

Recent US intelligence reports have flagged a possible Saudi bid to develop uranium fuel that can be enriched to produce Nuclear weapons with Chinese aid. With the JCPOA in tatters since the Trump administration's abrupt withdrawal from the deal and Iranian declarations to continue with weapons production, it cannot be surprising that Saudi harbours intentions of holding its own nuclear arsenal. In fact, Mohammad Bin Salman, the crown prince and de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia had made clear his intentions to procure nuclear weapons for his Kingdom if Iran pursues nuclear weapon production as early as 2018.



Dance of Fire and Ice: Saudi- Iran rivalry

Ever since the Sykes-Picot agreement sliced West Asia into various spheres of influence among world powers, sectarian conflicts, extremism and regional rivalry have plagued the region for years. The Saudi-Iranian rivalry is the latest addition to the mix and threatens to destabilize the West Asian region even more than before. While Iran has been a fledgeling in influencing nearby Iraq and Syria, Saudi Arabia in tandem with UAE has pushed ahead with plans to thwart any Iranian attempt to extend Iranian tentacles. Such pressure put up by the Arab Kingdom even led to fissures in the GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL (GCC), with

blockades being placed on Qatar whose increasing Iranian cooperation raised Saudi's hackles. Saudi's military foray into Yemen to oust the Iranian backed Houthis and the attack on the Abqaiq oil facility in Saudi, alleged to have been carried out through Iranian backing have concretised animosity and rivalry between the two.

However, the development of nuclear weapons by the two West Asian Powers will put the world on a new nuclear precipice. Iran and Saudi leadership have often undertaken actions bordering on brinkmanship and the addition of a nuclear angle to it can pose one of the greatest upcoming challenges ahead for the world.



Image source: CGTN

The shadow of the Dragon: Increasing Chinese forays into West Asia

In active pursuit of assuming world leadership, China has embarked on an aggressive spree of widening its diplomatic heft across regions. West Asia obviously holds interest for China given the increasingly erratic US policy that has unnerved allies and perceived enemies alike. Iran's recent overtures to China can be attributed to the US' 'maximum pressure' policy that has crippled Iran's financial system, only to be exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Saudi might be seeking to maximise its options if the US were seeking to turn inward and reduce its security umbrella in the region. Further, MBS' authoritarian

tendencies including his alleged role in the assassination of prominent journalist Jamal Khashoggi had raised shriller voices against MBS in the US and western world. China which is determined to upend the current world order and export its version of authoritarian capitalism seems a more natural fit for regimes such as those of Saudi and Iran. Both Iran and Saudi would find China, an authoritarian regime with suspect human rights credentials, more compatible with their style of governance.

China, the alleged mastermind behind Pakistan and North Korea's nuclear program will find it fitting to extend nuclear technology to Saudi and Iran to extend its influence in the West Asian region, a hitherto US sphere of influence. With a cold war brewing between the US and China, the latter will be tempted to add more allies to its camp and the nuclear bait to Saudi seems to stem from this idea.

Nightmare of Dirty Bombs: Nuclear weapons and terror groups:

The rise of ISIS saw the establishment of proto-state incorporating parts of Iraq, as well as Syria, becoming the most dreaded terror outfit. Even though it has seemingly been annihilated, various splinter terror outfits continue to infest the West Asian region. Often these terror outfits also have proxy links to certain countries that sponsor money and ammunition. Introduction of Nuclear power, therefore, increases the risk of such technology falling into the hands of these mercenaries considering the often brittle regimes that rule the West Asian nations. Use of proxy outfits also affords plausible deniability in the event of a nuclear attack on an adversary. Therefore, the introduction of nuclear weapons in the West Asian region provides fertile grounds for terrorists to lay hands on nuclear technology.



West Asian Dilemma: The Indian diaspora, energy security and much more

West Asia harbours 1/4th of the total Indian diaspora and remains critical to India's energy needs. [\[In 2019, India imported about 60% of its oil supplies from the Middle Eastern region.\]](#) A the nuclear standoff between the West Asian powers will, therefore, have an immediate knock-on effect on India with millions of Indian lives being put on stake. Furthermore, international waterways bordering the region including the Strait of Hormuz (which is already under pressure due to the US-Iran imbroglio) will become inaccessible for India in the wake of a nuclear attack, seriously constricting India's energy needs. Hence, the nuclear weaponisation of West Asia should be of concern to India.

India should, therefore, watch this development very closely and manoeuvre its diplomatic options accordingly. India can play a constructive role to ensure that a flare-up is prevented through different mechanisms. For instance, the Hormuz Peace Initiative that includes India and Oman (instrumental in forging out the JCPOA between US and Iran) should be

expanded to include Saudi and UAE to ensure a platform to bridge and negotiate disputes. Furthermore, India's recent induction into the UN Security Council as a non-permanent member should be used constructively to bring to notice of the world the possibility of a nuclear conflict in one of the most volatile regions on the Earth. While denuclearization doesn't fit into India's vision currently owing to a hostile nuclear neighbourhood, it still has the credibility as a responsible nuclear power to initiate dialogues on multilateral forums-on bringing more stringent controls on irresponsible sharing of nuclear know-how and also the possibility of a gradual phase-out of nuclear weapons for a nuclear-free world. Furthermore, India also needs to maintain strong diplomatic ties with both Saudi and Iran and find ways to ensure that Indian diaspora is not inadvertently caught in between Saudi and Iranian skirmishes. In the event of a nuclear confrontation, this should enable India to act quickly and bring home its citizens to safety.

Conclusion:

As we cross the 75th anniversary of the untold misery that was unleashed on Hiroshima and Nagasaki with the dropping of atomic bombs, it is necessary to take note of the nuclear situation once again in today's geopolitical situation. In light of the existential danger that the new development brings forth, it is necessary to have deliberations on it rather than turning a blind eye to the matter. Nuclear cooperation for weaponisation as a means to increase diplomatic and global strength without adequate safeguards can cause grave danger to the global community. It is therefore pertinent for the global community to look into this issue with an urgent concern.

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