

GEOPOLITICAL SHIFTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AMID GLOBAL POWER COMPETITION

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Abstract

During the past few years the Middle East has undergone significant geopolitical shifts. After the US policy to reduce entanglement in the Middle East and shifts its concentration to Indo-Pacific to counter China, the dynamics of Middle East has been changing. Middle East is transforming from conflict ridden region to a peaceful region. The rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran is the biggest manifestation of changing Middle East; followed by Saudi's normalization with Syria and negotiations with Houthis in Yemen. This paper studies the roles of United States and China in the geopolitics of broader Middle East; how the disentanglement policy of the USA compelled Saudi Arabia to seek for alternative security framework; how China is extending its diplomatic influence in the Middle East. This paper also studies the role of regional giants in facilitating peaceful coexistence and economic integration. Lastly this paper studies pragmatic foreign policy of Saudi Arabia in promoting peace by normalizing relations with Iran, Syria and other countries and also compelling the US to rethink its policy towards the Middle East.

Keywords: Middle East, Geopolitical Shift, Global Power, Strategic Shift, USA, China

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Introduction:

Middle East is undergoing significant geopolitical shifts. The agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran brokered by China has begun a new era in the Middle East. China has become a major diplomatic player in the region after brokering the deal. The rapprochement between the two regional powers is the major triumph of China's foreign policy. Moreover, the development has diplomatically sidelined the US in the region. After the cold war, the US has been the uncontested external power in Middle East. Although, in the wake of rising China, during the past two decades, the US has been reducing its entanglement in Middle East and is shifting its concentration to Indo-Pacific region to counter China. As a result, the geopolitical realities of Middle East are changing.

The energy rich Middle East has been grappling with multiple conflicts for decades. It has been the battleground for the proxies of global powers. Civil wars, internal conflicts, sectarian conflicts, terrorism and other conflicts have caused devastation in Middle East. For instance, Yemen crisis, Syrian crisis, Lebanon crisis, Iraq crisis, Palestine-Israel conflict, Saudi Iran rivalry have destabilized the region and caused serious humanitarian crises. The external powers as well as the regional powers have always intensified conflicts in the region. For instance, USA and its western allies have been supporting proxies in Syria against Bashar-al-Assad, while Russia and Iran have been supporting the regime of Bashar-al-Assad. On the other hand Iran is supporting Houthis in Yemen and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Moreover, USA has been supporting Israel in the region to counter the influence of Iran and preserve its interests.

However, now the dynamics of the region is changing dramatically. It is an unprecedented moment in the history of Middle East. The regional powers, who have been involved in intensifying the conflicts, are now facilitating peace in the region. Saudi Arabia and its allies are resolving their conflicts with other states through diplomacy and economic integration to mitigate security threats. In March 2023, Saudi Arabia has restored diplomatic relations with Iran. Moreover, Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern states are facilitating peace in the region to diversify their economies through economic integration. A convergence of external factors in terms of US diminishing engagement and internal factors of economic diversification convinced the Middle Eastern powers to facilitate peaceful cooperation. In order to resolve conflicts, Saudi Arabia and UAE along with other Gulf countries restored diplomatic relations with Qatar. Moreover, in this approach Saudi Arabia and UAE also restored ties with Iraq and Turkiye.

Meanwhile, China is facilitating negotiations between various states in the region to resolve conflicts. The recent rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran is the biggest achievement of China's endeavors. Saudi Arabia also restored diplomatic relations with Syria after 11 years. The US has been facilitating the normalization of relations between Israel and Arab states. Abraham Accord is the manifestation of the US policy to normalize relations. USA is facilitating peace in order to isolate Iran and strengthen its alliance but somehow it is resulting into peace in the region. After the rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, USA has changed its policy of disentanglement in the region. In order to maintain its hegemony and to isolate Iran, USA has started facilitating a normalization deal between Saudi Arabia and Israel in return of normalization, Saudi Arabia would get security guarantees from the US.

