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THE GLOBAL AMBITIONS OF A SAUDI PRINCE

How Saudi Arabia is
Solidifying China and
Russia's Presence
in the Gulf.

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Introduction

By Prof. Dr. SC Goran Ilik



Introduction

By Prof. Dr. SC Goran Ilik

To understand Saudi Arabia, it is very important to consider several political factors, such as 1) the existence of an oil-funded, patronage-based system that links important constituencies to the ruling elite while keeping them divided from each other; 2) a strong relationship with the religious establishment that provides both legitimizations ideologically and supports from an important social constituency; and 3) cohesion within the ruling family itself (Al-Rasheed 2018, 31). Also, it can be said that the oldest strategic alliance with a Western power is with the United States, dating since 1931. The US and Saudi Arabia have a similar interest in sustaining the Gulf region's stability, security, and prosperity. They worked closely on a wide variety of regional and global problems. Saudi Arabia is essential in ensuring the region's peace and prosperity. It is a significant partner in security and counter-terrorism operations and military, diplomatic, and financial cooperation. Its soldiers collaborate closely with the US military and law enforcement to protect both nations' national security interests. In that sense, the US and Saudi Arabia have longstanding security and strong economic relationship.



However, on 21 June 2017, Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud was appointed Crown Prince following his father's decision to depose Muhammad bin Nayef, making him heir to the Saudi throne. Mohammed Bin Salman Al Saud (MBS) seized the spearhead of the Saudi economy's reorganization, which he publicly declared in April 2016 when he unveiled “Vision 2030”, the country's strategic direction for the next 15 years. “Vision 2030” intends to transform Saudi Arabia's economy into a more diverse and privatized structure. It outlines goals and measures in various areas, ranging from non-oil revenue development and economic privatization to e-government and sustainable development. One of the primary motivations for this economic reorganization through “Vision 2030” can be linked to Saudi Arabia's reliance on a rentier economy since a limited supply of oil resources threatens the country's long-term viability. The “Vision 2030” is not just a plan but a vision of MBS for establishing a new Saudi identity as a global power in the new international context. In a Trump-like connotation, the ambition of the Crown Prince can be marked with the slogan “Make Arabia Great Again”.

An ambitious vision for an ambitious nation by ambitious Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. That can be used as a drive for the re-birth, rethinking, or recalibration of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia under the leadership of the Crown Prince. Even though the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was long known for two things - Islam and oil - the Crown Prince launched his ambitious plan for the future titled “Vision 2030”. This plan is sufficient to identify the main goals of the Saudi leadership and its global intentions. The Vision combines several components – quasi-theocratic, economic, and geostrategic. In many aspects, it seems inspired (or emulated) by the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative as Xi Jinping's plan to re-birth the Chinese nation and expand its influence globally. The “Vision 2030” aspires to wean the Kingdom off its reliance on oil while simultaneously reducing unemployment, increasing the female labour force, stimulating private-sector economic contributions, and developing cultural and entertainment activities. In this regard, it is very interesting to emphasize MBS's “understanding” of civil rights and liberties when he promised to establish a “moderate” society that was divergent from theological ultra-conservatism. Hence, the Saudi religious police's powers have been considerably limited.



MBS's intention to transform the Saudi economy by diversifying the government's sources of revenue and reducing longstanding oil export dependence through investment and private sector growth, his hardliner attitude toward the neighbouring countries and Saudi Arabian-led intervention in Yemen, and his proclamation for conservation and protection of Islam as an “a gift more precious than oil” confirm the new Saudi's ideology, stipulated in the aforementioned “Vision 2030”. Saudi Arabia’s justification for warfare in Yemen stems from religious convictions and fear for their security along their southern border (BBC News 2020). The rationale for Saudi Arabia’s military campaign in Yemen circulates retaining its power in the oil industry (Orkaby 2019). Saudi Arabia's engagement in the Yemeni war only ensures oil security.

