

Blinken's Saudi Arabia visit: Important takeaways

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Ties between Saudi Arabia and China have improved significantly in recent years. This is reiterated by several factors. If one were to look at the level of bilateral trade, in 2021 it was \$87.3 billion and Beijing was Saudi Arabia's largest trading partner.

In December 2022, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Saudi Arabia and the first China-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Summit was held. The Chinese President received a far warmer welcome than US President Joe Biden — who visited Saudi Arabia in July 2022. Thirty five agreements estimated at \$30 billion were signed during Xi's visit. Apart from areas like energy, technology, transportation and manufacturing, the agreements also included a plan for linking the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Saudi Arabia's vision 2030.

During his visit, Biden had sought to get an assurance from Saudi Arabia, that it will increase oil output, but was unable to do so. It would be pertinent to mention, that Saudi Arabia and other Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)+ member states announced oil cuts in October 2022 and April 2023 and on June 4, 2023 it announced a further cut of about 1 million barrels per day (bpd) (it said that these cuts would be made for the month of July, 2023).

Of late, Saudi Arabia has also begun to show greater interest in China dominated organizations. It has joined Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) as a dialogue partner, applied for membership of Brazil Russia, India, China and South Africa BRICS grouping, and the BRICS Bank also referred to as New Development Bank (NDB). Like many other countries, Saudi Arabia has also shown interest in the need to reduce dependence on the US dollar for trade – referred to as de-dollarization.

While Beijing-Riyadh ties have grown, relations between Washington DC and Riyadh have been strained in recent times. Even though bilateral ties may have soured in the recent past, both Washington and Riyadh realize each other's economic and strategic importance. While for Washington, in spite of the deterioration of ties with Saudi Arabia, the latter is important given its enhanced clout in the Middle East – even more so in the aftermath of the agreement with Iran. Saudi Arabia on its part may have improved ties with China, but has a strong security partnership with US, and would like to cultivate strong ties with Beijing without allowing a deterioration of ties with US. Strong ties with the US are important for achieving Saudi Arabia's vision 2030 and the Gulf nation's steps towards modernization which have been noticed globally (US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken during his recent visit did repeatedly raise concerns pertaining to Human Rights in Saudi Arabia).

Saudi Arabia-US ties and Anthony Blinken's Saudi Arabia visit

Visits by senior US officials to Saudi Arabia over the past year –including that of Biden's Saudi Arabia visit in July 2022, US National Security Advisor (NSA), Jack Sullivan's visit to the Gulf nation in May 2023 and more recently, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken's visit to Saudi Arabia (June 6-8, 2023) – reiterate the same.

Blinken's visit comes days after Saudi Arabia's announcement of a further oil cut. It also comes at a time when there have been rifts between Saudi Arabia and Russia, with the latter not adhering to the commitments it had made along with other OPEC+ members regarding a reduction in oil output. Russia has been pumping oil by selling it at cheaper prices. While selling cheap oil may have helped Russia in dealing with its economic challenges, Saudi Arabia needs oil prices to be at higher levels (\$81 a barrel) so that it can fund some of its mega-projects.

Apart from oil, both sides also discussed cooperation in areas like energy. Amongst the strategic issues, normalization of Saudi ties with Israel, the situation in Sudan and Yemen and countering ISIS were discussed during Blinken's visit. In a tweet, Blinken said: "Met with Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman to discuss our shared priorities, including countering terrorism through the D-ISIS Coalition, achieving peace in Yemen, and deepening economic and scientific cooperation".

With regard to normalization of ties between Saudi Arabia and Syria, Blinken commented: "we all want to reach a solution in Syria that's consistent with the key United Nations Security Council resolution 2254."

But he also expressed his scepticism whether Syria would seriously address humanitarian and security issues.

Apart from bilateral meetings with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS) and Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan, Blinken also spoke at a meeting of GCC foreign Ministers. One of the issues highlighted during his speech was normalization of more Gulf countries with Israel.

While Saudi Arabia's ties may have improved significantly with China and relations with the US may have witnessed a downward slope, Riyadh needs to ensure a robust relationship with the US. The US on its part would like to harness its ties with Saudi Arabia, to ensure stability in the Middle East.

[Photo by U.S. Department of State, via Wikimedia Commons]

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author.



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