Research Objectives:

Following are the objectives of this research:

- To understand the nature of the geopolitical shifts in the broader Middle East.
- To determine the reasons behind the geopolitical shifts in the broader Middle East.
- To determine the reasons behind the rapprochement between the two regional powers Saudi Arabia and Iran.
- To know how the normalization between the two rivals (Saudi Arabia and Iran) would impact the future of the Middle East.
- To understand how the disentanglement policy of US compelled Saudi Arabia to seek for alternative security framework.
- To discuss increasing China's diplomatic influence in the Middle East.
- To study the role of regional giants in facilitating peaceful coexistence and economic integration.
- To understand the pragmatic foreign policy of Saudi Arabia in promoting peace in the region and compelling the US to rethink its policy towards the Middle East.

Research Questions:

- What are the catalysts behind the geopolitical shifts in the Middle East?
- How the geopolitical dynamics in the Middle East are changing and the region is transforming from a conflict ridden region to a peaceful region?
- How the disentanglement policy of the USA in the Middle East triggered geopolitical changes in the region?
- What are the reasons behind the rapprochement between the two regional powers Saudi Arabia and Iran?
- What would be the impact of the rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran on the region?
- How Saudi Arabia is pursuing a pragmatic foreign policy to protect its interests?

The USA,s strategic shift from the Middle East and its impact on the geopolitical dynamics of the region:

US hegemony in the Middle East:

After World War II, the energy rich Middle East became crucial part of US foreign policy. Since then, the US has been protecting its interest in the Middle East. The US has been securing the cheap energy supplies for itself and its allies. It has been providing support to its satellite state Israel in the form of military, economic and diplomatic assistance. It has also been

supporting Saudi Arabia and other allies to counter the influence of Iran in the region.¹ The US has committed to maintain its primacy and hegemony in the region by countering the influence of Russia, Iran and China. At the end of cold war, for almost two decades US was the uncontested external power in the Middle East. With the rising influence of China, the Asia Pacific region became significant. The US policy makers had realized the importance of the Asia Pacific region in the later years of Bush administration. However, US was too entangled in Iraq, Afghanistan and other parts of Middle East that it was not possible for the US to focus on Asia Pacific.

United States disentanglement Policy:

During the Obama administration the US policy makers started pursuing the policy to reduce US commitments in the Middle East and focus more on the Asia, especially Asia Pacific. In 2012, Obama administration formally announced the “Pivot to Asia” strategy. In the Pivot to Asia strategy the US has committed to invest its resources in Asia Pacific which is going to be the center of global politics in 21st century. The US also committed to strengthen its relations with its allies in Asia and engage more Southeast Asian states to increase its influence and counter the influence of China.² During the Obama administration in 2011, the US combat mission in Iraq was also ended. The Obama administration was also committed to withdraw forces from Afghanistan to reduce US engagement in the broader Middle East. The successive US administrations pursued the policy to reduce its entanglement in Middle East and focus on the Asia Pacific. Trump pursued the same policy by concluding the Doha agreement for the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan and also announced A Free And Open Indo-Pacific policy to deepen engagement in the Indo-Pacific region to counter the influence of China.³ In December 2018, Trump administration introduced Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA) which allocated \$1.5 billion for spending in different strategic programs in East Asia.⁴ Although, Trump pursued its diplomatic

¹ Daniel Kurtzer, “The Middle East’s Evolving Security Landscape: Prospects for Regional Cooperation and US Engagement,” in *FOSTERING a NEW SECURITY ARCHITECTURE in the MIDDLE EAST*, ed. SILVIA COLOMBO and ANDREA DESSI, n.d.

² Stephen Daggett, “CRS Report for Congress Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama Administration’s ‘Rebalancing’ toward Asia Mark E. Manyin, Coordinator Specialist in Asian Affairs,” 2012.

