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C O N T E N T S

FROM THE EDITORIAL DESK

South Asian Integration: Need of the Hour		1
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ARTICLES

Rights of Tribal Women and the Indian State: A Human Development Perspective	<i>Niharika Tiwari & Anisur Rahman</i>	3
Jamaat-e-Islami in J&K: How does it survive the bans?	<i>Mehraj Bhatt</i>	30

OPINION

Audio Leaks and their Negative Impact on Pakistani Politics	<i>Syed Eesar Mehdi</i>	46
Symbolic Actions to Curb Terror Financing will not help Pakistan	<i>Nazir Ahmad Mir</i>	52
View from Across the Border: We are our worst enemies	<i>Mohammad Shehzad</i>	57
Xi Jinping's visit to Saudi Arabia: Implications for West Asia	<i>Afroz Khan</i>	63

REVIEW ESSAY

Lives on the Margins: The Contours of Shia Political Disposition in Kashmir	<i>Syed Eesar Mehdi</i>	70
--	-------------------------	----

BOOK REVIEW

Political Conflict in Pakistan by Mohammad Waseem Reivewed by	<i>Afroz Khan</i>	85
--	-------------------	----

STUBBLE

The Historic Seven Cities of Delhi	<i>Adil Rasheed</i>	89
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OPINION

Xi Jinping's Visit to Saudi Arabia: Implications for West Asia

Afroz Khan*

Abstract

It appears that China is now trying to fill in the gaps created by the United States in the last few decades in its strategic commitments towards the region, which has passed through a socio-cultural churning in the wake of the so-called 'Arab Spring' and radical Islamist assertion in Syria and Iraq. The withdrawal of US forces from Iraq and Afghanistan and the shift of American priority from the region to the Indo-Pacific is also a major concern for the countries in the region.



Chinese President Xi Jinping has paid a three-day visit to Saudi Arabia from 7th till 9th December 2022, amidst growing complications in long-standing bilateral relations between the United States and Saudi Arabia. During this visit, he also attended the first China-Arab States Summit and the China-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Summit in Riyadh and met the rulers of the

GCC countries. He signed a series of agreements of bilateral importance as well as commitments for regional development and an uninterrupted supply of energy resources from the region on which Beijing heavily relies upon. This is his third trip abroad since the coronavirus pandemic began and his first to Saudi Arabia since 2016.¹ During this visit, the Saudi and Chinese companies signed thirty-four agreements on various areas including green

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OPINION: XI JINPING'S VISIT TO SAUDI ARABIA:
IMPLICATIONS FOR WEST ASIA

energy, information technology, space research, digital economy, the peaceful use of nuclear technologies, data centres, cloud computing as well as artificial intelligence.

Most importantly, Saudi Arabia signed an MoU with Chinese telecom giant Huawei Technologies to acquire cloud computing technology and build high-tech complexes in Saudi cities, disregarding American apprehensions. Chinese President Xi Jinping and Saudi King Salman have also signed a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement" and the Chinese leader described it as "a new era" in bilateral relations.²

It is to be noted that Biden visited Saudi Arabia in July and met with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, despite the US promise to make the kingdom an international "pariah" after the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018. It is well-known that since the arrival of the Biden administration, the US-Saudi Arabia relationship has been passing through a tough time, especially with Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman in the driver's seat and there is mounting pressure on Saudi Arabia to take a position similar to the United States on the Ukrainian crisis. New tensions erupted over a decision by the Saudi-led OPEC+ cartel to cut production in

a bid to raise oil prices, but the group ignored pressure from the US and announced to reduce oil production targets by two million barrels per day.³ Although Saudi Arabia insisted that the decision to cut oil production was "purely economic" and aimed at stabilizing energy markets. The Americans were not convinced and termed this move equal to 'aligning with Russia'.⁴

The recent visit by Xi Jinping has added yet another episode to this highly intense political drama. This visit has not been received well in the US. The White House considered China's objectives "not conducive to preserving the international rules-based order".⁵ In his statement, White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said, "We are mindful of the influence that China is trying to grow around the world. The Middle East is certainly one of those regions where they want to deepen their level of influence".⁶

China is Saudi Arabia's largest trading partner and the biggest oil importer. During the last 25 years, the exports of China to Saudi Arabia have increased at an annualized rate of 15.3%, from \$905 million in 1995 to \$31.8 billion in 2020. During the same period, the United States's export to Saudi Arabia grew at an annualized rate of 2.61%, from \$5.66 billion in 1995 to \$10.8 billion in 2020. Similarly,

the exports of Saudi Arabia to China have increased at an annualized rate of 19.4%, from \$393 million in 1995 to \$33.4 billion in 2020 and during the same period, the exports of Saudi Arabia to the US have increased at an annualized rate of 0.49%, from \$7.93 billion in 1995 to \$8.96 billion in 2020.⁷

The growing trade dependency of Saudi Arabia on China is also opening up other areas for cooperation between the two countries. China's main exports to Saudi Arabia are textiles, electronics, and machinery, while it imports mainly crude oil and primary plastics from the Kingdom.⁸

The best part about this engagement is that, unlike western countries, China does not lecture countries on the issue of human rights, religious freedom etc., while doing business with them. This makes engagement more conducive for countries with poor human rights records. As far as Saudi Arabia is concerned, it is one of the most important Islamic countries and influential players in the OIC (Organisation of Islamic Countries) and better relations with it, China would hope, could reduce the criticism of China in the Islamic world over the treatment of its Uyghur Muslim minority.

