

US-China Rivalry and the Changing Geopolitics of the Middle East

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One of the key reasons for ties between Saudi Arabia and the US witnessing a downward slope, in the initial months, after Joe Biden took over as US President was his focus on revival of the JCPOA 2015/Iran nuclear deal, and his cold shouldering of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman MBS. In the aftermath of the Russia-Ukraine war however, Biden has sought to improve ties with [Saudi Arabia](#), primarily with an eye to get the Saudis to increase oil production, so that oil prices in the US can be kept in check — though the changing geopolitical equations within the Middle East are also responsible for the same. During his Middle East trip in July 2022 — Biden included Saudi Arabia in his itinerary. Biden was unable, however, to get Saudi Arabia-led OPEC to increase oil production. The decision by OPEC+ to cut oil production in November 2022 only exacerbated tensions between Saudi Arabia and US.

As a result of the expansion of Iran's nuclear program, the harsh clampdown of anti-government protests, in the aftermath of [Mahsa Amini's](#) death in custody, and Iran's supply of [drones](#) to Russia, ties between Iran and US have witnessed a further downward slide, and the hopes of the revival of the JCPOA have dimmed though attempts are being made for revival of the deal. In 2022, US imposed a series of sanctions on senior Iranian officials in connection with the violent crackdown on peaceful protesters.

Earlier this month, the US Treasury Department in a statement [said](#) it imposed sanctions on six Iran-based petrochemical manufacturers or their subsidiaries and three firms in Malaysia and Singapore due to the production, sale and shipment of Iranian petrochemicals and petroleum. Some of the firms on which sanctions have been imposed include petrochemical producer Amir Kabir Petrochemical Co. (AKPC), its subsidiary Simorgh Petrochemical Co. and four subsidiaries of previously sanctioned Marun Petrochemical Co.

While US ties with both Saudi Arabia and Iran have deteriorated, China's ties — not just economic but [strategic](#) as well, have strengthened with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, like Saudi Arabia, UAE and Iran. China's growing economic relationship with Saudi Arabia has emerged as a bone of contention in Washington-Riyadh ties. Both UAE and [Saudi Arabia](#) have categorically stated that they will cultivate strong ties with both Beijing and Washington without any hesitation.

Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Saudi Arabia in December 2022. During this visit, agreements were signed between both countries in several areas, and the reception he received was decidedly warmer than that received by US President Joe Biden. During the Chinese President's Saudi visit, a China-GCC Summit was also held. While speaking at the

summit Xi Jinping said that China will continue to import oil from GCC countries and also “.. continue to firmly support the GCC countries in maintaining their own security ... and build a collective security framework for the Gulf.”

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi visited China on 14-16 Feb. 2023. During the visit a number of issues were discussed including implementation of the 25-year strategic agreement signed in 2021 – referred to as “strategic accord” – and cooperation between both countries on matters of geopolitical importance. Both countries also spoke against US sanctions imposed on Iran, after the former’s withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018.

A clear reiteration of the US prioritizing ties with Saudi Arabia was the three-day visit of a US delegation to Saudi Arabia which coincided with Raisi’s China visit. The delegation included Special Envoy for Iran Robert Malley, Acting Coordinator for Counterterrorism and Acting US Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS Christopher Landberg, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Arabian Peninsula Affairs Daniel Benaim, and Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East Dana Stroul. During this visit several important security issues including integrated air and missile defense, maritime security and Iran were discussed.

Members of the US delegation and members of GCC held a meeting of the Working Group on Iran at the GCC’s headquarters in Riyadh on Feb. 15, 2023. A joint statement issued after the meeting stated: “The United States and GCC member states condemned Iran’s continued destabilizing policies, including its support for terrorism and the use of advanced missiles, cyber weapons, and Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS) and their proliferation in the region and around the world.” Iran predictably reacted strongly to this statement saying that its main aim was to create ‘discord’ in the region.

The politics of the Middle East has witnessed significant changes in recent years and it is tough to view it from simplistic binaries of the past. What is interesting to see is China’s increasing clout in the region and its ability to cultivate strong ties with both Iran and GCC countries. The visit of the US delegation to Saudi Arabia needs to be viewed not just in the context of bilateral relations between both countries but also China’s increasing clout in the region.

[Photo by Sgt. Mikki Sprenkle, via Wikimedia Commons]

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect TGP’s editorial stance.

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