³ “A FREE and OPEN INDO-PACIFIC Advancing a Shared Vision,” November 4, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Free-and-Open-Indo-Pacific-4Nov2019.pdf>.

⁴Premesha Saha, “From ‘Pivot to Asia’ to Trump’s ARIA: What Drives the US’ Current Asia Policy?,” ORF (Observational Research Foundation, February 19, 2020).

endeavors to protect US interest in the Middle East. The most successful diplomatic achievement of Trump administration in Middle East was the Abraham accord, through which UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan normalized relations with Israel.⁵ Abraham Accord initiated the process of normalization of relations between Israel and Muslim states. This accord was a major foreign policy success of Trump administration because it strengthened its ally Israel and isolated Iran in the region. This accord provided a way for other Muslim countries to normalize relations with Israel. Moreover, Biden administration also pursued the policy of containing China by announcing Indo-Pacific strategy and reducing the commitments in the broader Middle East by implementing Doha Agreement to complete the process of US withdrawal from Afghanistan. The US somehow reduced its commitments to some extent in Middle East to deepen its involvement in the Indo-Pacific and to contain China.⁶ However, the Russia invasion of Ukraine and the great power competition in the Middle East have compelled the US to reengage in Middle East. Biden in the initial years of his presidency was pursuing the policy to reduce engagement in Middle East to focus on more crucial areas.⁷

In the pursuance of the policy to reduce involvement in the Middle East, Obama administration concluded Nuclear deal with Iran. However, US allies in Middle East particularly Israel and Saudi Arabia were not comfortable with this deal. Saudi Arabia and other gulf countries were dependent on the USA for their security. After the nuclear deal, Saudi Arabia and its allies arrived at the conclusion that the US is abandoning them, so as a result they started deepening their relations with China and Russia. Moreover, US's weak response to 2019 Iran backed Houthi attacks on oil facilities in Saudi Arabia and Trump's repeated statements against US defense of Saudi Arabia made Saudi Arabia more doubtful of US commitment to defend it against Iran. In his initial years of Presidency, Biden took hard line on the role of Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman in Jamal Khashogi's murder, which irritated the Saudi rulers. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the disruption of oil and gas supply globally, swiftly changed the policy of USA towards Middle East especially Saudi Arabia and its allies.⁸ In July 2022, Biden visited Saudi

⁵ "The Abraham Accords - United States Department of State," January 13, 2021.

⁶ The White House, "INDO-PACIFIC Strategy of the United States," February 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>.

⁷ Charles W. Dunne, "The Past and Future of the American 'Pivot to Asia,'" in *A US Pivot Away from the Middle East: Fact or Fiction?*, ed. Imad K. Harb and David J. Kanbergs (Arab Center Washington DC, n.d.).

⁸ Peter Birgbauer, "The US Pivot to Asia Was Dead on Arrival," *TheDiplomat.com*, March 31, 2022.

Arabia to increase oil production but was unsuccessful. In his visit, Biden committed to strengthen US presence in the region and announced “new bilateral cooperation” on 5G and 6G technologies in response to Chinese investments.

Role of China in the Middle East and its impact on the geopolitical dynamics of the Region:

Increasing role of China in the Middle East:

China’s engagement in the Middle East increased after the end of Cold War. In Past two decades, China further expanded its engagement in Middle East primarily to fulfill its energy demands and to expand BRI investments to the region. President Xi is the architect of the modern China’s foreign policy. He formally ended Deng Xiaoping’s policy of China’s maintaining low profile by initiating Built and Road Initiative (BRI) and expanding China’s influence economically as well as diplomatically and to some extent even militarily.⁹ In 2016, China started proactive engagement in Middle East by introducing first Arab Policy Paper. Moreover, in 2016 President Xi visited Saudi Arabia, Iran and Egypt for the first time to strengthen relations with them.¹⁰ After the US Pivot to Asia policy and disentanglement policy in Middle East, China has further deepened its engagement in Middle East to increase its influence and fill the vacuum left by the US.

