Turmoil in West Asia: Challenges and Opportunities for India

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Abstract

While the present-day divide between Saudi Arabia and Iran has been framed in doctrinal and sectarian terms, it is the result of deep strategic vulnerabilities being felt in Riyadh in response to what is seen as the burgeoning role of Iran in areas that the kingdom views as its domain of exclusive influence – Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen. For the kingdom, this expanding influence is a "Shia Crescent" that is strangling it across West Asia and is an "existential" threat. Saudi Arabia has responded to the Iranian challenge by confronting Iran in the theatres of its influence – Syria and Yemen.

Given the deep hostility of the Trump administration for Iran, the robust United States (US) support to an Israeli-Saudi alliance against Iran in Syria and the interest of the US and its allies to effect regime change in Iran, there is a real prospect of a direct military conflict between the two major Islamic neighbours.

This article proposes that India, that enjoys extraordinary goodwill and standing with all the principal countries of the region, shape a peace process that would lead to dialogue between the kingdom and Iran and, over time, would lead to negotiations to realise a regional security cooperation arrangement in West Asia.

Introduction

The roots of the current competitions and contentions in West Asia between Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic can be traced to events that took place forty years ago - in 1979.[1]

The year began with the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Not only did this event overthrow the country's royal order, it also made Islam, as propounded by its leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, its ruling doctrine. This made Iran a revolutionary force against secular politics and Western political power and cultural influence.

Saudi Arabia viewed the revolution with alarm as it challenged its leadership of the Arab and Islamic world. Saudi concerns were aggravated by the second event of that year – the occupation of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by Islamic zealots from within the Saudi Wahhabi fold. They condemned the Saudi royal family for its materialism, corruption and licentiousness and its proximity to the West, and declared it unfit to be the guardian of Islam's holy sites of Mecca and Madinah.[2]

The rebellion was crushed with military force, but the kingdom's concerns about the challenge to its authority from domestic sources, coupled with the threat from the spread of the Iranian revolution remained. To confront the latter, the Saudi leadership encouraged the Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein, to launch a military attack on Iran. Seeing the Iranian armed forces in disarray, Saddam thought his army would capture large chunks of Iranian territory and dictate terms that would end the Islamic regime and replace it with a more amenable leadership.

But Saddam's plans were foiled as his attack united Iran and encouraged its forces to face the aggression resolutely. The war stretched over eight years and ended only when both sides were exhausted.

The war not only saved the Islamic revolution; it also imbued into the Iranian psyche a sense of achievement in the face of near-total global isolation when its cities were showered with missiles and its people with chemical weapons, with no protest from the international community and its institutions.

In 1979 itself, in early November, revolutionary youth attacked the US Embassy in Tehran and took its diplomats hostage for 444 days, largely as a reprisal for the long period of western interventions in Iranian politics, particularly the overthrow of its democratic government in 1953. For the Americans, the diplomats' incarceration and the failed rescue effort by President Jimmy Carter created an enduring animosity for the Islamic revolution and its leaders that continues to influence to this day large sections of the US political, official, media and academic establishments.

Regime-change in Iraq

The end of the Iraq-Iran war was marked by an extended period of camaraderie and positive engagement between Iran and Saudi Arabia when Iran shifted its focus from revolutionary zeal to economic development. Iran stopped questioning the legitimacy of the Saudi royal family, while Saudi leaders proclaimed there were no limits to cooperation with Iran.

This camaraderie ended with the US assault on Iraq in 2003 and subsequent regime-change, along the US commitment to Shia empowerment in the country that overtly privileged the majority Shia community. Saudi Arabia and its Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) partners viewed this approach as opening the door to the expansion of Iran's influence into one more Arab country.[3]

This increased the Saudi sense of strategic vulnerability vis-à-vis its Gulf neighbour, viewing this challenge in sectarian terms. King Abdullah II of Jordan first spoke of the "Shia Crescent" engulfing the region in 2004, remarks that were later echoed by Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak and Saudi foreign minister Prince Saud Al Faisal. To confront this "Shia Crescent", Saudi Arabia set up a regional balance of power by aligning itself with Egypt.

