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East: Surveying the Fluid Geostrategic Landscape

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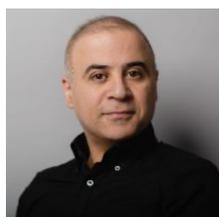
News

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Saudi Arabia closed its embassy in Sanaa, the capital of Yemen, in 2015. The Beijing-brokered deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran has also seen new diplomatic discussions to bring peace to Yemen.



**Ali
Alavi**

When Russia launched the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, many commentators in the West expected that the US allies in the Middle East would be the key players in tightening the Western sanctions on Russia. But this was not the case.

Much to the Western surprise, the US partners in the region – including Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Türkiye – not only maintained their neutral positions but also began to dynamically consolidate their economic and political ties with the Eastern powers of China and Russia.

A New Power Broker

China has recently astounded many analysts when it brokered a landmark agreement to reactivate ties

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between two major regional arch-rivals – Saudi Arabia and Iran – in March 2023. Since then, officials from Iran and Saudi Arabia have held meetings in Beijing to develop an entente cordiale.

On 29 March, Saudi Arabia officially partnered with China-led security bloc, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). The move would promote Riyadh to “a dialogue partner” within the SCO. Other Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt, Iran, and Qatar have been granted the status of an observer or dialogue partner within the organisation. Türkiye eagerly seeks to join the bloc as President Erdogan attempts to forge partnerships beyond NATO.

China’s coordination of the Tehran-Riyadh rapprochement was orchestrated out of desideratum and prospect. The US allies in the Persian Gulf are of critical significance to Beijing’s energy security essentials. China feels progressively dexterous in its regional diplomacy, and its expanding political and economic footprint has been welcomed by the region in the post-Covid era.

No Longer an Ally of Choice

Meanwhile, the Middle Eastern allies of the US began to view Beijing not only as a reliable trade partner but also a potential security guarantor providing them leverage vis-à-vis Washington. The Saudi Arabia-Iran agreement will meet the primary objective on the global energy market by endorsing the free flow of energy.

The US is likely to remain the key security patron for its allies in the region. However, the new Middle Eastern initiatives towards China and other global powers mean that Washington will not be the top-drawer cohort for the region’s technology adoption and economic aspirations.

The desire of the US allies in the region to diversify their economic and political partnerships is not limited to China, though. On 6 April 2023, Admiral Gorshkov docked in the port of Jeddah in Saudi Arabia, making history as the first visit of a Russian warship to the Kingdom.

A Turkish Gambit

Türkiye, the only Middle Eastern member of NATO, is reluctant to participate in the Western sanctions against Russia. Since the war began, Türkiye's trade with Russia has boomed. For instance, Moscow established more than 1 300 firms in Türkiye in 2022, a 670% increase against the previous year. Russia's atomic agency, Rosatom, is building the Akkuyu nuclear power plant for Türkiye.

Moscow also attempts to follow Beijing's footsteps in the region and has already become Ankara's key partner in the South Caucasus. In April 2023, the Kremlin reportedly hosted talks among senior diplomats that aimed at Türkiye-Syria rapprochement.

Reciprocating Russia's initiatives, Türkiye was the main facilitator of the Grain Deal between Russia and Ukraine, thus enabling food supplies to reach the global market. Indeed, both Türkiye and Russia have benefitted from that agreement. However, the deal signals Ankara's growing influence over Moscow.

A Marriage of Convenience

On the other side of the coin, there has been a common perception among many Western commentators that Iran and Russia are staunch ideological allies. However, the developments on the ground are more complex. Although there have been periods of close economic and military cooperation,

the relationship between the two is not one of romance.

It is fair to describe the relationship between Russia and Iran as a marriage of convenience rather than a formal alliance – a pragmatic partnership rather than an ideological coalition. Despite working together on various issues such as their support for the Assad regime, Tehran and Moscow are potential competitors in the global energy market. Iran may be willing to diversify its relationships beyond Moscow and reclaim its position as one of the leading energy suppliers. However, it has been given a cold shoulder by the Western powers.

There is an ever-present cloud of new sanctions from Washington, following the US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) under the Trump administration and against the backdrop of President Biden's hesitation to re-join the deal. Iran has been courting Russia, for instance, with supplies of high-tech drones. It is a basic survival strategy that isolated states under threat tend to pursue.

Although the United Arab Emirates (UAE) positions itself as a neutral regional player, it has been suspected of sanction-busting and pressed by the West to clamp down on the practice. The UAE has emerged as a favoured destination for affluent Russians seeking alternative places to shelter their assets. The UAE, as well as Saudi Arabia, has been fervently moving their economies beyond hydrocarbons. Both have thus sought cooperation with countries that can help them diversify their incomes.

The UAE and Beyond

Other American allies in the Middle East have been

building a portfolio of tactical affiliations to generate an equilibrium in their partnerships with the US. In pursuit of this strategy, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt, for instance, have been exploring the option of joining BRICS as an alternative forum for cooperation. Diversifying ties with the Eastern powers will help the US allies in the region to define their national interests outside of their relationships with Washington.

The war in Ukraine has advanced Saudi Arabia-China and Türkiye-Russia relations – now characterised by increased economic cooperation in trade and energy – and thus expended business transactions with non-US dollar currencies. Since Russia invaded Ukraine, China has gained more leverage in the Middle East than ever before. In fact, Moscow's influence is being increasingly overshadowed by Beijing's ability to offer more attractive trade packages to the regional powers.

A New Great Power Competition?

Whether the US allies are steadily moving away from Washington is an open question. Certainly, the recent diplomatic activities in the region tell us that the colourful patterns of classic alliances have faded. We cannot comprehensively measure the allegiance of "allies" according to the 20th-century templates and prosaisms. The concepts of allies, adversaries, and friends are increasingly fluid. And a new order is shaping out of the economic and socio-political necessities in the Global South.

What we are witnessing is a gradual shift in the political, economic, and security dynamics throughout the region. The US has been shifting focus to the Indo-Pacific and thus created new

opportunities for its Middle Eastern allies. Ironically, to this end, both the so-called friendly and non-friendly states in the region are pursuing similar policies by diversifying and building new relationships with a range of global partners – China, India, Brazil, and Russia.

The metamorphosis of the Middle Eastern socio-economic and political spectrum into a new arena is a complex and time-consuming process. It is best characterised by a gradual and slow-moving – yet perceptible – transformation of the regional landscape. In other words, the Middle Eastern states are redefining their interests within the broader context of Greater Eurasia. In doing so, they are exploring their economic potentials and reaching a new economic and political equilibrium.

This new equipoise may take some time to materialise, but Europe's next-door neighbour – the Middle East – is surely moving in that direction.

Views expressed in ICDS publications are those of the author(s). This article was written for the Lennart Meri Conference 2023 special edition of the [ICDS Diplomaatia magazine](#).

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