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'Differences also became apparent in several areas of regional politics' | Photo Credit: Getty Images/iStockphoto

In mid-July, The Wall Street Journal reported that earlier in December, the Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman (known as MbS), had told a group of Saudi journalists that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has “stabbed us in the back” and had threatened, “They will see what I can do.” He had added that his retaliation would be “worse than what I did with Qatar”, recalling the harsh four-year political and economic blockade of the kingdom’s neighbour from 2017.

The Crown Prince was possibly irked by the absence of the UAE ruler, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed (MbZ), for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) summit meeting with the visiting Chinese President, Xi Jinping.

This surprising outburst signals the end of the camaraderie between the Saudi Crown Prince and the UAE President. When MbS first came into public life with his father’s accession to the throne in 2015, it was obvious that he had a special bond with Mohammed bin Zayed; many observers believed that the Saudi prince, in his late twenties then, saw the more experienced MbZ as a mentor.

The two royals bonded their countries as strategic partners. They were partners in the war in Yemen, worked together to strengthen al-Sisi’s regime in Egypt, viewed Iran as a regional threat, disliked the Muslim Brotherhood, and then collaborated closely to implement the blockade of Qatar. In 2019, they also subverted the nascent democratic process in Sudan by backing the armed forces against the civilian Prime Minister.

But, over the last few years, their differences have become obvious. In July 2017, the UAE abruptly rejected the proposal to cut oil production put forward by “OPEC +” on the ground that its base production needed to be significantly increased. Abu Dhabi was then investing heavily in augmenting its oil production to monetise its potential to the maximum extent.

Differences then became apparent in several areas of regional politics. The UAE abruptly withdrew its troops from Yemen in 2019, but continued to pursue a separate agenda of supporting the secessionist movement in the south and mobilising local fighters backing the independence of the south. The UAE also expanded its maritime footprint in the region by taking control of Yemeni ports and Socotra Island in the Gulf of Aden, and Perim Island at the mouth of

the Bab al-Mandab.

The UAE then established bases in Eritrea and Somaliland, thus putting in place an unassailable strategic network that links the Gulf with the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, was left to do the fighting in Yemen, with little to show for its efforts over eight years.

The kingdom also experienced setbacks in Syria, where Russian intervention in 2015 ensured that the Assad government would not be toppled, and vis-à-vis Iran, when the United States failed to respond to repeated missile and drone attacks in 2019. This parlous scenario encouraged Saudi Arabia to pursue de-escalation and dialogue in the region. This started with the lifting of the Qatar blockade in January 2021 and initiation of the dialogue with Iran in Baghdad in April 2021. The UAE was a reluctant participant in both initiatives: it maintains a studied coolness towards Qatar and is pursuing its own engagement with Iran.

The UAE also normalised ties with Israel in August 2020, thus publicly dumping the Saudi-sponsored Arab Peace Initiative that requires Israel to accommodate Palestinian interests before Arab states normalise relations. Later, the kingdom initiated the readmission of Syria into the Arab League in May this year, but MbZ failed to attend the summit.

In Sudan, the two Gulf neighbours are now backing different generals — while the kingdom supports Army chief al-Burhan, the UAE is backing militia leader Dagalo, thus prolonging the destructive civil conflict. The UAE is also said to be uncomfortable with the speed with which Saudi Arabia normalised ties with Iran in March this year.

Saudi-UAE competition has now touched domestic areas as well. The two countries are seeking regional primacy in the same sectors — global business, tourism, finance and technology. Saudi Arabia is also wanting to become the principal hub for regional trade, thus challenging the UAE which is presently the dominant player. Both countries are pursuing ambitious plans to develop ports in the Gulf and the Red Sea and emerge as the major presence in the logistical connectivity projects under China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Though much smaller in size, the UAE has made it clear it will not be the kingdom's junior partner in the political, economic and logistical arenas. It compensates for its small size with the vision, dynamism and ambition of its leaders, its head start in global interactions in the areas of trade, connectivity, tourism, finance and technology, and the attractive image as a business-friendly and people-friendly locale it has successfully cultivated over several decades.

Hence, competition rather than cooperation is likely to define ties between the two Gulf neighbours. However, the kingdom's leadership position in the Arab and the Islamic world and its central place in global energy, business and finance will ensure that its preeminent place in regional and world politics and economics will remain unchallenged.

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