

Saudi Arabia's Quest for Strategic Autonomy

April 12, 2023 • vajiramandravi.com



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Why in news?

- Saudi Arabia had adopted an aggressive foreign policy in recent years as it is seeking to expand its influence in West Asia.
- It is reaching out to old rivals, holding talks with new enemies and seeking to balance between great powers, all while trying to transform its economy at home.

News Summary: Saudi Arabia's quest for strategic autonomy

How is Saudi foreign policy changing?

Image caption: Restructuring Dynamics of West Asia

- The main driver of Saudi foreign policy was the kingdom's hostility towards Iran.
- However, last month, Saudi Arabia announced a deal to normalise diplomatic ties with Iran.
- Soon after, there were reports that Russia was mediating talks between Saudi Arabia and Syria.
- Recently, a Saudi-Omani delegation travelled to Yemen to hold talks with the Houthi rebels for a permanent ceasefire.
- All these moves mark a decisive shift from the policy adopted by Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman after he rose to the top echelons of the Kingdom in 2017.
- In other words, foreign policy of Saudi Arabia is witnessing a change by making room for diplomacy and pragmatic alliances.

Why are there changes now?

- The Kingdom's recent regional bets were either unsuccessful or only partially successful.
 - In Syria, Mr. Assad, backed by Russia and Iran, has won the civil war.
 - In Yemen, the Saudi-led coalition failed to Houthis them from the capital. Also, the Houthis, with their drones and short-range missiles, now pose a serious security threat to Riyadh.
- Also, the U.S.'s priority is shifting away from West Asia. So, the Saudi Arabia is faced with two choices:
 - Either double down on its failed bets seeking to contain Iran in a region which is no longer a priority for the U.S., or
 - Undo the failed policies and reach out to Iran to establish a new balance between the two.
- When China, which has good ties with both Tehran and Riyadh, offered to mediate between the two, the Saudis found it as an opportunity and seized it.

Is Saudi Arabia moving away from the U.S.?

- It is not. The U.S., which has thousands of troops and military assets in the Gulf, including its Fifth Fleet, would continue to play a major security role in the region.

- For Saudi Arabia, the U.S. remains its largest defence supplier.
- However, the Saudis realised that the U.S.'s deprioritisation of West Asia is altering the post-War order of the region.
- Hence, Saudi Arabia is trying to use the vacuum created by the U.S. policy changes to autonomise its foreign policy.
- De-Americanisation of West Asia is not a Saudi goal. Rather it is trying to exploit America's weakness in the region to establish its own autonomy.
 - It is doing so by building better ties with Russia and China and mending relations with regional powers without completely losing the U.S.

How Saudi Arabia is balancing between the global powers?

Image caption: Balancing act of Saudi Arabia

- Saudi Arabia is trying to balance between the U.S. (its largest arms supplier), Russia, (its OPEC-Plus partner), and China (the new superpower in the region).

What are the implications for the region?

- Saudi Arabia's normalisation talks with Syria or its talks with the Houthis cannot be seen separately from the bigger picture of the Saudi-Iran rapprochement.
- If Syria rejoins the Arab League, it would be an official declaration of victory by Mr. Assad in the civil war.
- It would help improve the overall relationship between Damascus and other Arab capitals.
- Likewise, if the Saudis end the Yemen war through a settlement with the Houthis, Riyadh would get a calmer border while Tehran.
- Such agreements may not radically alter the security dynamics of the region but could infuse some stability across the Gulf.

Q1) Who are Houthi rebels?

The Houthi rebels, also known as Ansar Allah, are a Shia Muslim political and military group that operates primarily in Yemen. The group is named after its founder, Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi, who was killed by Yemeni government forces in 2004. The Houthi rebels are concentrated in the northern part of Yemen and have been involved in a long-running conflict with the Yemeni government.

Q2) What is civil war in Syria?

The civil war in Syria is an ongoing armed conflict that began in 2011, after a wave of protests and demonstrations swept across the country as part of the Arab Spring. The conflict quickly escalated into a full-scale civil war, with various factions vying for control of the country. The conflict began when the Syrian government, led by President Bashar al-Assad, responded to the protests with a brutal crackdown. Opposition groups, including defectors from the Syrian military, formed armed groups and began to fight back against government forces.

Source: [Saudi Arabia's quest for strategic autonomy](#)

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