

Saudi-Chinese Rapprochement and Its Effect on Saudi-American Relations

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Brief Analysis

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The first meeting between China and Saudi Arabia, which took place in Oman in 1985, was an initial gesture towards official bilateral relations between the two countries. Before 1990, there were no diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and China, and Saudi Arabia refused to recognize China as a government. However, full diplomatic relations were established after the Saudi Ambassador to the United States, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, visited Beijing. The two countries exchanged ambassadors, and organized meetings at the political and economic levels. Recently, Saudi Arabia has attempted to deepen its ties with China to widen its economic base and acquire important Chinese political position in regional transformations. This rapprochement has been made clear of by the recent [visit \(http://www.france24.com/ar/20170316-توقع-اتفاقيات-زيارة-الملك-سلمان-الصين-السعودية\)](http://www.france24.com/ar/20170316-توقع-اتفاقيات-زيارة-الملك-سلمان-الصين-السعودية) of the Saudi monarch, King Salman bin Abdulaziz, to China in March 2017, where he signed deals worth \$65 billion.

The question poses itself: does Saudi-Chinese closeness indicate the beginning of problem in Saudi-U.S. relations, or can China fill the vacuum occupied by the United States? To answer this question, the nature of the Saudi-Chinese relationship should be examined at both the economic and the security level, and analyzed for its implications on Saudi-U.S. relations.

Economically, the Chinese Deputy Minister for Commerce confirmed last October that both Beijing and Riyadh intend to establish an investment fund of \$20 billion. Thus, Saudi Arabia is becoming China's biggest commercial partner in the Middle East and Africa. Meanwhile, the Saudi Deputy Minister of Economy and Planning said that Saudi institutions are ready to fund partially in yuan, and China is ready to provide the funding. Saudi Arabia started using the yuan instead of U.S. dollar in its oil transactions with China as part of its pivot to China, and to compensate for the future fading role of Washington in the Middle East. During a phone call between the Chinese president and the Saudi King in November 2017, the Chinese President confirmed to the Saudi king that China's intention to strengthen its strategic partnership with Riyadh. China wants to keep up with the changes occurring in the region, especially the drop in Saudi crude exports to the U.S. to their lowest level in thirty years. China will allow Saudi Arabia to increase its sales in the second-largest oil market in the world, whereas the U.S. has become energy independent.

Security-wise, some analysts see Saudi Arabia as trying to create a strategic competition among the great powers to gain weapons and security support, especially after the U.S. appeared to respond weakly to Saudi security and military needs amidst security challenges. This might open the door to China and Russia to exert influence in the region, and coordinate their positions against Washington; thereby making the U.S. either an ineffective player or out of the game in the Middle East. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia is aware that it is impossible in the short term to relinquish the U.S. role in national security to China, which compared to the United States and even Russia, remains less committed politically and militarily to its friends among the countries of the region. Washington can bear the burden of military deployment, military progress, and coalition building, while China has no such capacity nor the desire to clash with the United States in the Middle East. Rather, China wishes to benefit from American dominance there, which secures shipping routes for export oil to China without China having to make any major investments to protect the region. Amid the current Saudi-Iranian conflict, China is aware that there is no current alternative to American military presence in the Gulf to limit Iranian influence, particularly since relations between Saudi Arabia and the United States have progressed following the election of Donald Trump. Trump is partnering with Saudi Arabia to limit Iranian influence and supports Saudi reforms, whereby Saudi Arabia has begun to expand the number of American banks and other economic ties in the Kingdom.

The goal of China's foreign policy approach is to keep on friendly terms with all the major players and to avoid continual hostility from several risks, including increasing Chinese involvement in the region's security that would affect American and Russian interests. Accordingly, the Chinese continue to work within their narrow economic self-interest, and they are likely to continue this strategy so long as regional conflicts do not pose a basic risk to Beijing's plans. In addition, the "Silk Road" initiative is considered a way for China to influence global transformations, and establish economic and cultural partnerships between Beijing and other countries; thereby, strengthening China's role as a main player in world affairs.

Saudi Arabia is well aware that the role that China is playing in the Saudi-Iranian conflict is for China's self-interest only; thus, Riyadh is not satisfied that Beijing will abandon its relationship with Iran in the future in favor of its relationship with Saudi Arabia. Riyadh also understands the dangers of a complete break from Washington and that this will not be in Saudi Arabia's long-term interest. Therefore, Saudi Arabia will try to benefit from its economic relationship with China, while also maintaining its functional and security relationship with Washington. Both Saudi Arabia and China are mindful that, given the presence of American military bases in the GCC countries, Saudi Arabia and Riyadh will be unable to remove the U.S. from its position as the dominant military actor in the Persian Gulf. The Kingdom will also benefit from diversifying its major markets for future oil exports. What seems likely is that China, Saudi Arabia, and the United States will form a tripartite role in the Gulf that accommodates their shared interests without any party marginalizing the others or removing itself from the scene. ❖

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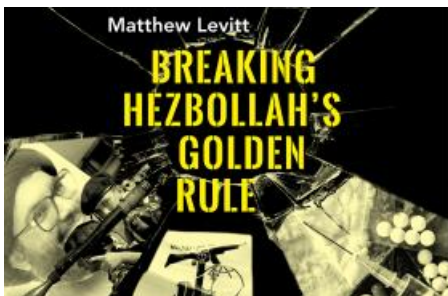
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