Iraq remained an area of competition in the Gulf. Iran expanded its influence with the support of the regime headed by Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki who depended on Shia militia funded, armed and trained by Iran. Saudi Arabia retaliated by providing backing for the jihadi insurgency that commenced from

2003 itself under the leadership of the Afghanistan veteran, Abu Musab Zarqawi, who proclaimed his formal affiliation with Al Qaeda by calling his organisation Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). After Zarqawi's death in 2006, his successors renamed the body the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) to affirm their independence from Al Qaeda and their intention to make Iraq into an Islamic state.

While Saudi Arabia maintained no ties with the Iraqi government in Baghdad, Iran remained the most influential foreign presence in the country and the principal backer of the government against the ISI.

Arab Spring and After

The balance of power in West Asia ended abruptly with the fall of the Mubarak regime in February 2011 in the wake of the Arab Spring agitations. The Saudi sense of vulnerability increased with the demand for political reform in Bahrain, a neighbour and GCC member with a Shia majority. The kingdom believed that reform in Bahrain would empower the Shia and provide a fresh opportunity for the expansion of Iran's influence up to the Saudi border and within the GCC family.

Saudi Arabia brought an abrupt end to the reform agitation in Bahrain by sending its troops into the country in mid-March 2011 and forcibly dispersing the demonstrators. The kingdom then confronted Iranian interests in Syria. It felt that removal of the pro-Iran Bashar al Assad regime would bring a major Arab country back into the political mainstream and restore the regional balance of power. It would also cut Iran's outreach to the Mediterranean, besides having the additional benefit of ending Iran's ties to the Hezbollah via Damascus, thus bringing one more country into the Arab mainstream.

The kingdom's game-plan for Syria met an obstacle at the very outset when US President Barack Obama refused to bomb Damascus to effect regime-change on the ground that earlier US interventions had brought no advantage to the US and had only benefitted the jihadis. Saudi Arabia then perforce had to rely on ground action against Assad. It shaped this confrontation on sectarian basis, mobilising Salafi militants from Syria's Sunni

community, in alliance with Qatar and Turkey, which were ranged against Shia militia provided by Iran from its Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) as well as from the Hezbollah and militants from Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Though the Saudi-backed militants met with some initial successes, the entry of Russian forces on the side of the Assad government in September 2015 ensured that there would be no military victory for the rebels. The kingdom's efforts received a further setback when Turkey, alarmed by the military successes of the Syrian Kurds and the prospect of their setting up a "homeland" at the Syria-Turkey border, left the Saudi side and joined Russia and Iran in the Astana peace process, even as Assad's forces continued to take more territory from the rebels.

Besides the ongoing conflict in Syria, Saudi Arabia opened another front against Iran, this time in Yemen with which it shares 1400-km border. Here, taking advantage of a weak central government in Sanaa, after the replacement of longstanding President Ali Abdullah Saleh by his deputy, Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi, the disgruntled Zaydis of north Yemen mobilised themselves as a militant movement 'Ansarullah' though they are informally referred to as "Houthis" after the family name of their founder.[4]

The Houthis, allied with the former President, occupied Sanaa and then went southwards to take Aden. Based on the Zaydis' Shia identity, Saudi Arabia viewed these successes as providing Iran with a strong military and political base at its border. It launched a military assault on the Houthis from March 2015 and later initiated ground action from the south.

After four years of war, the Saudis have little to show in terms of achievement on the ground, and, despite widespread death and destruction, the major towns of Taiz, the port city of Hodeidah and Sanaa, the capital, remain with the Houthis.

With the advent of the Trump presidency in the US, the regional security scenario in West Asia has deteriorated. The President has withdrawn from the nuclear agreement with Iran and has committed himself to effecting regime change in the Islamic Republic by encouraging internal insurrection. In this

endeavour, Trump has established close ties with Saudi Arabia and is also promoting a US-Saudi-Israel coalition against Iran in the theatres of its influence, particularly in Syria and Iraq.

Indian Peace Initiative

There are now serious possibilities of the ongoing proxy conflicts in Syria and Yemen evolving into a direct conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which will plunge West Asia into a region-wide conflagration. Given India's significant energy, economic, logistical and community-based ties with the region, this would seriously jeopardise India's abiding interests in regional stability.

