

Current Affairs.

Q.2:-

Saudi-Iran Negotiations brokered by China:

Background:-

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1) Background of Saudi-Iran relations:-

The relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran, two influential powers in the Middle East, is characterised by a combination of historical, religious, geopolitical and ideological factors. This intricate interplay has resulted in a dynamic relationship marked by cooperation and rivalry. Following are key reasons behind their rivalry.

1.1) Historical Origins:-

The roots of the Saudi-Iran rivalry can be traced back to the early 20th century. Saudi Arabia, founded in 1932, is predominantly Sunni and is home of Mecca and Medina. On the other hand, Iran, with its ancient civilization, has predominantly

Shia population. The historical tensions between these two branches of Islam has significantly shaped the dynamics between the two nations (A Syahransuri, A Rivalry of Necessity: analysis of contention between Iran and Saudi Arabia, 2020)

1.2) Geopolitical Rivalry:

Saudi Arabia and Iran vie for influence in the region, seeking to assert themselves as the dominant power. The Middle East's strategic resources, including oil and gas reserves, have made both countries crucial players in global energy markets and geopolitics (M. Kamrava, ~~2018~~ Multipolarity and instability in Middle East, 2018).

1.3) Religious Differences:

Religious differences have exacerbated the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Saudi Arabia has often been associated with promoting conservative interpretation of Sunni Islam known as Wahhabism, while Iran champions the Shia branch of Islam. This has led to competing efforts to export their respective ideologies and gain influence within the Muslim world.

1.4) Proxy Conflicts:

The Saudi-Iran rivalry has manifested in proxy conflicts across the region. In countries like

Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria; local conflicts ~~across the region~~ have taken on a wider dimension as Saudi Arabia and Iran support opposing sides, often along sectarian lines. This has contributed to the destabilization of these nations and prolongation of conflicts (MN Mirza et al, Structural Sources of Saudi-Iran rivalry and 1.5) ~~Oil Production and OPEC~~ competition of the sphere of influence, 2021).

1.5) Oil Production and OPEC:

As two of the world's largest oil producers, Saudi Arabia and Iran have often found themselves in competition within the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Disputes over production quotas and oil prices have strained their relations at various times. (M G Gesta, Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, the World Trade Organization, and Regional Trade Agreements, 2003).

1.6) Nuclear Deal and Regional Dynamics:

The Iran Nuclear Deal, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), signed in 2015, temporarily eased tensions between Iran and the international community including Saudi Arabia. However, Saudi Arabia remained concerned about Iran's regional ambitions and its support for proxy groups (K Katzian et al., Iran nuclear agreement, 2016)

1.7) Leadership Changes:

Leadership changes in both countries have influenced the tone and direction of their relations.

Saudi Arabia's Crown prince Mohammad bin Salman has taken a more assertive stance in the region while Iran experienced changes in leadership as well.

1.8) Global Alliances:

Saudi Arabia has historically enjoyed close ties with the United States, while Iran's relations with the US has been strained since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The alliances have further contributed to the complex dynamics of Saudi-Iran relations.

Due to these factors, Saudi Arabia and Iran were rivals since several years until China came between them as a mediator to turn their rivalry into friendship.

2) Introduction:

The United States has long maintained its political power and influence in the Middle East, the increasing Chinese foothold in the region is changing the matrix. The clash of their interests, influence and more certainly quest to play a more influential role in the region in terms of diplomacy and economic security.

is changing the geopolitics of the Middle East. In this regard, the Saudi-Iran deal brokered by China - an equivalent to the US-led Abraham Accords to strengthen peace in the Middle East in yet another manifestation of the great power rivalry between Beijing and Washington - Interestingly, the global rift between Washington and Beijing is widening, but the tensions between the 'rivals' in the region are de-escalating. From Israel and the Arab States under the Abraham Accords to now, with the peace agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, it is increasingly imperative to assess China's growing influence in the Middle East in contrast to US's long-held dominance in the region.

3) China's Saudi-Iran Deal.

On March 10, 2023, Saudi Arabia and Iran announced the normalization of ties brokered by the People's Republic of China (PRC) with a joint ~~trilateral~~ trilateral statement citing that an agreement has been reached between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran. The statement reflects intentions "to resume diplomatic relations between them and re-open the embassies and missions within a period not exceeding two months," as well as respect "the sovereignty of states and the

non-interference in internal affairs of state." In addition, the two sides also agreed to implement two bilateral agreements, the General Agreement for Cooperation in the fields of Economy, Trade, Investment, Technology, Science, Culture, Sports and Youth, and the Security Cooperation Agreement, which were signed in 1998 and 2001 respectively. However, neither agreement had been implemented, as Riyadh and Tehran froze ties in 2016 after finding themselves on opposite sides of the conflicts in Yemen and Syria (China Embassy, Joint Trilateral Statement by China, Saudi Arabia and Iran, 2023).

After seven years of tensions between the two Gulf countries, Saudi Arabia and Iran resumed diplomatic relations after negotiation in the good offices of Beijing from March 6-10. This diplomatic breakthrough by Beijing marked the latest efforts to normalize relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran (USIP, Timeline of Iran Saudi Relations, 2023)

4) China's Mediation

In the case of the Saudi-Iran deal, China's mediatory role can be understood in context of two key incidents. The first is Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Saudi Arabia in December 2022 for a series of summits

During the visit, the two sides reaffirmed in the joint statement that they would firmly support each other's core interests, support each other in safeguarding national sovereignty and territorial integrity and jointly defend the ~~state~~ principle of non-interference in other countries' internal affairs (Xinhua, China, Saudi Arabia issue joint statement, 2022)

The second incident, which followed Xi's Riyadh visit, is Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi's visit to Beijing in February 2023 - the first state visit by an Iranian leader to Beijing in over 20 years. In his talks with Raisi, Xi extended China's support to Iran, ~~promising~~ to safeguard its sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity and national dignity and oppose external forces from interfering in Iran's internal affairs and undermining its security and stability (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, Xi Jinping holds talks with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, 2023)

5) China's Interest in the Gulf.

Nevertheless, China's interest in brokering peace between Riyadh and Tehran is not altruistic in any sense. Rather, it is more crafted by

design, as peace in the middle east is vital to china's expanding strategic interests in the Gulf. In particular, the Gulf plays an outsized role in two of China's key interests, its economic and energy needs.

7) Critical Evaluation: Why China better mediator than US.

7.1) China's Increasing Mediation role
China's emergence as a mediator is evident in recent diplomatic efforts, contrasting with its previous policy of non-interference.

7.2) Historical Context and Approach:
China's traditional stance of non-interference has evolved, showing a willingness to engage in conflict resolution.

7.3) Non-Interference vs Active Mediation:

China's non-interference principle allows for unbiased mediation, while US's historical involvement may raise suspicions.

7.4) Balancing Relations and gaining trust

China's relatively neutral stance in regional conflicts may facilitate building trust in conflicting parties.