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Look East and Move Beyond Oil and Blue Diamond: Saudi Arabia-Thailand Diplomatic Revival and Normalisation

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Introduction

The lavender carpet rolled out at Al-Yamamah Palace in Riyadh on 26 January 2022, when General Prayuth Chan-o-cha, Prime Minister of Thailand, was received by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman (MBS). This was the first high-ranking visit that the Thai government had paid the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) in thirty-two years endorsed by the official royal invitation of MBS. This visit marked an end to the [three-decade Blue Diamond Affair](#), a series of scandals and tragedies which resulted in resentful Riyadh-Bangkok ties. Now, both kingdoms have reached a [joint agreement](#) to revitalise diplomatic relations for their future benefit. Thus, this opens an avenue for exploring areas of mutual interest, socio-economic cooperation, and commitment to address any challenges as bilateral partners.

Revisiting the Blue Diamond Affair

In 1989, Kriangkrai Techamong, a Thai cleaner employed by Saudi Prince Faisal Bin Fahd, stole several precious jewels and a 50-carat blue diamond whose whereabouts still remain unknown. Moreover, a wave of incidents followed the theft's investigations; such as, the murder of Saudi diplomats in Bangkok and a Saudi businessman with connections to the House of Saud, who disappeared and was later presumed deceased in

Bangkok. The Blue Diamond Affair and its outcome undoubtedly worsened ties, resulting in lowering the diplomatic level to Chargé d'affaires and a travel ban between the two kingdoms. [Before](#) that, the KSA accommodated almost half a million Thai workers and students, but fewer than hundreds remained because of the incidents, as their residency permits were cancelled. Then, Riyadh discontinued visa issuances for Thai citizens and restricted the provision of Thai Muslim pilgrims for the Hajj and Umrah. The conflict remained unresolved for thirty-two years until now.

Normalisation and the Look East Policy

This historical moment marked a new diplomatic chapter where both kingdoms agreed to end the conflict. However, several factors have made Thailand appealing to the KSA, as normalisation is vital to achieving its [Look East](#) Policy. Based on several variances and fluctuating relations with neighbouring countries, Saudi Arabia needs to seek allies and establish relations beyond the Greater Middle East. Moreover, the West, whom Riyadh has relied on as allies, has somehow turned against the KSA. The demise of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi placed [further strain between Riyadh and its Western allies](#), notably Washington. Yet, despite the long-standing strong security and economic bonds, Riyadh violated human rights and freedom of speech,

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which opposed the significant values of democracy.

Sensing the possibility of changeovers in future relations, Riyadh scrutinised new viable and advantageous ties. The global [middle powers](#), like Saudi Arabia, have a moderate capability to influence the behaviour of other less influential states. However, in times of crises and conflicts with their partnerships, these states need to seek new opportunities and enhance their multilateral diplomacy, which is why the 'Look East Policy' is diplomatically appropriate for this context. Since the Khashoggi case, the KSA has been applying similar methods to have less dependence, politically and economically, on the West and look towards the East. To do so, Riyadh needs to have good relations with many countries. Therefore, the restoration of Saudi-Thai relations would be a way to help wean off its dependence on oil. This would allow the KSA to have more skilled labour in its industries, develop its tourism, and enhance Saudi food security, as Thailand is considered the world's kitchen with potential in the [Halal food sector](#). With MBS's rise to power, this normalisation would move towards a new era with [Vision 2030](#) aligning with Saudi economic diversification by beneficially seeking a new ally to share common interests.

Challenges from the Past to Vision 2030

Even though both kingdoms would like to re-establish diplomatic relations and emphasise future economic prospects, they could still face several challenges. Over three decades, the attempts faced difficulties because of the political instability, the coup d'état, and the continuous changes in the Thai government, thus causing a delay in revitalising ties.

Moreover, before the MBS administration, Bangkok dealt with the ultraconservative Saudi government, which resulted in unsuccessful diplomatic ties due to the unresolved incidents. Interestingly, Vision 2030 was announced in 2016, and normalisation happened seven years later. Thus, Thailand could be overlooked when competing with other existing potential partners of the KSA like the Philippines, which has already dominated regional labour markets.

