

BRIDGING DIVIDES: IRAN'S NUCLEAR ASPIRATIONS AND SAUDI-IRAN RAPPROCHEMENT THROUGH A CONSTRUCTIVIST LENS

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ABSTRACT

The rapprochement between the two arch rivals of the past and regional power centers of the Middle Eastern geopolitics, Saudi Arabia and Iran, marks a pivotal shift, with enormous implications for regional stability, balance of power, security calculus and global diplomacy. Unlike the efforts of the past, the recent peace deal has been brokered by rising global power China, who has higher geopolitical and geo-economic stakes. Notwithstanding, the Iran's nuclear program besides its opposition from the West especially the US and its closest ally Israel, has been the primary irritant in normalization of Saudi-Iran relations. For the same reason, Riyadh in the past has been very vocal against Iran's nuclearization ambitions, levelling it as serious security threat for KSA, region as well as global security. In this context, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) though criticized by Riyadh and later witnessed unilateral withdrawal of the US from it, the forestalled process further aggravated Saudi's concerns, giving space to Tehran to expedite its efforts. This article investigates how Iran's nuclear program intersects with the Saudi-Iran rapprochement, examining interplay of different regional and extra-regional conflicting interests, with a view to offer plausible options for future West-Iran nuclear deal. Employing a constructivist framework, this research examines how ideational shifts, shared perceptions and role of leadership in decision-making influence the Saudi-Iran thaw. The study relies on qualitative analysis of secondary sources, using theoretical insights to gauge the regional dynamics of power, trust and mutual interest. The paper situates analysis within the recent and broader geopolitical context, incorporating the ongoing Hamas-Israel conflict, the regime transition in the US and China's expanding influence in the Middle East. The research ultimately concludes by offering different options for renewed West-Iran nuclear deal amid these evolving dynamics.

Keywords: Saudi-Iran Rapprochement, Iran Nuclear Program, JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action), Middle East Geopolitics, Constructivist Framework, China's Role in the Middle East..

INTRODUCTION

The Middle East has long been a hotbed of geopolitical rivalries, with Saudi Arabia and Iran standing as two most influential yet antagonistic powers. Since Iranian Revolution in 1979, the relations between the two have mostly been

characterized by deep sectarian divides, contest for ideological supremacy, and use of other states as proxies, all to compete for regional dominance. In this struggle, the Iran's nuclear program added a layer exacerbating the Saudi-West apprehensions

and concerns, labelling it as threat for global peace and security. Recently, however, the rapprochement between the two orchestrated by China has significantly impacted the geopolitical landscape of the region. Nonetheless, the evolving peace deal when contextualized in a scenario where Iran becomes a nuclear power, germinate an academic debate over efficacy of an enduring rapprochement, especially when Riyadh always viewed it as direct threat to its security. The Iran's nuclear deal process in the form of JCPOA which was initiated in 2015 and after traversing a long distance when collapsed in 2018, primarily due to unilateral withdrawal of the US, gave Iran an opportunity to push forward its nuclear agenda, further exacerbating Saudi concerns. As the geopolitical landscape evolves, with China deepening its presence in the Middle East, the Israel-Hamas conflict intensifying, and the U.S. on the cusp of another presidential administration, both risks and opportunities for addressing these issues are emerging. In this backdrop, this study explores the intersection of Iran's nuclear ambitions and Saudi-Iran rapprochement in the broader geopolitical settings accounting for China's influence in the Middle East and the concerns of the US led west. Using a constructivist theoretical framework, it examines how shifts in perceptions, ideas and leadership can impact the regional peace especially with reference to Iran's nuclear program. Ultimately, the study outlines possible pathways for a fresh West-Iran nuclear agreement that addresses the concerns of all stakeholders especially the Saudi Arabia, thus removing the main irritant in Saudi-Iran enduring peace and cooperation.

Research Objective

The paper primarily delves into the complex interplay between Saudi-Iran rapprochement and Iran's nuclear ambitions, situated within the broader geostrategic landscape. It seeks to provide different pathways for mediating a renewed nuclear deal with Iran, thus addressing the concerns of all stakeholders, especially Saudi Arabia.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative research methodology with content and thematic cluster technique, to investigate the intricate relationship between Saudi-Iran rapprochement and Iran's

nuclear program. It draws on secondary literature sources including books and journal articles to crystalize the context of the issue in broader geopolitical framework. Based on detailed analysis of interests and concerns of major stakeholders, the research offers broad framework for resuscitating the nuclear deal process with Iran, addressing both regional and global apprehensions.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the Constructivist Theory of international relations that signifies the role of ideas, identities and shared perceptions to shape states' behavior. The theory suggests that the complexion of international relations are not mere reflection of displayed material power or economic interdependence, but rather significantly influenced by ideational factors like beliefs, norms and social construct based on perceptions. Within the specific context of the Saudi-Iran rapprochement, the theoretical framework facilitates a nuanced understanding of how enduring rivalry shaped by multiple factors especially sectarian and ideological divides, can be reconfigured with change in leaderships and perceptions from both sides. Similarly, in the US-Iran context, it underscores the changes in relations between the two over the years; during Pahlavi period and later. The constructivist lens also helped in identifying pathways for deconstructing entrenched narratives of enmity from both sides, while keeping bigger geopolitical settings in sharp focus.

Literature Review

The literature review examines the complex interplay between Iran's nuclear ambitions and Saudi-Iran rapprochement by organizing the review into thematic clusters. The main clusters include: brief historical context of Saudi-Iran relations, Iran's nuclear program and the JCPOA, recent Saudi-Iran rapprochement, the constructivist perspective on Middle Eastern geopolitics and the broader geostrategic landscape.

The Saudi-Iran rivalry, deeply rooted in sectarian, ideological, and geopolitical differences, has shaped the Middle East's security landscape. (Hiro, 2018) and (Terrill, 2011) identify the 1979 Iranian Revolution as a turning point, positioning Iran as a revisionist power challenging Saudi Arabia's status

quo. This ideological confrontation, framed as a "modern cold war," drew sharp sectarian lines between Sunni-led Saudi Arabia and Shia-dominated Iran. (Alam, 2017) and (Arafat, 2020) however, argue that while sectarianism remains visible, geopolitical competition for regional dominance has been the primary driver of their rivalry.

(Fozia & Ali, 2018) and (Imad & William, 2020) highlight the use of proxy wars in Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon as tools to extend influence, embedding the conflict into the region's security dynamics. (Lebedev, 2022) and (Heiden & Krijger, 2018) expand the scope, emphasizing factors such as Iran's nuclear ambitions, Saudi opposition to the JCPOA, and the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime as accelerants of this enmity. Scholars broadly agree that while sectarian rhetoric has defined the rivalry, the underlying struggle for power and influence continues to sustain its intensity.

Iran's nuclear program has been a focal point of regional and global tensions. (Parsi, 2017) highlights the JCPOA as a significant diplomatic success, preventing nuclear proliferation while offering sanctions relief. However, the U.S. withdrawal in 2018, as (Riedel, 2017) notes, undermined the agreement, allowing Iran to advance its nuclear capabilities. (Lebedev, 2022) and (Ibrahim, 2020) argue that Saudi Arabia's opposition to the JCPOA stemmed from fears of Tehran's regional ambitions and the deal's failure to address Iran's destabilizing proxy activities.

(Krylov, 2022) and (Fulton J. , 2022) provide a broader perspective, examining how external powers like China have enabled Iran to navigate sanctions, complicating efforts to revive negotiations. The literature concludes that while the JCPOA was a crucial step toward de-escalation, its collapse has exacerbated insecurity, leaving the nuclear issue a key point of contention in regional and global geopolitics.

The recent Saudi-Iran rapprochement marks a significant turning point in regional geopolitics. (Kodagoda, 2023) highlights how shared challenges, including regional power struggles and economic vulnerabilities, pushed both nations toward reconciliation. (Mnekhir, 2023) emphasizes that shifting global alliances and mutual recognition of the need for stability created a unique opening for diplomacy.