Hence, it is proposed that India shape and promote a diplomatic initiative that will encourage mutual confidence and dialogue between the two estranged Islamic neighbours. Once this has been achieved, India should pursue the realisation of a regional cooperative security arrangement.

It makes sense for India to lead the peace initiative: it has the longest, uninterrupted and substantial ties with all the Gulf countries. It has an established regional standing for its political, economic and technological achievements as also the fact that its conduct in international interaction has consistently been non-hegemonic, non-intrusive and non-prescriptive. It also has the highest stake in regional stability on account of its energy and economic interests. Above all, it has a resident community of over eight million in the region whose welfare is of paramount importance to all governments in Delhi.

Again, in recent years India has maintained the momentum of bilateral engagements with the principal countries of the Gulf. In June 2016, Prime Minister Modi completed an unprecedented Indian diplomatic interaction with the countries of the Gulf. Over a ten-month period, he visited the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Qatar, and hosted the Abu Dhabi Crown Prince, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, in Delhi. In every capital, he was received with the greatest warmth; every country applauded its historic and civilisational links with India, and every interaction yielded substantial agreements which will take bilateral relations to

new areas and re-shape ties to make them relevant to contemporary times.

The countries saw India as their "strategic partner", a status that represents a high degree of shared values, perceptions and approaches on matters of security concern. Thus, the joint statement with the UAE spoke of "shared threats to peace, stability and security", and agreed to a "shared endeavour" to address these concerns, which is founded on "common ideals and convergent interests".[5] It spoke of the need for the two countries to establish a "close strategic partnership" for "these uncertain times" and called upon them to "work together to promote peace, reconciliation, stability … in the wider South Asia, Gulf and West Asia".

Similarly, the joint statement with Saudi Arabia talked of the two countries' responsibility to promote peace, security and stability in the region. It noted "the close interlinkage of stability and security of the Gulf region and the Indian sub-continent and the need for maintaining a secure and peaceful environment for the development of the countries of the region".[6] In Tehran, Mr Modi noted that India and Iran "share a crucial stake in peace, stability and prosperity" in the region and have shared concerns relating to "instability, radicalism and terror". The two countries agreed to enhance cooperation between their defence and security institutions.[7]

These interactions were followed by visit to India of the Abu Dhabi Crown Prince as chief guest at India's Republic Day celebrations in January 2017, the visit of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani to Delhi in February 2018, and then the visit of Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, in February 2019.

The first part of the peace initiative will need to focus on areas of ongoing confrontation – Syria, Yemen and Iraq – where each side will need to explore compromises in terms of its maximalist demands. In Syria, this would consist of supporting the peace process, the development of a national constitution and free elections, without insisting on a prior removal of Assad from power.

In Iraq, this will require both countries to end pursuit of their own interests in the country through local proxies and allowing the country's politicians to shape national politics without outside interference. In Yemen, Iran would need to recognise the kingdom's legitimate concerns about Iranian influence, while Saudi Arabia would have to let the Houthis join the country's political and economic order.

While progress in addressing these contentious issues will be slow, India has the credibility and the diplomatic skill to encourage dialogue between the two parties. The satisfactory outcome in discussions relating to these matters will set the stage to address the more serious issue of shaping a regional security cooperation arrangement that will be inclusive, in that it will bring together all the regional entities and external powers with a stake in regional security.

Here, India could consider putting together a "Third Party" of influential nations on the lines of the group of countries that had facilitated discussions that led to the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 after a five-year diplomatic effort.[8] These partners could include: China, Japan, Russia and the European Union, all of which have substantial ties with regional players and high stakes in regional stability.

This peace initiative will bring to West Asia, for the first time in a century, a non-military approach to regional security that involves active participation of regional states as key role players in determining their own destiny.

References

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[4] For details of the early mobilisations and conflict in Yemen see: Talmiz Ahmad, "Yemen in Meltdown: Domestic and Regional Competitions and

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[8] For lessons that can be drawn from the Peace of Westphalia to promote peace efforts in West Asia, see: Patrick Milton, Michael Axworthy and Brendan Simms, *Towards a Westphalia for the Middle East,* London : (Hurst and Co., 2018)

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