

ASIAN VIEWPOINT

The Saudi difference

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Saudi Arabia occupies a relatively safe spot on a world map that is being torn asunder by the strategic contest between the US and China for global supremacy. The spot is safe because Saudi Arabia is friendly to both countries, to the extent that neither the US nor China can afford to ignore the Saudi factor in Middle Eastern and African security, without which global stability cannot be imagined.

What is the Saudi factor? To me, it is the ability of Saudi Arabia to use its national wealth to possess and exercise commensurate international power. This might sound like a platitude: After all, which country would not turn its wealth into power? The truth is that there are such countries and regions.

Japan's case is instructive. It rose from the radioactive ashes of World War II to become the leading Asian economy in just years. Still, it did not translate its economic strength into military prowess out of deference to the security umbrella provided by its protective alliance with the US. Germany is another example of how a country, even after its reunification, abjured military power and invested instead in its membership of the European Union, which itself is a largely pacifist regional organisation.

Saudi Arabia stands out because of its differences from such nations and regions. Its legendary oil wealth is an economic asset that is strategic as well. Riyadh serves as the de facto leader of the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (Opec) because it is by far the largest and most profitable oil exporter in the world and is endowed with enough capacity to act as the swing producer on the global market. Saudi Arabia has used its position in Opec wisely to try and balance the interests of the developed and developing worlds, so much so that the country is not viewed as a Western outpost in the developing world nor an Asian Trojan horse in the developed world. Instead, Saudi Arabia's importance in global affairs rests on its ability to belong to different economic and political worlds.

Till now, the US has been seen as the undisputed leader of the developed world and China as the countervailing leader of the developing world. Those two worlds have now collided and collapsed into one space, a contested space created by the reflexive American resistance to China's rise, particularly its ability to intervene in the affairs of the developed world while retaining its leadership of the developing world. It is yet unclear how the contest will play out, but it cannot play out without the participation of third countries. Saudi Arabia stands out among the third countries, which can mediate relations between the two great powers because they are not beholden entirely to one side.

Of course, the US and China will not depend on third-party mediation to settle their



Saudi Arabia deftly uses its national wealth to possess and exercise commensurate international power

disputes: They are too powerful for that. However, not even the US and China are so powerful that they do not need trustworthy friends to keep regional affairs humming while a bruising battle for global supremacy continues. Saudi Arabia is the most trustworthy country in the Middle East and Africa for both the US and China. This is a remarkable feat.

By contrast, Iran — Saudi Arabia's chief adversary in the Middle East and Africa — has pushed itself into an international corner because of its unremitting hostility, which is almost biological, to America and Israel. Tehran has attracted the corresponding hostility of the two countries, which, together, constitute the Judeo-Christian core of contemporary Western power.

True, Iran has been feted by China tactically even as Tehran has been abhorred in the West strategically. China is not involved overtly in Iran, less so in its proxies' aggression against America and its allies in the region, but Beijing is trying to secure its energy sources by deepening relations with Iran. That is natural, but Sino-Iranian relations are unlikely to promote optimum security in the Middle East, given that they will be challenged by America's umbilical relations with Israel. The 2024 agreement signed in Beijing between Palestinian factions, including rivals Hamas and Fatah, may or may not have strengthened Palestinian unity. Still, they have done little to change facts on the ground, particularly in a Gaza devastated by the Israeli military response to Hamas' terrorist attack on the Jewish state in 2023.

By contrast, the Abraham Accords of 2020, mediated during the first Donald Trump Administration, highlighted the common belief of Judaism and Islam in the prophet Abraham. Those accords have made concrete diplomatic progress and, very importantly, have not incurred a hostile Chinese response. No accord named after Abraham can survive without the support of Saudi Arabia because Riyadh is the global capital of Sunni Islam, even as Iran struggles to secure its position as the hub of global Shi'ite Islam. Tehran's support for proxy wars in Iraq and Syria has not earned measurable dividends, and its ill-fated investment in Houthi rebels in Yemen has been countered ably by Saudi Arabia. By any measure, Riyadh lies strategically miles ahead of Tehran.

However, even Saudi Arabia needs to shore up its regional position by simultaneously en-

gaging the two great powers of the US and China. That is possible.

Between America and China

In a November 2023 article, researchers for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace made some interesting but flawed arguments. They said: "Like many emerging powers, Riyadh is hoping it can have the best of both worlds: the benefits of a US security partnership while advancing ties with US adversaries. Perhaps Mohammed bin Salman seeks a division of labour, where the US serves as Saudi Arabia's primary strategic security partner, and China remains a critically important partner for trade, technological cooperation and managing relations with Iran. Given Saudi reservations about embracing America's confrontational stance towards China and the constraints the US Congress will demand on any security commitments the United States makes, it remains to be seen whether this new framework for a limited partnership is possible."

The article assumed wrongly that the decisions of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the greatest moderniser in contemporary Saudi history, would be so simplistic as to depend on the partisan vagaries of the US Congress in seeking to position the Kingdom as a regional interlocutor between America and China.

Instead, Riyadh's calculation was that Washington would not — because it could not — impede Saudi Arabia's economic relations with China, while, equally, Beijing would not — because it could not — stymie long-established security relations between Washington and Riyadh. The reason for this confidence was that Riyadh was too important for one side to lose to the other. Instead, Washington would be content with its lucrative ability to sell high-end military equipment to Saudi Arabia, and China would be content with its lucrative ability to benefit from Saudi Arabia's economic prowess and use it as a gateway to the Middle East and Africa.

To put it simply, Riyadh needed access to both Washington and Beijing. Equally, those two capitals of global power needed access to the indisputable economic and strategic capital of the Muslim world. So, Saudi Arabia's policy towards America and China was not a gamble. It was a hard-headed decision based on the inalienable fact that the Saudi economy counts in world affairs and that Saudi foreign policy possessed the ability to turn wealth into power.

That capacity was manifested by Prince Turki al Faisal al Saud during his tenure as Saudi Ambassador to the US. The Saudi instinct for national survival and success had been honed to success during the Cold War. In the following era, it was honed further to situate the country firmly on the trajectory of international relations defined, not by the old rivalry between American capitalism and Soviet communism, but by the equally high-stakes contest between the American and Chinese versions of capitalism.

Saudi realism

It is testimony to the quality of Saudi realism in foreign affairs that even the radical inversion of American foreign policy initiated by President Donald Trump recognises the time-tested role of trusted interlocutors such as Saudi Arabia. So do America's challengers on the global stage, such as Russia, another country (along with China) with which Saudi Arabia maintains good relations despite tense US-Russian relations. It is not a small thing that the Kingdom was chosen as the venue of peace talks over Ukraine.

Now, transfer that desire for peace from Europe to Asia. It is no secret that Taiwan is a flashpoint-in-waiting. There is no reason that Saudi Arabia cannot act as an intermediary power between the US and China before any military confrontation between the two powers over the island. Even elsewhere in Sino-US relations, which are going downhill because of the tariff war between the two sides, Saudi Arabia can intervene as an impartial friend of both sides. After all, the Age of Hydrocarbons determines that no matter which side is after what, neither side can do without access to nations that provide oil. It is to the credit of Saudi Arabia that it is looking at its place in the world beyond the power of oil, but, at this moment, oil remains a measure of the gold standard in international relations.

The possibilities are immense. Saudi Arabia has only to follow through with them. ■

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