Importance of Middle East for China’s vision:

Middle East is very crucial to China’s vision. China needs the resource rich region to fulfill its energy demands but also needs it for its transit route to decrease its dependence on the contentious Pacific Ocean and Strait of Malacca. Furthermore, through Middle East, China will be connected to Africa and Europe and will be able to extend BRI to the regions. China is the largest oil importer of Middle Eastern countries. In 2020, Middle Eastern Countries exported \$176 billion

⁹ Xi Chen, “China in the Post-Hegemonic Middle East: A Wary Dragon?,” E-International Relations, November 22, 2018.

¹⁰ Jonathan Fulton, “China’s Great Game in the Middle East,” ECFR, October 21, 2019, https://ecfr.eu/publication/china_great_game_middle_east/.

of oil to China, which is almost 47% of total Middle East's oil imports.¹¹ In 2014 China proposed 1+2+3 model through which cooperation in infrastructure, trade and investment were initiated. In order to expand engagement, China also invested in Iraq's oil industries. China and Saudi Arabia initiated comprehensive partnership to cooperate in diverse fields like Aerospace, nuclear power and finance. China has developed good economic and diplomatic relations with both Saudi Arabia as well as Iran, and invested heavily in both countries. China also engaged Israel as well as Palestine.¹²

President XI's proactive diplomacy in the Middle East:

During Xi's administration, China has started pursuing proactive diplomacy in Middle East. China has been playing an active role of peace mediator in various regional conflicts between the states. During 2015-16, China has hosted peace talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran on Yemen crisis. In 2017, China has hosted peace dialogue between Palestine and Israel. In 2018, China hosted symposium on Syrian crisis. China also facilitated the Iranian nuclear deal. Moreover, China has been engaging militarily in Middle East in counter terrorism activities, peace operations. China has been conducting joint military exercises with Iran in the Persian Gulf Ocean. It has supported Iraq in war against ISIS and collaborated in anti terrorism activities with Saudi Arabia.¹³ Moreover, China's establishment of its base in Djibouti, presence in Gwadar port and chabahar port are part of China's policy to increase its presence in Gulf region especially near the strategically important checkpoints namely Strait of Hormuz and Bab-al-Mandeb which are strategically important for its interests.¹⁴ China has been pursuing inclusive and neutral policy in engagement with Middle Eastern states. It is engaging the region's states in peace talks and is mediating in various conflicts in the region. China has maintained neutral role in Yemen crisis, Syrian crisis, Saudi-Iran conflict and Israel-Palestinian conflict. China seeks to promote peace in Middle East to expand the Built and Road Initiative to the region. China wants every state in the

¹¹ "Beyond Oil: A New Phase in China-Middle East Engagement," *TheDiplomat.com*, January 25, 2023.

¹² Jonathan Fulton, "China's Great Game in the Middle East," *ECFR*, October 21, 2019, https://ecfr.eu/publication/china_great_game_middle_east/.

¹³ Xi Chen, "China in the Post-Hegemonic Middle East: A Wary Dragon?," *E-International Relations*, November 22, 2018.

¹⁴ Jonathan Fulton, "China's Great Game in the Middle East," *ECFR*, October 21, 2019, https://ecfr.eu/publication/china_great_game_middle_east/.

region to join BRI and benefit from it. This non-interventionist and neutral approach is highly respected by the Middle Eastern states.

Geopolitical shifts in the Middle East:

In the wake of waning of US engagement in the Middle East, the region is undergoing significant seismic shifts. As the US has been shifting its concentration to Indo-Pacific region to contain China, the Middle Eastern states especially Saudi Arabia and its allies are seeking ways to manage their own security. Saudi Arabia and its allies are resolving their conflicts with other states through diplomacy and economic integration to mitigate security threats. Moreover, Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern states are facilitating peace in the region to diversify their economies through economic integration. A convergence of external factors in terms of US diminishing engagement and internal factors of economic diversification convinced the Middle Eastern powers to facilitate peaceful cooperation. In order to resolve conflicts, Saudi Arabia and UAE along with other Middle Eastern countries restored diplomatic relations with Qatar. The recent rapprochement between the long time regional rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran is the manifestation of changing Middle East. Moreover, in this approach Saudi Arabia and UAE also restored ties with Iraq and Turkiye. Saudi Arabia also restored diplomatic relations with Syria after 11 years.

Saudi-Iran Rapprochement and the role of China:

The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran started in 1979 after Iranian revolution. Since then, relations between the two countries are strained. Both states have been fighting proxy wars against each other in Syria, Lebanon and Yemen to dominate the region. Before the peace agreement brokered by China in March 2023, some efforts of rapprochement were made between Saudi Arabia and Iran, but were unsuccessful. Finally on 10th March 2023, China brokered a peace deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran in Beijing after secret peace negotiations. Through the peace agreement they both agreed to reestablish diplomatic relations and reopen their embassies. They both agreed to reestablish the security pact of 2001 and the 1998 general cooperation agreement.

Furthermore, both states committed to respect the sovereignty of states and will not intervene in internal affairs of other states.^{15, 16}

The rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran facilitated by Beijing made headlines in international News. Analysts have interpreted the development as geostrategic shift in the Middle East and the beginning of more powerful and vigorous diplomatic role of China in the region.¹⁷ China has been gradually extending its influence in Middle East by becoming a major trade partner and larger importer to now a powerful diplomatic peace broker. The rapprochement sidelined the USA diplomatically in the region. The détente between Saudi Arabia and Iran is beneficial for Saudi Arabia, Iran as well as China. For Saudi Arabia, the normalization of relations with Iran is important to reduce security threats from Iran and deepen relation with China. Also, the waning influence of USA in the region and strained relations of Saudi administration with Biden convinced the Saudi administration to seek for alternatives as USA is no longer a reliable security partner. Moreover, the domestic reform agenda in Saudi Arabia to diversify its economy under vision 2030 and to pursue the dream of becoming investment hub needed such normalization. While for Iran, détente with Saudi Arabia is significant to end its diplomatic isolation and to perform its economic activities freely. Additionally, Iran has good strategic relations with China; so with rising influence of China, Iran would be able to end the diplomatic and economic isolation imposed by the US. Furthermore, for China normalization between the two rivals is important for its BRI projects and its diplomatic influence in the region. China is keen to establish peace in the Middle East to strengthen its trade relations and extend BRI investments in the region. The agreement provided China the opportunity to pursue its economic vision.

Peace talks in Yemen:

Civil war in Yemen started in 2014 when the Irani backed Houthi rebels captured Yemen's Capital Sanaa. The Houthi rebels were demanding the end of the government. In 2015, the Houthis

¹⁵ Al Jazeera, "China-Brokered Saudi-Iran Deal Driving 'Wave of Reconciliation', Says Wang," Aljazeera.com (Al Jazeera, August 21, 2023), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/21/china-brokered-saudi-iran-deal-driving-wave-of-reconciliation-says-wang>.

¹⁶ Maleeha Lodhi, "A Game Changer?," DAWN.COM (DAWN.COM, March 20, 2023), <https://www.dawn.com/news/1743151/a-game-changer>.

