At the end of his recent video about the Chinese-Saudi-Iranian [diplomatic deal](#) on 10 March, the astute foreign policy expert Muqtedar Khan [asks](#) whether this breakthrough may lead to the "de-Americanisation of Saudi Arabia" itself.

It is an interesting question that reflects current realities pertaining not only to [Saudi Arabia](#) but also to the entire Middle East and North Africa (Mena) region.

For the kingdom, one could conclude that it has already reached a point of no return. This, of course, does not mean that the Saudis are willing to end their close alliance with the [US](#) as such a move would be most detrimental to Saudi interests.

Let's, however, consider this sequence from the past year: first, US President [Joe Biden](#) vociferously, publicly, and repeatedly promised to make Saudi Crown Prince [Mohammed bin Salman](#) a global "[pariah](#)" over the assassination of journalist [Jamal Khashoggi](#). But he did nothing of the sort when he went to [visit him](#) – all smiles, reverence, and courtesy – and had his infamous [fist-bumping](#) moment caught on tape by all the cameras of the world.

During last July's visit, Biden essentially begged Bin Salman to increase oil production to try to fight US and worldwide inflation caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Not only did the crown prince refuse, but he did the exact opposite: Bin Salman actually [decreased oil production](#) by two percent. That was despite the [threats](#) that Biden had levelled against him should the Saudis do that.

Once again, [Biden did nothing](#) but return home feeling and looking sorry, silly, powerless, and way out of his league. A heated exchange then took place between Biden and Bin Salman in October with threats of a [Nopec bill](#) by US members of Congress (lifting sovereign immunity from the oil cartel member states) and Biden warning the Saudis of [“consequences”](#) if Opec+ were to cut oil production.

To make this double-slap-in-the-face worse, since Russia is part of Opec+, MBS actually objectively [helped Putin](#) get more oil revenue to finance his “special military operation” and mitigate the effects of [US sanctions](#), at a time when the US is engaged in a war against him.

Then to the repeated and increasingly bitter threats of Biden, Saudi Arabia responded with very firm and forceful (though not hostile) press releases from their embassy that they would always put their national interests first, and that no amount of pressure and threats from the US or anyone else could make them deviate from that.

A humiliating defeat

Again, Biden had to swallow his pride. And now, this: the 10 March tripartite deal between Riyadh and Tehran announced in Beijing. It has not been emphasised enough how severe and humiliating a defeat this represents for the US.

First, apparently Washington was [left out](#) of these diplomatic negotiations and had nothing to do with it.

Second, as Khan says in his podcast, not only may it end Iran’s isolation and further break the embargo the US has been working so hard to maintain since the Iranian Revolution and the hostage crisis of 1979, but the two powers who broke it are: a) China, the main US [adversary](#) in the world now, America’s public enemy number one as they themselves claim in their rhetoric, as has become obvious in their inept and reckless foreign policy; b) Saudi Arabia, their top ally (after Israel) in the Middle East.

That must hurt.

Third, it is not just its top strategic adversary that is replacing the US as a major peace broker (though we are not there yet, but it’s at a minimum an excellent first step towards possible further rapprochement) but Beijing is doing so in what had always been the US’s own backyard, the Middle East.

Fourth, the fact that this deal was announced in Beijing seems to symbolise the shift eastwards of Middle Eastern foreign policy and alliances, in a series of “Asian pivots” and [“Look to the East”](#) (as Iran calls it) strategic realignments.

Fifth, and finally, from a public relations, global image, and beyond that, actual soft-power viewpoint, this is absolutely disastrous for the US.

The diplomatic breakthrough and success of China make even more obvious and cruel by comparison the never-ending slew of major foreign policy failures, defeats, and debacles of the US for decades. Its new aura as a major, and totally unexpected peace broker only highlights further the loss of influence and ineptitude of the US itself.

China as peacemaker

Worse, China is coming out of this as a state power interested in and able to bring about peace, detente, normalisation, and de-escalation. It has proven itself capable of pulling stunning diplomatic coups like this one with finesse, persistence, intelligence, and agility, while in sharp contrast, the best the US could do is flood entire nations with weapons to keep the Ukraine war going [“as long as it takes”](#), and drag the world in another forever war of choice, now as American as apple pie.

China now looks like a brilliant peacemaker while the US looks just like the warmonger it actually always was, if one just looks at its history since its very bloody beginnings in the genocide of First Nations populations all the way to Vietnam and Iraq.

Xi is presented in official American discourse as a problem, something the world should be afraid of. Yet, after this recent breakthrough, one wonders who looks like the real problem in the Middle East or elsewhere.

Xi's recent speeches and China's strategic documents have made it clear this diplomatic operation is only the beginning of an ongoing effort to turn China into a major international broker.

It started in the Global South – Africa included – and is now possibly expanding into Europe and the Russia-Ukraine war, with the Chinese president's recent [three-day visit to meet Vladimir Putin](#). Xi commented pointedly to the Russian president: “There are changes going on now that haven't happened for 100 years. And we are moving these changes together.”

China is in this for the long term, and Xi has made it clear he is eager to extend his services to anybody to help solve other conflicts.

Escaping US control

The question of whether Saudi Arabia can undergo a “de-Americanisation” of its country can be extended to the entire Mena region. Like the rest of the world, with the exception of the EU, these states are finally extracting themselves from US control and domination even if it means striking tactical partnerships with authoritarian regimes like China.



Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman welcomes Chinese President Xi Jinping in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia on 8 December 2022 (Saudi Press Agency/Handout via Reuters)

The Middle East has actually already entered a largely de-Americanised era – the era of fluctuating, realist, pragmatic, fluid, radically open, and quite unpredictable hybrid alliances in order to give itself more space to manoeuvre, and more options for the sake of sovereignty.

The next moves in that direction are already being planned and are on the horizon. For example, both Saudi Arabia and Iran want to [join the BRICS group](#), while Saudi Arabia has applied for membership in the [Shanghai Cooperation Organisation](#) where Iran is already an observer state.

But the answer to the “de-Americanisation” question will be provided, maybe soon, by one ultimate test: whether Saudi Arabia and other oil producers after it will trade in a currency other than the dollar. Only then would there be a true revolution, and what observers have called [“the nuclear option”](#) (against the US).

And not surprisingly, Saudi Arabia, pushed by China itself and many others who would love to see that happen, is actually [considering](#) this.

Given that dollarisation of the global energy market has always been the lynchpin of the US domination of the world economy itself, this would indeed be a nuclear blast.

And it may now just be a matter of time, possibly a mere few years.

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