

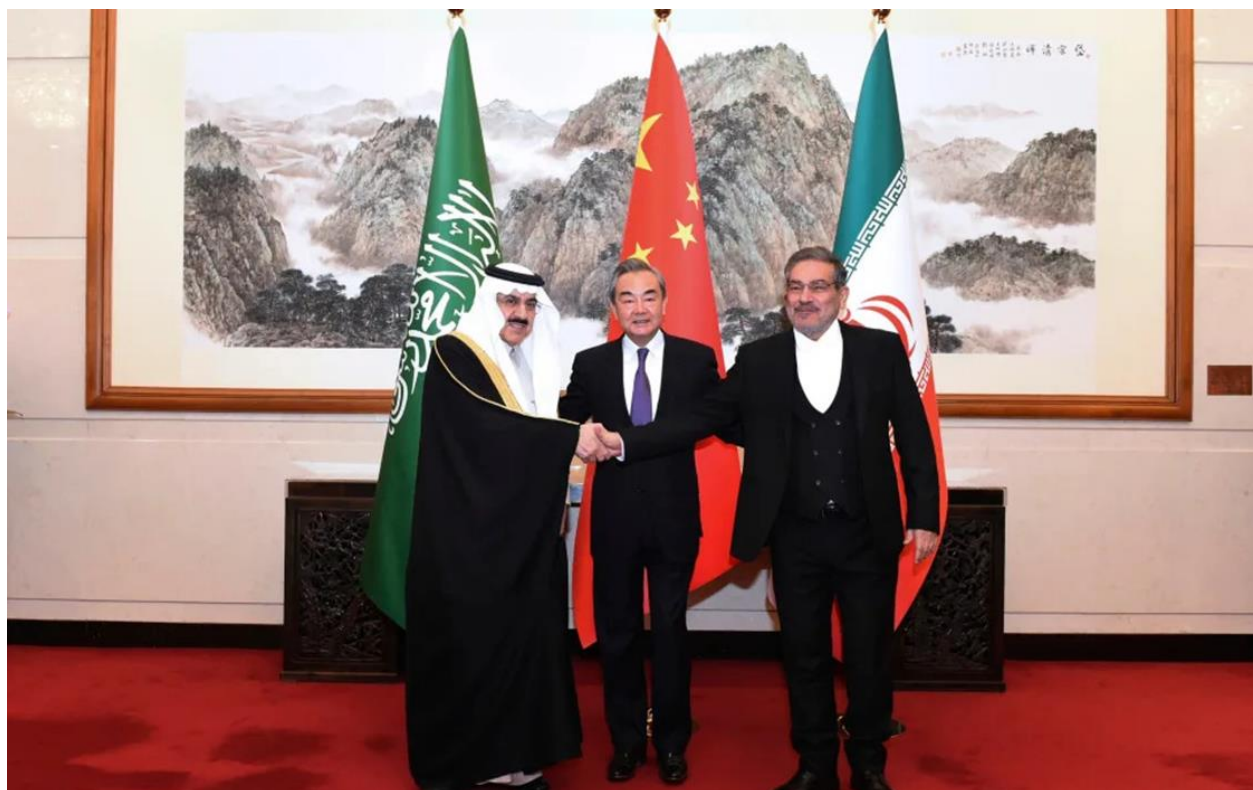
FEATURE

Why the China-brokered Iran-Saudi deal heralds a new era of geopolitics

Michael Stephens

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From L-R: Ali Shamkhani, secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council; Wang Yi, China's most senior diplomat; and Musaad bin Mohammed al-Aiban, Saudi national security adviser, at a closed meeting in Beijing on March 11 - Luo Xiaoguang/Xinhua

Friday's [roadmap agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran](#) signed in Beijing has provided the world with a fascinating window into a new era of geopolitics, where the United States is no longer the sole arbiter of international affairs.

The simmering tensions between the two heavyweights of the Gulf have threatened at times to explode into conflict. So of course, it's a good thing that they're sitting to work their problems out. With the Ukraine conflict showing

no signs of stopping, no one wants another interstate war on their hands, especially not in a region that provides nearly 20 per cent of the world's oil daily output.

However, the fact that it was Beijing and not Washington that sat the two sides together to sign the deal is the big story here.

In terms of great power politics, the Middle East has always been the domain of the United States to manage. Its military resources spread across bases in Cyprus, Iraq, Kuwait,

Bahrain, Qatar and the UAE afford it enormous influence and power. Washington's close ally Israel is a nuclear armed state with strong diplomatic and defence interlinkages, and Turkey to the north is a NATO ally with a sizeable 1 million strong army.

Although many countries in the Middle East have found American leadership difficult to accept, they never questioned the basic facts. The US was the big power in the room, and if something needed doing you talked to Washington first, and then to everyone else.

Even at times when Washington's perceived biases made the US a poor arbitrator, mechanisms such as the Quartet in the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or the E3+3 in the case of the Iranian nuclear negotiations were found to disguise US leadership. Yes, others have been in the room, Russia, France, the UK, but it was always the Americans setting the agenda. Not so this time.

Beijing hasn't done this alone, Oman hosted rounds of secret talks, and the Iraqis (with significant US and European encouragement) also provided a diplomatic talking shop for the Saudis and Iranians to air their grievances. So in a way, the Americans have got what they wanted.

A lessening of tensions between the Middle East's two big powers, which is one less headache for President Biden to worry about.

But the fact that Americans weren't in the room during the signing, and didn't shape the agreement's parameters is significant, and is a sign of things to come. The Chinese have shown regional nations that they can be trusted to deliver, and this agreement will only serve to bolster Beijing's rapidly growing regional influence and power.

President Biden has made no secret of his belief that the Middle East is a diplomatic side show; global competition with China, and Putin's invasion of Ukraine have relegated it to a distant priority for his administration. But this has allowed China to present itself as a genuine alternative in the Middle East.

Beijing may lack Washington's deployed firepower, this agreement has shown that it has one thing the US doesn't have, credibility, and that is something that no amount of tanks, planes and bombs can make up for.

Michael Stephens is Senior Research Fellow at The Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI) and Associate Fellow at The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI).