

Re-establishment of diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia is a positive step, but only the beginning of a more difficult process.

By Dennis Sammut

The announcement on Friday (9 March), that Saudi Arabia and Iran agreed to re-establish diplomatic relations did not come as a complete surprise. It was known for some time that the two countries had been having some diplomatic contacts with each other, with a view to normalising relations. It also follows a recent similar step between Iran and the UAE. Also, in itself the establishment of diplomatic relations – in this case, re-establishing them after they had been broken in 2016, - is largely a symbolic step, even if an essential one for maintaining lines of communication and for putting bilateral relations in a proper framework.

But the timing and the context in which the decision was made and announced makes the diplomatic move hugely significant not only at the regional level, but also globally. The fact that China brokered the deal, and the agreement was signed in Beijing framed the agreement in a global context.

Some have described the event as a diplomatic earthquake. I disagree. It would be wrong to overestimate any of these considerations, despite their significance. The agreement has important implications but, in itself, it changes very little, and it will have to be seen if the process of Saudi-Iranian reconciliation, which with the re-establishment of diplomatic relations has now only just started, can deliver peace and regional stability in the Gulf region. As for the role of China, it was largely opportunistic. One can expect China to play similar roles in the future in other contexts as China pursues global prestige, but with this agreement China has also assumed certain responsibilities particularly with regards to moderating Tehran's policies and actions.

So careful assessment is necessary to evaluate the diplomatic move properly, and assess its consequence in the short and medium term.

Heavy baggage of history

There are many reasons for Saudi-Iranian rivalry, some of which go back centuries. Some are rooted in the sectarian approach to Islamic issues that pitch Sunni against Shia. A lot of it has to do with Iranian/Persian historical ambition to see the Gulf as its own lake. But what brought relations to a crisis

in recent years has been the aggressive attitude of the leadership of the Islamic Republic of Iran to its neighbours, and the threat it poses to global order.

None of today's very real problems are resolved

There are a number of very real problems in the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia – most of which have wider and regional implications. Iran's support of the Houthis in their overthrow of the legitimate government of Yemen, and their perpetration of the terrible civil war in that country is high on the list. The targeting of civilian sites and economic objects in Saudi Arabia and UAE by the Houthis with the backing of Iran are blatant examples of hostile acts towards neighbours.

Iran has generally pursued a policy of destabilisation across the Middle East region. This includes activities against several GCC countries, and others, as well as a risky naval posture in the Gulf. Its Revolutionary Guard Corps sometimes appear to be outside the country's chain of command, but with closer inspection one can quickly understand they are in fact a vital part of the chain of command. Their actions cannot therefore be dismissed as acts of a fringe group.

And then of course there is the nuclear file, with Iran pitched against the international community, and reportedly within days of being able to produce a nuclear weapon.

Saudi Arabia takes a difficult but pragmatic decision

In this situation, normalising relations with Iran could not therefore have been an easy one for the Saudi leadership. In the behind the scenes negotiations that have been taking place in the last two years, Riyadh has tried to secure some commitments from Tehran. It is not clear to what extent it has succeed in doing this in Beijing. The Beijing statement declares respect for "sovereignty of states and non-interference in internal affairs". No one really believes that Iran is going to stop interfering in Yemeni affairs any time soon, so Iranian goodwill has to be shown in other ways.

The Saudi leadership is under no illusion that the Beijing Declaration is some panacea for the future of the region. But under the leadership of Crown Prince

Mohammed bin Salman Saudi foreign policy has become increasingly pragmatic. This latest move is another example of this pragmatism.

Saudi Arabia does not want another crisis, let alone another war in the Gulf. It understands the huge costs and implications. A war will also completely ruin the Kingdom's very rapid process of reform and modernisation and lay to ashes its vision for the future. So avoiding such a conflict is a priority. By involving China in the process – frankly not because this was absolutely necessary – Saudi Arabia hopes that the Chinese will now have a stake – and a responsibility- in the process of reining in Iranian radicals. There are only two countries who have enough influence on Tehran to be able to do that – Russia and China. At the moment China is the lesser evil so going with the Chinese was also a very pragmatic decision.

