

# Saudi Arabia-Iran reconciliation

### Why in news?

The Saudi-Iran reconciliation in a China-brokered agreement reflects the new reality that Beijing is increasingly playing a bigger role at a time when the U.S., is preoccupied with challenges elsewhere.

#### What is the history of the ties?

- Islamic sectarianism The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is rooted in Islamic sectarianism.
- While Iran is the foremost Shia state in the world, Saudi Arabia is considered to be the religious home of Sunni Islam.
- In modern times, this sectarian rivalry has translated into a tussle for regional hegemony.
- In both the wars in Yemen and Syria, Iran and Saudi Arabia find themselves on opposite sides.
- US factor Iran is highly critical of Saudi Arabia's closeness with the United States.
- The US has crippled Iranian economy with its sanctions regime for decades.
- **Militancy** Saudi Arabia is worried of the large network of armed militias across West Asia that Iran funds and backs, a threat to its own sovereignty as well as the regional balance of power.

### What is the agreement about?

• Iran and Saudi Arabia will patch up a 7 year split by reviving a security cooperation pact, reopening embassies in each other's countries, resuming trade, investment and cultural accords.



## Why was the agreement signed now?

### **Saudi Perspective**

- **Vision 2030** Regional peace will be crucial to turning Saudi Arabia into the global hub that Vision 2030 envisions.
- This has led to Saudi Arabia making concerted efforts to end long-standing conflicts with powers across the region, with the Iran deal the latest such move.
- **Away from US** Furthermore, it has also led to Saudi Arabia slowly moving away from the singular influence of the United States in its foreign policy.

• While the US continues to be Saudi Arabia's biggest military supplier, in recent years, the desert kingdom has courted various powers including Russia, China and now, Iran.

#### **Iran Perspective**

- **Nuclear deal** The agreement comes as Iran accelerates its nuclear program after 2 years of failed U.S. attempts to revive a 2015 deal that aimed to stop Tehran from producing a nuclear bomb.
- However, a brutal sanctions regime and internal tensions have made it difficult for Iran to achieve its goals.
- **Regional allies** Finding allies in the region is of utmost importance to Iran when the Khomeini regime is perhaps at its weakest since the revolution.

# What is the role of China in this agreement?

- China's role as peace broker is yet another sign of changing currents in the region.
- China has historically maintained ties with both countries and the latest deal points to China's growing political and economic clout in the region.

#### What are the concerns for the United States?

- The United States has for a long time wielded great influence in West Asia.
- It has been the predominant global power that has had influence over geopolitics in the conflict-ridden region.
- Crucially, this deal and China brokering it, does not portend well for the United States.

## What is the impact on the agreement on other stake holders in West Asia?

- **Israel** The move has ushered in a wave of anxiety in Israel which shares no formal diplomatic ties with either nation.
- While Israeli leaders see Iran as an enemy and an existential threat, they consider Saudi Arabia a potential partner.
- **Yemen** Riyadh intervened in Yemen against the Houthi movement after the Iranaligned group ousted the internationally recognized government from power.
- Restored ties between Riyadh and Tehran could facilitate agreement between Saudi and the Houthis.
- **Syria** Iran has offered military, economic and diplomatic support to President Bashar al-Assad since his crackdown of protests in 2011 left him isolated.
- The Saudi-Iranian deal comes as a step towards Syria's return to the Arab League.
- **Lebanon** Lebanese politics have been broadly split for years between a pro-Iran alliance led by powerful armed group Hezbollah and a pro-Saudi coalition.
- The agreement between Tehran and Riyadh has sparked hope that paralysis could end.
- **Iraq** After the toppling of Saddam Hussein, Iran deepened its political, security and economic influence in Iraq, sparking Saudi alarm.
- Iraqis hope for a general regional detente that would allow their country to rebuild.

### What is the way forward?

- The agreement is welcome in context of the human toll that the Saudi-Iran rivalry has taken.
- However, this does not mean that all problems will be immediately resolved.
- While Iran and Saudi Arabia may still fall out, for the time being, this diplomatic agreement has ushered in major change in geopolitical dynamics in West Asia.
- The agreement could be the start of a greater global geopolitical realignment.
- The announcement could not only lead to a major realignment in West Asia, it also poses a major geopolitical threat to the United States, with China acting as peace broker for the historic deal.

#### References

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