¹⁷ "Shifting Sands by Vali Nasr," IMF, September 2023, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/fandd/issues/2023/09/POV-shifting-sands-vali-nasr>.

captured the Presidential Palace, which led to the resignation of the government. Meanwhile, in 2015 Saudi Arabia with its Gulf allies started air strikes against Houthis with the help of the US. So, from 2015 Yemen became the battleground of proxies between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Since then the air strikes from Saudi Arabia and UAE have killed almost nineteen thousand civilians and many injured. In response the Houthi rebels started drone attacks from 2021 on Saudi Arabia and UAE.¹⁸ In January 2022, Houthi attacked UAE through Missiles and drones. While in March 2022, Houthi rebels attacked oil facilities in Saudi Arabia through drone.¹⁹ The civil war in Yemen has further destabilized Middle East and deepened the tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Furthermore, the conflict especially the Houthis attack on Saudi oil facilities and UAE has made the security of Saudi Arabia and UAE more vulnerable. The Yemen conflict has deepened the instability in the region and has created security risks for the Saudi Arabia and UAE, both of which have been pursuing the policy of economic diversification and economic integration. The conflict is a great hurdle in their economic vision. So, in order to mitigate security risks from Iran and Houthis and to facilitate peaceful environment for economic integration, Saudi Arabia and its allies have normalized relations with Iran and started negotiations with Houthis rebels in Yemen. In order to resolve the conflict in Yemen, Saudi Arabia started negotiations with Houthis in April 2023. Moreover, in September 2023 Houthi delegation visited Saudi Arabia and held talks for five days.

Normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and its allies with Syria:

In 2011, protests started against Bashar-al-Assad regime in Syria in support of democracy. These protests resulted into a civil war in Syria. The USA and its western allies along with Saudi Arabia and UAE have been supporting the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) against the Assad's regime which is supported by Russia and Iran. It has been twelve years of the civil war in Syria.

¹⁸ "War in Yemen | Global Conflict Tracker," Global Conflict Tracker, 2015, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/war-yemen>.

¹⁹ Reuters, "Yemen Houthis Attack Saudi Energy Facilities, Refinery Output Hit," *Reuters*, March 20, 2022, [https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/saudi-led-coalition-says-four-houthi-attacks-hit-targets-kingdom-no-casualties-2022-03-19/#:~:text=RIYADH%2C%20March%2020%20\(Reuters\),state%20media%20said%20on%20Sunday](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/saudi-led-coalition-says-four-houthi-attacks-hit-targets-kingdom-no-casualties-2022-03-19/#:~:text=RIYADH%2C%20March%2020%20(Reuters),state%20media%20said%20on%20Sunday).

Since then, Syria has become a battleground among global powers (USA and Russia) and regional powers (Saudi Arabia and Iran). The involvement of external forces has intensified the civil war in Syria. Moreover, the activities of terrorist organization ISIS have further deteriorated the situation in Syria. In 2013, ISIS started capturing areas in Syria. In 2015, various terrorist attacks were conducted in Europe by ISIS after which USA, some European states, Saudi Arabia and Turkey started military campaign against the ISIS in Syria and Iraq. In addition to it, Turkiye is also fighting Kurdish militants in Syria and Iraq.²⁰ For years, Saudi Arabia and its allies with the help of US, supported groups in Syria to overthrow Bashar al Assad from power but were unsuccessful. These all conflicts have created a complex and multifaceted crises in Syria which led to the instability in Syria as well as in the Middle East. Moreover, the ISIS is not only a threat to Syria and Iraq but also to Saudi Arabia, UAE and the West. The prospect of the resolution of conflict in Syria is also high after the deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In May 2023, Syria's membership in Arab League was restored after twelve years of suspension. Then later that month, Syrian president visited Saudi Arabia and attended Arab League Summit. These developments are very important and crucial for the future of Middle East. Meanwhile, now Saudi Arab is normalizing and strengthening relations with rivals and foes in the region to transform the region to an investment and economic hub. This shift in foreign policy of Saudi Arabia and other states is unprecedented, which will have far reaching impact on the development of the region.