(Fulton J. , 2022) and (Kadir, 2022) stress China's instrumental role in mediating the agreement, leveraging its economic partnerships and regional influence through initiatives like the Belt and Road. (Chaziza, 2020) adds that China's pragmatic approach succeeded where traditional Western efforts failed, highlighting its rising influence. (Gul, Abbasi, & Haider, 2021)) echo this, pointing to external actors like China reshaping the balance of power in the region.

Constructivist theory emphasizes the role of ideas and perceptions in shaping state behavior, particularly in the Middle East. (Wendt, 1999, pp. 123-125) highlights how intersubjective understandings drive actions, a concept (Jahandad & Mustafa, 2022) apply to Saudi-Iran relations, arguing that sectarian narratives and security dilemmas perpetuate conflict. (Buzan & Waever, 2003) explain how shared security concerns bind Middle Eastern states, with (Alam, 2017) noting that the Saudi-Iran rivalry stems as much from ideational clashes as from material power struggles.

On a broader scale, (Krylov, 2022) points to external powers like China and the U.S. reshaping regional perceptions. (Houghton, 2022) and (Kadir, 2022) emphasize China's pragmatic, non-interventionist approach, which challenges traditional Western dominance. This constructivist realignment of ideas and alliances highlights the influence of shifting narratives on Middle Eastern geopolitics.

The articles highlight a multifaceted geopolitical environment influencing Iran's nuclear ambitions and the global response. Robinson (2023) points to the JCPOA's decline following the U.S. withdrawal under Trump, which allowed Iran to expand its nuclear program. Davenport (2024) describes the resulting "diplomatic vacuum," exacerbated by Iran's uranium enrichment and regional tensions. Meanwhile, Cole (2024) highlights the potential for heightened confrontation if Trump returns to power, with risks of direct conflict involving Israel and Iran's proxies.

China's growing role as a stabilizing force is noted by (Davenport, 2024) and (Chaziza, 2020), who emphasize Beijing's economic and diplomatic balancing in the region, countering traditional Western dominance. Conversely, the Russo-Ukraine war, as analyzed by (Lebedev, 2022) has diverted Western attention and bolstered Iran-Russia ties.

These developments suggest an unsustainable status quo, with rising risks of miscalculations or conflict. While some advocate interim de-escalatory measures (Davenport, 2024), others warn of regional volatility, including Saudi Arabia's potential pursuit of nuclear capabilities (Robinson, 2023). The literature underscores the need for innovative diplomacy to address the evolving nuclear and geopolitical challenges.

Analysis and Discussion

Based on the comprehensive literature review, the key findings have been synthesized, contextualizing these within the current geopolitical realities to explore the implications for Iran's nuclear ambitions and its impact on Saudi-Iran rapprochement in particular and Middle Eastern security landscape in general.

Iran's Nuclear Program, JCPOA and Saudi Concerns
The evolution of Iran's nuclear program especially following the collapse of JCPOA after the US unilateral withdrawal in 2018 has exacerbated regional insecurities particularly from Saudi Arabia's perspective. However, with recent peace process brokered by China has changed the whole context, where Riyadh may still have serious concerns over Iran's nuclear program but due to expected assurances from China, both sides agreed to give peace a chance. On the other hand, the collapse of JCPOA prior to the recent rapprochement, heightened Saudi security concerns.

Riyadh's security concerns emanating from Iran's nuclear program are multidimensional ranging from regional security threats to geopolitical rivalry. The Saudi Arabia feared that nuclear Iran would exploit its proxies like Houthis in Yemen and Hezbollah in Lebanon, to leverage its influence, altering the regional geopolitical landscape. Saudi Arabia viewed Iran's nuclear advancements as part of Tehran's broader strategy to assert regional dominance besides challenging Riyadh's role in Islamic world on forums like Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC). This fear led to arms race, where Riyadh openly signaled willingness to pursue nuclear capabilities if Iran achieves nuclear status (Borger, 2023).