Moreover, there is a slight contradiction as Riyadh emphasises economic diversification and Vision 2030 that aligns with [Saudisation](#). Therefore, finding a balance between Saudi interests and prioritising relations with Thailand could be challenging. Accordingly, admitting Thai skilled and semi-skilled workers into Saudi Arabia would play a significant part in realising Vision 2030. However, the concept of putting Saudi first would be a priority as rampant unemployment still exists. Additionally, for both kingdoms, the existing accusations by the West of their mal famé for being non-democratic and failed human rights could affect their relations and global images.

Opportunities in Restoring Ties and the Use of Soft Power

Despite these challenges, this diplomatic restoration happened just when various portents besieged Riyadh in every dimension. The emergence of the MBS administration resulted in progressive political and socio-economic reforms, Vision 2030, to enhance Saudi soft power and diversify its economy. Consequently, this could pave the way for unexplored opportunities and long-standing, fruitful bilateral relations. The KSA is also a major global crude oil supplier for the energy sector and was [ranked second](#)

[in 2021 as Thailand's oil supplier.](#)

Therefore, they could expect more engagement in energy trading. For the non-energy sector, tourism would be promoted as a soft power tool for both kingdoms. For instance, Thailand, a world-famous tourist destination, has publicised its renowned medical tourism and wellness centres to attract visitors, particularly from the Middle East. Moreover, recognised for being the world's kitchen and having Halal products, Thailand could guarantee Saudi food security; such as, contract farming projects for agriculture and exports to the KSA.

For Saudi Arabia, megaprojects like NEOM that need considerable investments would be highly persuasive to entice massive cooperation and tourists when finished. Accordingly, the KSA has heritage assets beyond traditional tourism, thus making Saudi soft power nearly unmatched. This is derived from being the Islamic birthplace and housing the two holiest sites of Islam. Its religious tourism subsector welcomes [millions of Muslim pilgrims for the Hajj and Umrah every year](#), including Thai Muslims, who could later visit other parts of the country. As a member of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), where Thailand is [one of five observers](#), normalisation would allow Saudi Arabia to promote sustainable solutions in deep South Thailand and seek education and religious collaborations. Interestingly, the [first initiative](#) happened three days after the meeting. Bangkok received around 50,000 copies the Quran from the Saudi Embassy to distribute to Islamic centres. Furthermore, [a forum](#) will soon be held to gather public input on the issue in light of the diplomatic restoration. Accordingly, the new diplomatic chapter would initiate promising opportunities in various

aspects for both kingdoms during the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond.

Conclusion

In diplomacy, there are no permanent enemies and friends, only permanent interests. Hence, over three decades, the lavender carpet finally rolled out for Bangkok in Riyadh, and the curse of the Blue Diamond was doomed. Moreover, Thailand finally has sound relations with all Muslim countries, as the relations have been rectified. Undoubtedly, Saudi Vision 2030 is a leading motivation for diplomatic restoration, together with the KSA longing to rebrand its global image by looking East and using soft power, which strives to foster new economic partnerships beyond oil. As the unresolved issues that once destroyed their diplomatic relations remain, it is critical to avoid repeating past mistakes. Even though there is no proof that Riyadh has forgotten nor forgiven, normalisation with Bangkok is seemingly a non-zero-sum game that could pave the way for long-lasting and fruitful relations leading to a broad spectrum of economic, education, tourism and hospitality, and security collaboration.

Nonetheless, as the existing accusations by the West of their mal fame for being non-democratic and failed human rights could affect their relations and images, both kingdoms should be aware of their worldwide standing. Therefore, Bangkok should maintain neutrality with all sides since it has links with various nations in the Middle East, some of which are at odds with the KSA, such as Iran. Similarly, Riyadh should also try to retain positive relations with neighbouring countries and Western allies. Furthermore, Saudi

Arabia is significantly an active member of the OIC in promoting the issues of the Muslim world, where Thailand is one of the five observers. Consequently, the normalisation has implications for Thailand's predominantly Muslim Deep South situation.

About the author

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