Regional implications of this visit

In one of his interviews, Trump warned that "if the United States would get involved in each and every affair of Saudi Arabia and put conditions on the trade which involves a large chunk of defence equipment then the Saudis will turn to Russia and China for it and it will cost a lot to us".⁹

In 2016, China released its first official policy document titled "China's Arab Policy Paper"¹⁰. This document indicated that China was willing to play a wider role in the West Asia region in the future. The language and content of this document are very broad and generalistic in nature and it does not lay out the details of bilateral relations with any specific country in the region. It lays emphasis on energy security cooperation and seeks to strengthen cooperation in counterterrorism. The document also mentions Chinese efforts to link the West Asian region with the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project.

During the visit, Xi Jinping reassured the Saudi leadership that BRI and Saudi Vision 2030 were complementary to each other.¹¹ The leaders of the two countries discussed possible deals in which Chinese

firms could be involved in mega projects that are central to Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman's vision of reducing the dependence of the Saudi economy on oil. Chinese investment is crucial for the \$500 billion futuristic megacity NEOM project (a city that connects Asia, Africa and Europe being built in Tabuk Province in north-western Saudi Arabia). China's role in the regional post-oil economy will be essential in the future.

Xi's visit has in a way reset and recalibrated China-Saudi bilateral relations. It is being perceived by analysts in the region and beyond that Saudi Arabia is desperately trying to limit its dependence on the US. Another question that arises from this visit is whether China is actually gearing up for playing a new role in the West Asian region or it is business-as-usual with the regional trading partners. Is it an indication that China is going to slowly replace the US as an important player in the region? The answer is clearly no. The US remains a major security provider in West Asia and it is not likely to be replaced by any other power in the region. China has neither the capability nor expertise to resolve complex regional issues of the region. Saudi Arabia is also perhaps not trying to develop its relationship with China at the cost of its relationship with the US. In fact, most of the

countries in the region including Saudi Arabia recognise the ability of the US to influence regional security.

Conclusion

It appears that China is now trying to fill in the gaps created by the United States in the last few decades in its strategic commitments towards the region, which has passed through a socio-cultural churning in the wake of the so-called 'Arab Spring' and radical Islamist assertion in Syria and Iraq. The withdrawal of US forces from Iraq and Afghanistan and the shift of American priority from the region to the Indo-Pacific is also a major concern for the countries in the region.

It is generally believed that Chinese interest in the region is primarily economic in nature. Looking through the prism of economy, the interests of China and the USA converge in the region. The existing security architecture in the region is largely curated by the US in a way that guarantees the protection of the Chinese economic interests in the region. Therefore, while China seeks to enhance its strategic-economic engagement with countries in the region, it may not be interested in changing the regional power balance. However, any incremental growth of Chinese influence in the region is not likely to be taken well

OPINION: XI JINPING'S VISIT TO SAUDI ARABIA:
IMPLICATIONS FOR WEST ASIA

by the US. There is a deep suspicion of the Chinese intent in Washington at one level and strong apprehension of the adverse impact of Chinese engagement on the strategic behaviour of the regimes in the region, which had so far chosen to rely on the US for their security and sustenance.

In the current context, Saudi Arabia's effort to increase its partnership with China could be seen as an attempt to send out a message to the Americans that the rapidly growing Saudi economy would need more partners (than the US and its allies in the West) to engage with. In order to achieve a regional power balance Saudi Arabia has also restarted its relations with Iran and ended its unilateral blockade of Qatar. Efforts are also underway to end the conflict in Yemen and the economic crisis in Lebanon.

There is a change in Saudi foreign policy both at regional and global levels, which emphasises on diversity of partnership, and it should not be misunderstood as Saudi attempt either to defy the US or reduce its influence in the region. In the process, Saudi Arabia must have factored in American displeasure about its move to pursue a policy which may not strictly converse with the American approach to the region. Saudi Arabia is perhaps in the quest of multilateralism and multi-alignment to craft a new balance of power in the region. In the words of Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al Faisal, the U.S.-Saudi relationship isn't a "Catholic marriage," where only one wife is allowed; it is a "Muslim marriage," where four wives are permitted and "Saudi Arabia is not seeking a divorce from the United States; it is just seeking marriage with other countries".¹² ■

Endnotes

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OPINION: XI JINPING'S VISIT TO SAUDI ARABIA:
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OPINION: XI JINPING'S VISIT TO SAUDI ARABIA:
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