

Lessons for India from the Saudi-Iran Truce Brokered By China

Syed Kamran Ali
Independent Researcher

Anshu
Independent Researcher

Girijesh K. Mishra
Assistant Professor at Lakshmi Bai College, University of Delhi

Only three days after China brokered a peace deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran in March 2023, the United States along with United Kingdom signed a deal to transfer three nuclear-powered submarines to Australia (Miller & Superville, 2023). These two developments are difficult to overlook by the international community, particularly the developing world, which is already reeling under the effects of Covid-19, the Russian-Ukraine war, and now yearning for a peaceful global environment.

Many developing countries, including some of the big ones, such as Indonesia, have expressed their concerns over Australia getting nuclear-powered submarines (Basu A. , 2023). They are concerned because they don't want their neighborhoods to become a new playground. For the developing world, this development further reinforces the widely held belief that foreign policy actions of the US are aimed at maintaining its hegemony while being immune to the concerns of others.

Moreover, such US actions are also bound to worry India because, India is increasingly tying its defense and foreign policy interests with the US, therefore it is being widely perceived as a significant component of US's Indo-Pacific strategy. At the same time India also aspires to lead the Global South but Global South dislikes the foreign policy of the US, which it accuses of being hegemonic and self-serving.

This places India in a sticky wicket. On one hand it has aggressive China attempting to occupy its territory, on the other hand, when it goes to challenge expansionist China, it risks falling into the western camp, whose actions are not very popular among the developing world, to which India has a desire to lead.

One of the numerous repercussions of this has been the growing belief of strong Indo-US friendship among the developing countries, leading to the declining influence of India in many of these countries. An example of it was seen in the China striking a Saudi-Iran peace deal but given India's strong historical ties and deep understanding of the region, India was better suited to serve as a mediator between Iran, and Saudi Arabia than China, and in return reestablish its credentials of being a leader of Global South, but the rising proximity between India and US, significantly reduced its influence in both the countries and damaged its prospect of being a neutral player.

Just imagine if India at the presidency of the G-20 had broken this peace agreement, how much the prospects of India as a leader of the Global South would have risen up.

It is important to highlight that US has been a major factor behind the deteriorating Indo-Iranian relations. Just take some examples. After US scraped the JCPOA, It successfully pressurized India to cripple its oil supply from Iran (Basu & Venkatesh, 2019), today the trade between India and Iran is very low. India has joined I2U2, an anti Iranian group,

comprising all Iranian's rival from United States, and UAE, to Israel, India is an outlier in the grouping.

Moreover, in the early March of 2023, Iran's foreign minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, called off his visit to India over the refusal of Raisina dialogue's organizers, an annual event co-organized by Indian Government with the ORF, to take out a video clip of Iranian protestors from the event's promotional video, it is unclear what prevented Indian authorities from making that small omission other than its desire to further appease the US (Hindustan Times, 2023).

Taking a cue from rising Indo-US bonhomie, the behavior of Iran has been reciprocal of India's actions. China has been allowed to become a big player in Iran without giving any attention to the concern of India. Apart from being an important part of the China's ambitious One Belt One Road initiative, Iran has emerged as the big supplier of discounted oil to China. In 2021, both the countries signed an historical multi billions 25 years deal. Despite severe US sanction on Iran the overall business between both the countries stand at \$15.795 billion (Tehran Times, 2023) in contrast the total annual trade between Iran and India has been \$1. 91 billion (Embassy of India, 2022) while the business between India and Iran continues to fall. Iran's trade with China is only increasing.

Experts in New Delhi, should ponder that Iran apart from being a powerful voice in global south, also has massive oil and gases reserves on its side, and the moment the US's sanctions are gone its prospect will rise up again. Moreover, Iran has strategic and commercial advantages for India, which India itself has recognized by investing millions of dollars in the construction of Chabahar port (Laskar, 2023). Additionally, Iran has been proved a trusted ally of India on various occasions (Ponawalla, 2018). All this should be enough for India to stop damaging its ties with Iran.

Saudi Arabia is also of utmost importance to India as it is heavily dependent on the Saudi for its energy security, in addition to that, almost 8.5 millions Indian work in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which is largely dominated by the Saudi (Pethiyagoda, 2017). Both nations have until now taken care the concern of each other like a good friend. But with growing Chinese footprints in the KSA and it emerging as the second largest recipient of investment from Chinese BRI, and all that Coming against the backdrop of its deteriorating relations with USA and rising bonhomie of India-US (Marks, 2023). There are good reasons to believe that things may take a turn.

The underlying challenge for India is that Saudi may see India closely connected with the US. Saudi might not like this. Though at this time one can't see Saudi disturbing its relation with India as the relations are mutually beneficial, but any time in the future if Saudi had to chose between India and China, it will certainly be the latter not the former, and the same is true for Iran. Neither of the country would take any decision which can damage its relations with the China, this leaves India in a poor position in the region.

The US's policies in West Asia are what India is placing gradually all of its faith in. This Indian move is coming at the backdrop of US poorly planned withdrawal from the Afghanistan, US repeated rhetorics of West Asia not being as important to it as it once was, hence it is shifting to indo-pacific, and its excessive support of Israel's unlawful activities in Palestine. This fading interest of the US and rising footprints of China in the region, which is, strategically, and economically, very important for India, should have been a big reason for India not to put all its eggs in the basket of US policies in the region.

In addition to that, it should serve a word of caution to India that neither people nor the leaders in the West Asia are happy with US, and one doesn't need to go through bundle of literature to know the reason behind it. India's choice to ally with a partner that is so

unpopular in the area, speaks poorly of the decision-makers in New Delhi. While India with sizable Muslim population and a strong past record of supporting Palestine cause has positive image in the region. The baggage of US bad foreign policy is too much for it to carry on its shoulder in the region.

Finally, it is crucial to stress that India given the size of its economy and population, should not only be an independent actor in International politics but also be perceived as such by global community. Although the Indian Foreign Minister frequently claims that India's course is neutral, but, this doesn't seem to be the case given how events are unfolding in West Asia. In any issue involving foreign relations, India should map out its own course. The United States's assistance may be sought in certain situations, but India should never forgo its own interest in doing so.

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