New gas and oil Pipelines and economic integration in the Middle East:

Russian invasion of Ukraine have altered the supply of gas and oil from Russia to Europe. Europe responded to the Russian aggression with sanctions on Russia. The Ukrainian crisis completely changed the energy policy of Europe. Europe is now looking for alternatives for energy supply. The most viable alternatives for European countries are Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia and Caucasus. The announcement of new economic corridor by US, Saudi Arabia, India and other countries on the sidelines of G20 in India is part of the plan to connect Asia, Middle East and Europe through pipelines, ports and rail.²¹ Moreover, Iraq is also planning to build pipelines and rail to supply gas to

²⁰ "Conflict in Syria | Global Conflict Tracker," Global Conflict Tracker, 2015, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-syria>.

²¹ Al Jazeera, "G20 Summit: Transport Project to Link India to Middle East, Europe Unveiled," *Aljazeera.com*, September 9, 2023.

Europe. The Iraqi project also includes 1200 km rail and motorway from Iraq to Turkey.²² So the invasion of Ukraine by Russia is providing an opportunity for the Middle East to deepen its economic and political ties with Europe. This will bring investment to Middle East and will facilitate economic integration and peaceful coexistence among the states in the region.

Pragmatic Foreign Policy of Saudi Arabia and its impact on the region:

Saudi Arabia is exploiting the great power rivalry between USA and China to its fullest to gain maximum benefits. In the past few years, Saudi Arabia has been pursuing very pragmatic Foreign Policy and has achieved exceptional success on its foreign policy front. After US pivot to Asia policy to focus on Indo-Pacific region and reduce entanglements in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia started seeking alternatives. Saudi Arabia deepened its ties with China, Russia and India. China also extended its engagement in Middle East to fill the vacuum left by the US. China not only increased its economic engagement in the region but also political and diplomatic engagements. Diminishing influence of the US in the Middle East and its little interest in the security of Saudi Arabia convinced Saudi Arabia that the US is no more a reliable security partner. So, Saudi Arabia and its allies started focusing on the regional stability and peace. The giant in Middle East, Saudi Arabia needs security to fulfill its economic vision and establish itself as economic and investment hub of the region. To mitigate security threats, Saudi Arabia signed a deal with Iran brokered by China to resume diplomatic relations. Saudi Arabia and its allies also resumed ties with Qatar and Syria and started negotiation with Houthis to end the conflict in Yemen. Biden administration took hard line on Jamal Khashogi's murder due to which the relation between US and Saudi Arabia became strained.²³ However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has impacted the foreign policy of US towards Middle East. In the wake of the Ukrainian invasion, US soften its attitude towards Saudi Arabia and also started reengaging in the Middle East. Moreover, the rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran brokered by China has surprised

²² "Iraq Plans to Build Gas Pipeline to Europe - Oil & Gas Middle East," Oil & Gas Middle East, September 21, 2023, <https://www.oilandgasmiddleeast.com/news/iraq-plans-to-build-gas-pipeline-to-europe>.

²³ Steve Holland et al., "Biden Confronts Saudi Crown Prince over Khashoggi Murder, Expects Action on Energy," Reuters, July 16, 2022.

USA.²⁴ The rapprochement between the two regional rivals has sidelined USA diplomatically in Middle East and China came out as major diplomatic player in the region. This development has completely changed the policy of USA towards Middle East. The USA has started to reengage in Middle East to counter the influence of China and Iran in the region. On September 9, at the sidelines of G20 summit in India, USA, Saudi Arabia and others announced construction of new corridor, which will link India to Europe via UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Israel through rail, ports and energy pipelines.²⁵ This new economic corridor is announced to counter the Built and Road Initiative. Furthermore, USA is also working on normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel. According to Thomas Friedman in his op-ed in New York Times, the US is preparing to broker a deal between Saudi Arabia and Israel in which they both will normalize relations with each other while in return Saudi Arabia will get a mutual defense pact with the US and a civilian nuclear program.²⁶

Conclusion:

The events of the past decade and more specifically of the current year (2023) are indicating geopolitical shifts in the Middle East. Since World War II, the US has been playing a major role in Middle East to maintain its hegemony and exploit the cheap oil reservoirs in the region. Moreover, After the Cold War it has become more powerful in the region. However, with the rise of China, Obama administration introduced Pivot to Asia policy to reduce entanglement in Middle East and to shift its focus to the Indo-Pacific region. The successive administrations of Trump and Biden pursued the same policy of shifting its focus to more important regions to contain China. As the US has been reducing its entanglement in Middle East to shift its concentration to Indo-Pacific region in order to contain China, the geopolitical realities of Middle East are changing. The US has reduced its commitments to some extent in Middle East. Biden administration announced Indo-Pacific policy to engage Southeast Asian states and strengthen its presence in the region

²⁴ Al Jazeera, "China-Brokered Saudi-Iran Deal Driving 'Wave of Reconciliation', Says Wang," *Aljazeera.com* (Al Jazeera, August 21, 2023).

²⁵ Al Jazeera, "G20 Summit: Transport Project to Link India to Middle East, Europe Unveiled," *Aljazeera.com*, September 9, 2023.

²⁶ THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN, "Opinion | Biden Is Weighing a Big Middle East Deal," *The New York Times*, 2023.

economically as well as militarily. In this aspect the US has formed new alliances like AUKUS and strengthened old multilateral alliances like QUAD. In the wake of the waning of US engagement in the Middle East, China has been extending its influence in the region to fill the vacuum left by the US. China is the largest oil importer from Middle Eastern countries. Furthermore, China is also the major trade partner with Middle Eastern countries. China sees Middle East as a route to connect it with Africa and Europe and also as destination for its BRI investments. Moreover, the Gulf Ocean is the safest route for China to fulfill its energy demands and avoid more contentious routes in Asia-Pacific like Strait of Malacca. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries have realized that the US is no longer interested in their security. Therefore, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries are pursuing the policy of economic integration and peaceful coexistence to mitigate the security threats and facilitate economic diversification and economic integration in the region. In this regard Saudi Arabia has normalized ties with Turkiye, Qatar and then with Iran, followed by Syria. The rapprochement between the long time regional rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran is the manifestation of changing Middle East. Saudi Arabia has also been strengthening its relations with China. In initial years Biden administration pressurized de-facto leader of Saudi Arabia on Jamal Khashogi's murder, due to which relations between USA and Saudi Arabia became strained. However, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine Biden administration started reengaging Saudi Arabia to lower the oil prices and gain support of Gulf countries in UNGA against Russia. Moreover, the rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran has completely reversed the policy of US towards Middle East. The US in order to re-strengthen its foothold and counter the influence of China and Iran in the Middle East, has started reengaging Saudi Arabia. According to Thomas Friedman in his op-ed in New York Times, the US is working on a deal between Saudi Arabia and Israel to normalize relations. In return, Saudi Arabia will get security guarantees from the US and some concessions will be provided to Palestinians. After the waning of US interests in the region and the United States reduced interests to defend Saudi Arabia, the kingdom has formed a very pragmatic foreign policy to protect its interests. In July 2022, Biden administration requested Saudi Arabia to increase oil production but the demand was declined by the kingdom. Furthermore, the agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran brokered by China was a big setback for the US. These moves of Saudi Arabia changed the policy of USA. On September 9, at the sidelines of G20 summit in India, USA along with India, Saudi Arabia and Israel announced a new economic corridor. Moreover, if the normalization agreement between Saudi

Arabia and Israel is concluded and Saudi Arabia gets security guarantees from the US, this will be a biggest achievement for Saudi Arabia. However, the recent conflict between Israel and Hamas is the biggest threat to peace and economic integration in the region. If the conflict between Israel and Hamas is not managed properly, the conflict may lead to a new form of instability in the region. It has already derailed the normalization process between Saudi Arabia and Israel but has the potential to derail the developments of the past few years.