Iranian's Demands:

The economic sanctions on Iran have seriously hurt its oil sales-dependent economy. In addition, Iran

had to face partial economic and political isolation. Notwithstanding serious challenges faced in terms of higher inflation and increased unemployment, Iran can hold on to its acclaimed dividends of the deal. Though these demands appear unrealistic from the West's perspective, Iran considers these essential to forego its nuclearization.

The demands from Iran's side are: Firstly, lifting of economic sanctions on its oil export and assurances that this relief will endure longer and will not be suspended again, with the change of administration in the White House. Where present regime in the USA hanging on for another two months, even if willing to afford some respite, cannot bind succeeding governments to honor it. Secondly, Iran demands to unfreeze its assets abroad. Thirdly, exclusion of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) name from the Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) list. The last one will be the hardest to negotiate and materialize. Nonetheless, now largely it will depend on the President-elect of the US, Donald Trump, how he contemplates the US relations with Iran in future.

Demands of the West:

In the JCPOA, the demands from the West were primarily crafted out of Israel and Saudi's concerns over Iranian nuclearization. Israel and Saudi Arabia both were not part of the deal process, yet the US and its allies were not in a position especially to defy Israeli interests, which are overambitious in claims. The west demanded Iran to divorce its stubbornness in cooperating with IAEA's investigations of its nuclear activities, suspension of its uranium enrichment, suspension of constructing heavy water reactors and related projects required for weaponization, and ratification of Additional Protocols to its IAEA safeguard agreement.

Lingering Contentious Issues:

The present stalemate to strike any deal can be attributed to three main contentious issues:

Iran objects afresh, scrutinizing the past based on its archival material smuggled by Israel and handed over to IAEA. It believes that such an effort would set in an unending futile exercise, which Iran would not be able to justify. Instead, the start should be taken from what they have now and what exists, not past activities.

1. Iran's empathy for IRGC, as its official entity flagged as a terrorist organization, would curtail Iran's bargaining options due to domestic pressure.
2. Iran demanding assurances for longevity and reliability of economic relief regardless of any change in the White House.

Geostrategic Environment Scan:

Until the dawn of 2022, both sides reached the touching distance of the finish line, but things have backslid since then. The multifarious geopolitical developments on the political canvas have impacted the deal process. The most prominent was the Russo-Ukraine war, followed by explicit Chinese claims over Taiwan. On the sidelines, the humbling exit of the sole superpower from Afghanistan, the Iran-Saudi reproachment after years of frigid animosity, the Saudi-Chinese voyage of unprecedented partnership, and China's multi-billion deal with Iran to improve its oil facilities infrastructure have also played a phenomenal role in the dismal pace of the Iran-West nuclear deal process. These all developments have been discussed briefly in ensuing paragraphs to find their impact on future of the said deal.

Humiliating Exit of US-Led Coalition from Afghanistan:

Afghanistan not only proved a nail in the paw of the USA but also drained it economically and militarily, raising serious concerns for its capability to go for another misadventure anywhere, including against Iran.

Russo-Ukraine War:

2022 diverted the focus of the West towards Eurasia, where Russia overtly challenged the prevailing US-led western architect of the world order. It was a clear sign of defiance by a revisionist state to challenge the omnipotent hegemony. Unlike any past conflict, the West was divided to put its bets due to the security vs. dependence dilemma. On one side, the West cannot ignore Russia knocking on their backyard door. They also cannot afford a total shutdown of energy they receive from Russia, especially in the absence of any immediate alternative.

For the same reason, the economic sanctions imposed by the West on Russia remained way short

of their desired result. These sanctions have hurt Europe more than Russia, which has found substitute buyers for its energy supply. The war has put the Iran nuclearization issue on a backburner, where the US and its allies had more important things to do.

