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Q- How do you see the increasing rapprochement between KSA and Iran? Also analyze its socio-political implications on Middle East and Pakistan? What measures will you recommend for Islamabad to follow?

On March 10, 2023, Iran and Saudi Arabia announced the restoration of their diplomatic ties, the outcome of an agreement mediated by China. The restoration of diplomatic relations was announced through a joint Trilateral statement that mentioned that the reopening of embassies within two months along with bilateral cooperation in different fields will be achieved between the two states. Diplomatic ties between Iran and SKSA were severed in 2016 after the Saudi execution of Shia cleric Nimr Al-Nimr, which sparked anger and protests in Iran, leading to strained relations between two states.

Significance of the deal :

This deal has significant implications for Middle East, and Pakistan, which is Iran's immediate neighbour and a close strategic ally of Saudi Arabia, is poised to benefit from the agreement. Despite breaking diplomatic ties in 2016, Iran and Saudi Arabia have found themselves on opposite sides of almost every regional conflict, from Syria to Iraq to Yemen. While Iraq and Oman had previously attempted to engage the two rivals, it was Beijing that ultimately managed to broker this

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geopolitical. Pakistan has been trying to resolve the regional rift since its first occurred, and has continued its mediation efforts over the years. By adopting a balanced approach, Islamabad has tried to maintain equilibrium in its dealings with both countries. The Pakistan Foreign Office called the normalization as "an important diplomatic breakthrough" made possible by "China's visionary leadership". According to Michael Kugelman, South Asia director at The Wilson Centre in Washington, Pakistan will be one of the biggest beneficiaries if the deal is successful. He says:

"Few countries are more vulnerable to Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry than Pakistan. It has a military alliance with Saudis, it borders Iran, it has shia population of 20%, it is pressured to help Saudi Arabia militarily, and it is periodically targeted by militants based in Iran."

Reasons behind increasing Rapprochement:

- KSA's motivation: Stabilizing Economy and Region

KSA has been driven by the desire to stabilize its economy and the region, which has been affected by its rivalry with Iran. The Saudi economy has suffered due to attacks on critical oil infrastructure by Iran-backed militant groups, as well as the ongoing proxy wars in Yemen and involvement in Lebanon and Iraq. To address these

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challenges, Saudi Arabia has signed expensive defense and weapon agreement with the US, and is working to transition its economy away from hydrocarbons, which requires stability in the region. The new leadership of Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman is also reflected in a shift in Riyadh's traditional foreign policy on Iran.

• Iran's Objectives : Overcoming Economic Isolation and Regional Integration

Meanwhile, Iran has sought to break free from economic isolation imposed by US sanctions and to integrate itself back into the region. The new Iranian president has worked to project power domestically and internationally, and the deal with Saudi Arabia has been positively received in the Iranian media.

China's Role In Brokering the Peaceful deal :

China's involvement in the region is driven by its growing economy's need for energy from the Middle East, and its successful avoidance of regional rivalries and conflicts. China's involvement in brokering the deal reflects its peaceful foreign policy principles and the desire to rise together, as opposed to the negative portrayal of its Belt and Road Initiative as debt trap diplomacy. The negotiations leading up to the deal have been ongoing since before 2021, and have been supported by other countries in the region, including Iraq,

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Oman, and the UAE.

Impact on Middle East

- **Regional Peace and stability:**

Cooperative development and good faith adherence to the agreement could lead to regional peace and stability, as well as economic integration both within and between regions. The agreement may foster trust and respect between previously hostile parties and could result in decreased violence and proxy wars in the region, with Yemen being a notable example. Although the UN Secretary General and the US have expressed hope for an end to the war in Yemen, it may be overly optimistic to expect an immediate end to Iran backed militias. While Iran relies on these groups to safeguard its interests against the US and Israel, their use against Riyadh may be curtailed.

- **Nuclear program resolution:**

Additionally, this agreement may serve as a foundation for the revival of JCPOA, as analysts suggest that any deal between Iran and Saudi Arabia would require guarantees from Iran regarding its nuclear program. Iran's recent pledge to increase inspections of its nuclear sites by IAEA is a positive indication in this regard. This also presents an

opportunity for Iran to have an important regional ally and minimize threats from the US and Israel.

Ultimately, this reconciliation between Riyadh and Tehran could represent a viable solution to Iran's nuclear program.

IMPACT ON PAKISTAN

• Economic advantages and Regional Opportunities :

The Saudi-Iran peace deal presents Pakistan with a unique chance to enhance its economic prospects while contributing to regional stability. A closer relationship with Iran holds immense strategic value for Pakistan. Enhanced cooperation between the two countries would foster an environment of trust and cooperation, paving the way for resolving outstanding disputes.

• Trade and Energy Synergy :

Pakistan's history of trade with Iran and the significant presence of its workforce in Saudi Arabia align with potential economic synergies arising from the peace deal. It provides an opportunity to tackle the long standing controversy surrounding the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline. With Iran having completed its part of the pipeline, Pakistan's lack of progress could lead to

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penalties surrounding \$18 billion. Pakistan couldn't complete the project fearing Saudi Arabia's objections.

The completion of pipeline would result in providing 775 MCF gas per day.

Decline in Sectarianism: Pakistan is home to second largest Shia population in world after Iran with its estimated Shia population of 20%. (although it is a Sunni-majority country). The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia directly impacted Pakistan leading to increased sectarian violence. Now, after the peace deal, Pakistan can engage with both countries and can help reduce tensions in the region and put an end to sectarianism in the country.

Recommendations for Islamabad

- **Energy security and Bilateral Cooperation:**

Pakistan's energy needs can be met through active engagement with both Saudi Arabia and Iran.

By securing a reliable energy supply from these nations, Pakistan can mitigate its energy crisis and ensure a stable foundation for economic growth.

- **Adopting a Neutral stance:**

Given its historical ties with both Saudi

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Arabia and Iran, Pakistan could consider adopting a neutral stance to facilitate equilibrium in the region. This approach would enable Pakistan to safeguard its economic and diplomatic interests while preventing entanglement in potential conflicts.

• Strategic alignment for Regional Prosperity:

Pakistan should seize the opportunity to further align itself with the evolving geopolitical landscape. By enhancing diplomatic relationships and aligning its foreign policy with economic and regional stability goals, Pakistan can ensure a brighter future for itself and broader region.

Conclusion:

The increasing rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran holds immense potential to reshape the Middle East's dynamics. The shift from rivalry to cooperation has far reaching implications for stability, conflicts, alliances and economies. Pakistan's role in this evolving landscape involves skillful diplomacy, balanced engagement and strategic measures to secure its own interests and contribute to region's stability.