China's role

Beijing is itself moving very cautiously in balancing its relations with Iran and its GCC neighbours. It would like to come across as an honest broker with the prestige and the tools to help the sides resolve their problems. But China lacks important skills in this sort of international mediation. Its decision making process is top-heavy – and this makes it slow and cumbersome. So Beijing is in uncharted waters, and everyone will be watching how they will perform.

Nevertheless, the role of China in brokering the Iran-Saudi diplomatic agreement can be seen as a success for Chinese diplomacy. Iran and Saudi Arabia could have easily had the same meetings and made the same deals in other places – for example Muscat or Baghdad. But in choosing to go to Beijing, both Iran and Saudi Arabia wanted to show their appreciation of China as a partner. There is also no doubt that Riyadh will have expectations as to Chinese ability to mitigate Iranian radicalism and mischief making.

For China itself the agreement with Iran and Saudi Arabia is part of a bigger process in expanding Chinese global prestige. China's foreign policy chief, Wang Yi, speaking at the signing ceremony in Beijing, said "This is a victory for dialogue, a victory for peace, offering major good news at a time of much turbulence in the world. As a good-faith and reliable mediator, China has faithfully fulfilled its duties as the host." China would continue to play a constructive role in handling issues in the world and demonstrate its responsibility as a major nation, he added.

So it is likely that we will see Chinese diplomacy playing the role of mediator in different contexts in the future. This can only be welcomed. There have been some small examples of China playing a similar role in a number of other less high profile contexts. The Iran-Saudi Arabia deal is probably the first one that has global significance.

Hopefully it also means that the Chinese leadership have realised the risk to them of global turmoil and instability, and have decided that their interest is best served by global peace and stability. Pity they were not able to persuade Mr Putin of the benefit of this policy when he visited them a few days before he invaded Ukraine in February of last year, and even greater pity that they have not found the words to condemn Mr Putin's invasion despite the fact that it throws the world in the worst turmoil seen since World War II.

Global reaction is positive

Global reaction to the Iran-Saudi diplomatic deal has been positive. The international community should encourage the sides to fulfil their obligations under the deal, and build on them.

The U.S. also welcomed "any efforts to help end the war in Yemen and de-escalate tensions in the Middle East region". "Of course, it remains to be seen whether the Iranian regime will honour their side of the deal", a State Department spokesperson said.

Wisely, the west is not particularly perturbed by the Chinese involvement. It is the sort of involvement that western countries would like to see China more concerned with. And western countries with experience of brokering similar deals know that they come with a lot of obligations on the part of the mediator that sometimes last for decades. The world will look to see how China honours these obligations.

Despite the diplomatic breakthrough, the gap between Iran and Saudi Arabia will continue to widen

The restoration of diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia is a positive and necessary move that will help lessen tensions between the two countries and reduces the risk of misperception and conflict by accident. But the gap and the differences between Iran and Saudi Arabia is still likely to

widen considerably over the next decade. This is due to the domestic situation in the two countries.

Since 2016 Saudi Arabia has embarked on an ambitious reform programme, which has seen tremendous changes taking place over a short period of time. The new dynamism in the economy, art, culture and youth sectors is inspiring. Saudi women are slowly but surely coming out of the shadows to play a full role in society. The country is energised.

In contrast, the regime in Tehran is waging a war against its own people who are demanding dignity, respect for women, end to corruption, and basic freedoms. The regime is still hanging on, since it has all the leverages of power, but for the next decades it is likely Iran will be a country in turmoil.

These two dynamic processes facing each other across the Gulf are bound to cause friction. Hopefully, diplomatic relations and some kind of normality in state to state contacts can lessen the risk of escalation into conflict and crisis.

The 10 March Beijing declaration between Iran, Saudi Arabia and China is an important step in the process of reducing the threat to peace in the Gulf region. But neither its content, nor the context in which it is agreed should be overestimated. It's a positive step forward and all concerned should be congratulated for achieving it. But there are many more steps to come if words are to be translated into action.

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