

Year of regional integration



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EXCLUSIVE

A series of political developments in the last few weeks indicates a better situation for the future of the Middle East and West Asian region. This future will be based on greater convergence between the countries of the region.

The agreement to normalize relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the efforts to normalize relations between Turkey and Syria, the media reports about Bahrain's desire to normalize relations with Iran, the visit of Ali Shamkhani, Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) to the UAE, are all tell-tale signs, because the grounds are paved for cooperation between the countries of the region. The prelude of this convergence was the agreement between Tehran and Riyadh in Beijing, which was struck on March 10. This agreement will end the tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, while these tensions had overshadowed the stable capacities of the region. While Saudi Arabia has spent more than 350 billion dollars during the 7-year war with Yemen, the Syrian crisis has entered its 12th year, and political instability in Lebanon rages on and on.

Bahrain's differences with Iran should also be taken into consideration, and it is safe to conclude that the countries of the region can no longer tolerate tensions and the loss of sustainable development capacities.

At the same time, the agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia will lead to the isolation of Israel. Israel intended to isolate Iran through the Abraham Accords or a so-called normalization of ties with Arab countries, and now with the new domestic developments, this regime has isolated itself. Recently, the UAE canceled its purchase order for a defense system from Israel, and Saudi Arabia did not issue visa for the Israeli foreign minister and his accompanying delegation to Riyadh.

Turkey and Syria are expected to reach a comprehensive agreement soon. Turkey intends to be the initiator of a regional unity with Iran, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Syria, and therefore it will adjust its policies as well.

The set of these developments indicates that the next Iranian calendar year, which will begin in a few days, will be the year of regional convergence, reduction of tensions, and peace and stability. All countries in the region urgently need this regional stability and peace. Saudi Arabia, for instance, which is implementing its major plan known as 2030, sees the continuation of tensions detrimental to its national security, as Iran and other countries also need stability and peace in the region to

Iran begins joint naval drill with Russia, China in Oman Sea



A crew member of an Iranian chopper sees a military vessel sails into the Gulf of Oman on March 15, 2023 to take part in joint naval drills with forces from Iran, China and Russia in attendance.

● MOHSEN RANGINKAMAN/
MEHR

Political Desk

The naval forces of Iran, China and Russia have started a joint exercise in the Sea of Oman, as the three countries are teaming up to deepen exchanges and cooperation among their navies.

The maritime drills, dubbed "naval security belt combined war game 202," kicked off on March 15 and will run through March 19, China's Ministry of National Defense announced in a statement on Wednesday.

The drills will help "deep-

en practical cooperation among the navies of participating countries," the statement pointed out.

The maritime exercise will reportedly involve forces from the marine and airborne units of the Islamic Republic of Iran Navy, the

Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) Navy, and flotillas from China and Russia. Iranian naval forces, together with their Chinese and Russian counterparts, have held several joint war games in recent years with the purpose of improving the security of international maritime trade, countering piracy and maritime terrorism, exchange of information in naval rescue and relief operations, and exchange of operational and tactical experiences.

Back in October last year, Iranian Navy Commander Rear Admiral Shahram Irani said Iran planned to hold a joint naval exercise with China, Russia and a number of other countries in the northern tip of the Indian Ocean.

Irani said the joint exercise would be meant to boost up the combat capabilities of Iranian forces and falls within the framework of maritime diplomacy so as to ensure sustainable security.

He noted at the time that Iran had invited a number of member states of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) – a forum aimed at increasing maritime cooperation among the littoral states of the Indian Ocean region, to take part in the naval drills.

The Navy chief added that the war games had been designed in accordance with an instruction book compiled by the Iranian Navy. Meanwhile, the White House said that it is not concerned about the joint drill, yet, it "monitors it closely." Noting that this isn't the first time Russia and China have held a joint military exercise, John Kirby, Coordinator for Strategic Communications at the National Security Council in the White House said on Wednesday, "We are certainly monitoring it (the drill) to make sure there is no threat from this exercise to our national security or our allies in the region."

Iran's SNSC secretary to visit UAE

Iran's Supreme National Security Council secretary Ali Shamkhani will visit the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on Thursday, Nour News, which is affiliated with the Iranian top security body, reported.

His visit to Abu Dhabi comes at a time of growing rapprochement between Iran and Gulf countries. Last week, Shamkhani took part in talks brokered by China that resulted in Saudi Arabia and Iran resuming diplomatic ties after they were suspended in 2016. News of the visit came as Saudi Arabia's finance minister, Mohammed al-Jadaan, said that Saudi investment in Iran could happen "very quickly" following last week's agreement. Shamkhani's trip to the UAE highlights growing ties between Tehran and Abu Dhabi since the lat-

ter sent an ambassador back to Iran in September, more than six years after the Gulf Arab state downgraded ties with the Islamic Republic.

"Shamkhani will travel to Abu Dhabi on Thursday in response to an official invitation by his Emirati counterpart Sheikh Tahnoun bin Zayed Al Nahyan to discuss bilateral, regional, and international issues," Nour News said on Wednesday.

"Top economic, banking and security officials will accompany the Supreme National Security Council secretary to the UAE," it added.

Al-Jadaan, speaking at the first private sector forum of Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund, said Iran presented investment opportunities. "There are a lot of opportunities for Saudi investments in Iran. We



don't see impediments as long as the terms of any agreement would be respected," al-Jadaan said.

Meanwhile China, which hosted the latest round of Saudi-Iranian discussions, on Wednesday announced the beginning of joint maritime drills in the Gulf of Oman with the Russian and Iranian navies.

The exercises, which will go on until Sunday, are the fourth of their type since the three countries started such

operations in 2019.

The UAE downgraded its ties with Iran after Saudi Arabia severed its relations with Iran in January 2016 following the storming of the Saudi embassy in Tehran by Iranian protesters after Riyadh executed a prominent Shi'ite cleric. The UAE has business and trade ties with Iran stretching back more than a century, with the Dubai emirate long being one of Iran's main links to the outside world.

Saudi Arabia could invest in Iran ...

Iran has been under renewed US sanctions since then president Donald

Trump abandoned a landmark nuclear agreement between Tehran and major powers in 2018.

Saudi Arabia said at the time it had supported the sanctions, which target key areas, including oil.

But al-Jadaan said: "There is no reason for (investments) not to happen. I mean, Iran is our neighbor and has been and will continue to be for hundreds of years. So I don't see any issue that would prevent the normalization of the relationship across investments... as long as we stick to the agreement, you know, respecting sovereign rights, not interfering in other affairs."

He added: "I think that there are a lot of opportunities in Iran, and we provide a lot of opportunities for them."



Mohammad Ali Rajabi
Cartoonist



MP: Regional disputes can be solved through talks

Political Desk

Musa Qazanfarabadi, Head of the Judicial and Legal Committee of the Iranian Parliament told Iran Daily that regional countries should resolve their disputes through negotiations and they should refrain from involving other parties. Referring to Iran's negotiations with some countries in the region to resolve the misunderstandings that existed in the past, Qazanfarabadi said, "Problems

and disputes in the region can be resolved through negotiation and the result will benefit all countries in the region."

"Solving the problems and differences of opinions between the countries of the region is in no way beneficial to the arrogant countries, namely the West, and therefore, they are afraid of the conclusion of these negotiations and the formation of cooperation between the countries of the region," the MP added.

Referring to the necessity of developing regional cooperation, the legislator stated that the most important point is that the neighboring countries understand the regional and international conditions and have come to the conclusion that they are able to solve the existing problems through their unity and mutual understanding and there is no need for the presence of foreign and western countries to solve the problems in the region.