Chinese Blatant Expression of its Right over Taiwan:

The second setback to the US global hegemony came from the Chinese' assertion to reclaim its right over Taiwan. The situation got tense, and the West left Iran on its own. Moreover, the increased China-Iran economic interactions have addressed the sanctioned Iran's pariah status of international isolationism.

Iran- Saudi Reproachment:

After unfinished détente efforts by Pakistan, Iraq and Oman, the recent rapprochement brokered by rising global power, China, has totally altered the geopolitical landscape of the Middle Eastern region. This maneuver, if succeeds, will offset the US-Israel hype to target and isolate Iran through Abraham Accords, I2U2, IMEC.

The Middle East Crisis 2023:

The dawn of 7 October 2023 shocked the world and not Israel alone. The scenarios following the events unfolded on this day and later, have been unprecedented, impacting balance of power and security dynamics of the region. The world at large has been divided into two clear halves; pro-Israel and fence-sitters, with equivocal support for Palestine. Nonetheless, the conflict despite earnest harsh stance by the West, coercive warnings and strategic posturing, failed to limit the spread. So far, Iran, Lebanon and Houthis of Yemen are seriously engaged in the conflict, while many others are still finalizing to choose the sides. With enduring tensions in the Middle East reflected through Israel-Hamas conflict, the Iran's nuclear program, despite the US-Israel apprehensions, has receded to background. In addition, the Saudi-Iran rapprochement, visibly manifests undeclared assurances by China and Iran for Saudi Arabia for not to worry.

The US Election, Trump's "America First" Policy and Iran's Nuclear Program:

The results of US elections on 5th November 2024 though expected, came as a surprise for many

including the warring sides in the Middle East. In these evolving scenarios, where Trump is expected to repeal liberal international order orchestrated and anchored by the US for last half century, it would likely continue to play its role in global issues, demanding more stakes of burden sharing from other players and not just the US leading all the campaigns. In case of the Middle East crisis, the US administration under Trump is likely to negotiate a peace deal among conflicting parties. With China's increased influence in the region, the US will either pursue the old traditional stance to isolate Iran while clustering other neighboring countries including GCC and especially Saudi Arabia, or normalize its relations with Iran to regain lost space in the Middle East. In either scenario, it seems that now the time to bar Iran from pursuing its nuclear ambition has lapsed. It is assumed that Saudi Arabia has also accepted this reality and can follow two pathways; pursue own nuclear program with China's help as hinted by the Saudi leadership in the past or consolidate rapprochement with guaranteed assurances that Iran's nuclear program is not aimed against Riyadh.

Options to Strike a Deal

The prevailing period of stasis, where no recognizable change is visible in the status quo, can prove dangerous in the overall geopolitical matrix. Iran, which has endured the sanctions for a long time, would only be compelled to negotiate if it receives assurances for its demands. On the other hand, the Trump administration will not be in a position to offer anything to Iran, which has an unacceptable political price tag for him and his party. More negotiations with the same mindset from both sides would not yield any meaningful result, instead would continue to engage the parties in a Sisyphean struggle. On the contrary, if the negotiation process breaks, it would allow both sides to go all out, which can be fatal.

In this scenario of dealing with no deal, there is a need for both sides to first chalk out what is negotiable and what is not. Selecting the negotiables to start with, the negotiations need to be revived with set timelines. Specific options in this regard are given below:

Overarching Philosophy- The tighter you hold, the lesser you have:

both sides need to understand that unless both agree to concede from their initial stance, there will be no outcome of this process. The mediator must find common grounds to move forward when differentiating between desirable and practicable.

Working Formula - One Bite at a Time:

The only way to solve even the most intricate problem is to deconstruct it into smaller achievable steps and then build on those. In the same way, instead of staying glued to unnegotiable, there is a need to build the process on negotiables. Understandably, the gap between sanctions and assurances is too big to bridge, and distrust between both sides is too profound to ignore. Still, the world at large, and the region in particular, cannot afford to let the issue linger on without reaching any material solution.

Revolving Door Approach:

Like a revolving door to exit by one and entrance by the other simultaneously, both parties have to work in tandem and not autonomously. One has to give in, in order to get in, in every round. The cyclic repetition of such actions from both sides would reduce the trust deficit and improve the working relationship to endorse any negotiated bargain.

Humanitarian Exchange – the Start Point:

To improve the bilateral trust level, both sides should agree to release the number of prisoners held with each under their captivity as a measure of confidence-building measure. The said initiative will ease the tensions and, at the same time, will offer leverage for its domestic politics to continue the further negotiation process.

Some-for-Some – An Interim Measure:

As an interim measure, instead wasting time on an unrealistic All-for-All approach, the US and Iran go for smaller bites as confidence-building measures. Unfreezing the Iranian assets abroad or partially lifting the ban on Iran's oil exports, in exchange for restoring the IAEA monitoring process, can put the negotiations on the practical path. When done, this would offer governments on both sides an excuse for

domestic audiences to stay engaged in the negotiation process for more significant incentives.

All-for-All- the Ultimate Recipe:

This option would only be possible when antecedent confidence-building steps have been taken, and both sides agree to cede further realistic demands of each other.

Issue through the Prism of Constructivism:

Unlike Realists, who believe in the material form of power and security, and liberalists, who construe interdependence as the prime actor in states' relations, constructivists argue on the ideational basis as the source of subjective interpretation of the material world and its manifestation in international relations. They believe that there is no objective reality or truth and that states' relations depend on shared thoughts and ideas and not essentially on material conditions or forces. For example, Iran's nuclearization initiative is a real threat to many but is subjective to other states' perceptions. Where Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the USA, due to an ideational clash, would consider it a threat, countries who have no clash of interests with Iran would not be bothered about it. Nonetheless, the states without any record of clash with Iran but a supporter of a non-nuclear world, like Japan based on shared ideas and beliefs would also object to any state going on the path of nuclearization.

Considering the above construct, let us evaluate the Iran nuclear deal from the cognitivist's point of view. Iran had been the closest ally of the US in Shah's regime. Then what changed with Iran, where it was later after the overthrow of Pahlavi, became the sour enemy? More than any material change, it was due to a change in perception of Iran. Later, the Shiite government coming into power in Iraq reflected joint choices and perceptions of the US and Iran. Again in Trump's first term from 2017-21, the US perception of Iran was highly negative, and so were the manifestation of anti-Iran policies and sanctions. With the change in the White House, Biden's administration voyaged for a negotiated settlement of Iran's nuclear issue. It all speaks that perceptions are bigger than realities. Now Trump again assuming the control in January 2025 with totally changed geopolitical landscape, one can wait and see how

perceptions build narratives and translates into physical actions.

Constructivists believe that the only way to address a conflict is to deconstruct existing ideas through interactions that are the basis of the clash and then, with mutual understanding, reshape the perceptions. This would merit deconstructing the existing contours of the term "enemy" and reconstructing it based on new defines and ideas. The only recipe, therefore, to strike a deal is intense diplomatic engagement between the two, where Iran would only be lured in by incentivizing through symbolic concessions.

Constructivist also argue that strong leadership on both sides of the conflict have the power to influence the outcome. To start with, the leadership on both sides rejects the existing perceptions about each other, which would pave the way for a meaningful dialogue. The nuclear agreement between Iran and the West in 2015 manifests enduring efforts to deconstruct the prevailing conception about each other. However, this drive later lost its steam, bringing both sides to square one.

Conclusion

- The present no deal, no crisis scenario does not suit anyone. Nonetheless, when pitched against one-upmanship, the status quo is a preferable option. However, if diplomatic efforts drag on for long, or to the worse, end in a deadlock, it would frustrate both sides, and chances of getting entangled in a downward spiral culminating in a military confrontation would increase. Where both sides need to table their achievable divorcing from the desirables, they should at least consider the steps to mitigate the chances of an escalation. This is possible if both sides are cognizant of the tripwires and make a conscious effort to avoid those

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