

Prospects for Iran-led Naval Alliance in Middle East

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Middle East, a historically volatile region, plagued by persistent conflicts exacerbated by external interference, has emerged as the epicenter of focus. Within the Middle East's intricate mosaic, the enduring conflict between Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf states persists as a formidable source of instability. In this scenario, China's ongoing efforts to mediate between these formidable actors have brought upon a possibility of fostering tranquility in the region, exemplified by its active role in the resolution of the Syrian civil war. Engrossed in this complex tapestry, the talks have unfolded, shedding light on Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf Cooperation Council's perception of China's potential as a catalyst for constructive resolution of regional disputes. The burgeoning interest in China's involvement in the region amplifies the significance of these deliberations.

Amidst the changing tides, the world witnessed China's facilitation of a trilateral agreement, orchestrating the resumption of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. It's a remarkable feat indeed. Yet, this was merely the prologue as China, driven by the commitment to restart harmonious relations, hosted consequential discussions in early April, welcoming the foreign ministers of Iran and Saudi Arabia. Not resting on these outcomes, reports hint at China's contemplation of organizing a groundbreaking GCC-Iran summit later in this year. Chinese footprint in the Middle East has resulted in a flurry of economic deals and commitments. For example, more than 30 deals were signed at the 10th Arab China Business

Conference, valuing a whopping total of approximately 10 billion USD. China hosted the 'Summer Davos' version of the World Economic Forum Conference in the last month, and Saudi Arabia sent a high-profile team of 24 delegates, including some ministers of key ministries. So, the Chinese footprint in the Middle East has emerged as a key alternative to the American gateway for Middle Eastern countries.

These new developments have provided Iran with multifaceted opportunities to promulgate regional alliances and break the shackles of Western sanctions imposed due to its alleged nuclear program. The longstanding diplomatic stalemate between Saudi Arabia and Iran has been one of the key hindrances to forming a regional alliance comprising Middle Eastern countries. As the two countries started mending their diplomatic relations through Chinese mediation, they can lead the formation of regional alliances in the coming days, which will shape the future of Middle Eastern political landscape. A likely development was announced in the last month when Iranian Navy Commander Rear Admiral Shahram Irani shared the prospect of forming a naval alliance in the region. Along with Iran and Saudi Arabia, the prospective members are Qatar, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Iraq, Pakistan, and India. If the prospective alliance is materialized, then it will have tremendous impacts on the maritime security of the region as it is home to some of the world's key shipping routes like the Suez and the Hormuz Strait. Iran is often alleged as the destabilizer in this region by the US-led Western bloc as its naval activities are seen as a threat to the global principle of freedom of navigation in international waters. An Iran-led naval alliance, that too with some of the closest allies of the US in the region, will certainly contribute to the reversal of this narrative of allegations against Iran.

There have been some developments prior to the announcement of the naval alliance in the last month. The announcement coincided with the Emirati withdrawal from the US-led maritime coalition named Combined Maritime Forces (CMF). The withdrawal of UAE from the coalition can be seen as an expression of displeasure with the coalition leader - the US. However, this is a voluntary coalition in nature, and therefore, the withdrawal might not signify a greater degree of damage in bilateral relations between the UAE and the US. So, the question remains whether this prospective naval alliance will come into formation in the days because the obstacles will be multifaceted. First of all, a strong US and Israel led opposition will work against the formation of the alliance, and they will construct narratives on how the prospective alliance will be detrimental to the maritime security of the region and the global trade regime. Secondly, it might not be possible to include both India and Pakistan as alliance members, as the former will not welcome the latter's inclusion in the security alliance. Therefore, if the naval alliance comes into light, it might be limited to Gulf members. Finally, and most importantly, the future of the prospective alliance depends on how the newfound Saudi-Iran partnership mediated by China works out in the coming days. Therefore, the role of China is crucial in this

case as its support and backup will be instrumental in withering away the Western opposition against the formation of the alliance. The Chinese backup has been the most important catalyst behind this initiative of Iran, and the level of Chinese support will determine whether the alliance will be formed or not. This is a region plagued by years of historical, sectarian, and tribal enmity, often exacerbated by external intervention. The Chinese intervention is relatively new, and the consequences of this engagement have started to surface.

But why does China venture into these turbulent waters? The motivation behind China's bold intervention stems from a multifaceted tapestry of objectives. First and foremost, a political desire to ensure a climate of tranquility propels China's diplomatic pursuits. Additionally, an unwavering focus on ensuring continued Chinese access to vital resources and burgeoning markets of the Middle East underscores China's pragmatic engagement. Displaying the attributes of a responsible leader, China seeks to showcase its commitment to fostering stability, projecting an image of reliability that resonates with regional stakeholders. Moreover, China's strategic maneuverings strive to garner support and goodwill from the countries involved in the web of Middle Eastern dynamics. Thus, through its endeavors, China weaves a narrative focusing on the complicated political dynamics of the region while leaving an indelible mark on the path toward a harmonious future. The prospective naval alliance might be another addition to the Chinese venture in the Middle East.

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