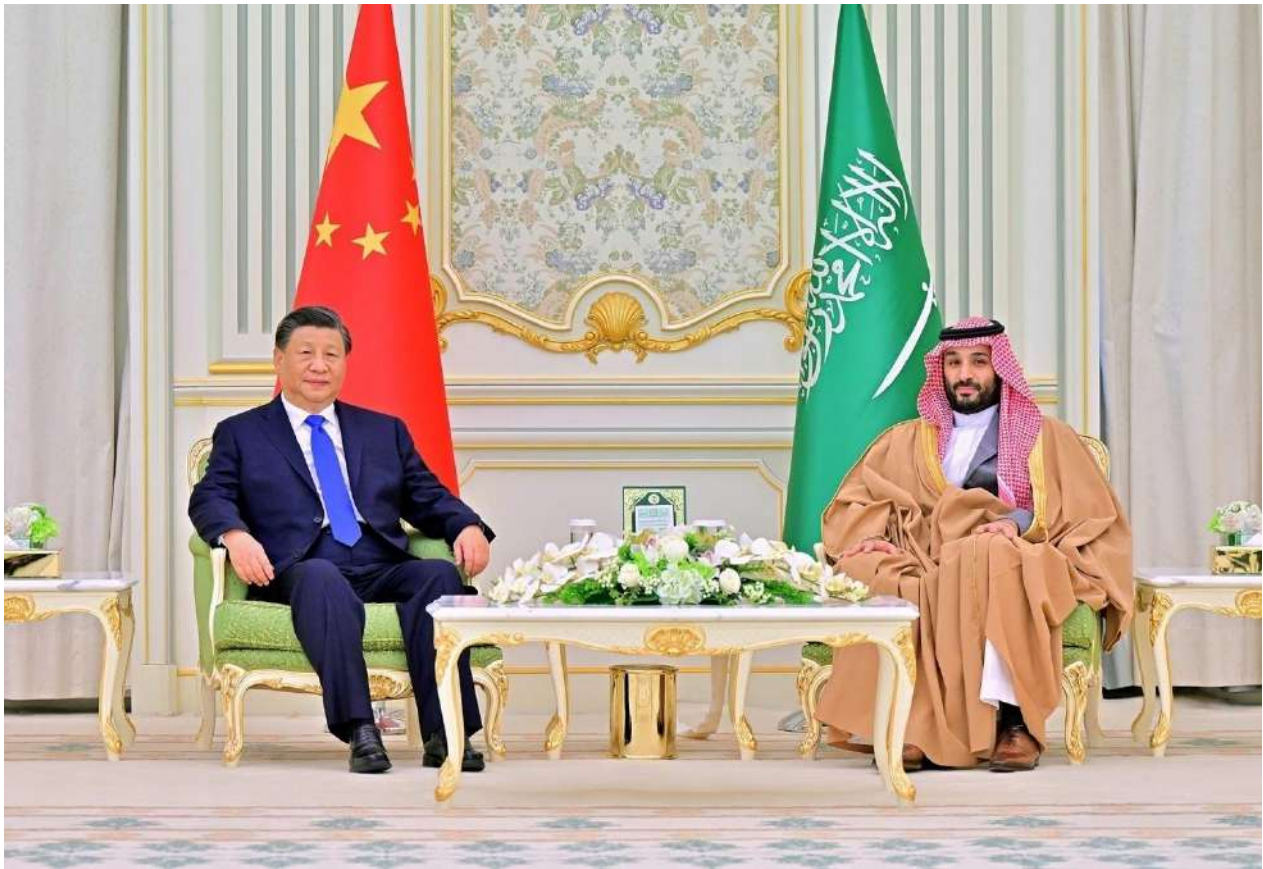
Furthermore, it is critical to emphasize that the Crown Prince has a favourable reputation among young Saudis who feel that being at the core of Saudi Arabia's leadership is a symbol of change – as a new Messiah destined by God to restore the Kingdom's grandeur predestined with its geographic position to connect the three continents of Africa, Asia, and Europe. The Kingdom's geostrategic importance stems from its location and possession of vast oil reserves and borders the world's two most important strategic

maritime trade routes - the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. Despite not being a military power, the Kingdom's massive oil riches have gradually and significantly improved its status as a powerful worldwide economic and financial power. Also, the Kingdom is home to Islam's two holiest sites, Mecca and Medina, or as is stated in the "Vision 2030": "Our Kingdom is the Land of the Two Holy Mosques, the most sacred sites on earth, and the direction of the Kaaba (Qibla) to which more than a billion Muslims turn at prayer".



Trying to reinvent the new role of the Kingdom, the Crown Prince started to behave as a proactive player, intending to juggle with the USA, China, and Russia's interests in the Gulf. Despite the historical ties with the US, Saudi Arabia's relations with Russia and China have greatly strengthened during the last twenty years. MBS began to move proactively in international affairs, chasing the Kingdom's new position on the global stage, driven by the desire to establish Saudi Arabia as a new global power capable of playing with the US, Russia, and China at the same time.

However, the relationship with the United States was solidified in 1945, with the start of the Cold War, and Saudi Arabia became a prominent funder of anti-communist activities worldwide. This reinforced the strategic importance of Central Asia and the Middle East, particularly oil-rich countries like Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, to the future of the Cold War. So, during the Trump administration, the US maintained warm links with Saudi Arabia, backing Saudi Arabia in the Saudi-Qatar conflict, and withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal in 2015. However, following the assassination of Saudi royal family critic writer Jamal Khashoggi by a Saudi agent in 2018, the US published an unclassified intelligence dossier blaming MBS for the murder. Of course, human rights and a free press were never a Trump priority. Later, US President Joe Biden declined to meet with the Crown Prince. Recently, Saudi Arabia has been the subject of sanctions from the EU and the US over its Human Rights records, affecting its trade and financial relations.



At the same time, the Crown Prince recognizes the enormous potential that may lead to improved relations with China - while maintaining relations with the US at a very low level as a reaction to the new Biden administration. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia and Russia agreed to deepen and expand security

cooperation. With this behaviour, the Crown Prince dragged the Kingdom into power competition of the great powers triangle – the US, China, and Russia.

Given China's expanding global position and influence and Russia's historical presence in the Gulf, they will deepen economic and security cooperation with Saudi Arabia in the future. Saudi Arabia experienced significant Chinese investment in the building and expanding of industrial parks and ports as part of its Belt and Road Initiative. According to the International Monetary Fund's Direction of Trade Statistics, Saudi Arabia has overtaken China as China's top trading partner in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia has developed oil refineries and strategic oil storing facilities in China to control the Chinese energy market as competition from Iran and Russia increases. At the same time, Iran seems to be a major source of contention between Saudi Arabia and China and a significant political obstacle to closer political relations. This, however, has the potential to spark geopolitical conflict in the region. Besides billions of dollars in investments in China, Saudi Arabia has significantly invested in Chinese infrastructure projects, particularly in Pakistan's Gwadar Port.

Moreover, China has also emerged as a potential partner for nuclear technology. In this regard, the Crown Prince visited Beijing in 2019 and met with President Xi Jinping to maintain amicable relations between the two nations. The ambitious Xi's Belt and Road Initiative confirmed the Chinese expansionist ambition in the Gulf. The Crown Prince also intimated that China might expand its diplomatic presence in the Middle East while noting that Saudi Arabia is eager to collaborate with China to advance global and regional peace, security, and development. Most of these relationships have been built on a mutually advantageous economic partnership that shows the similarity between China's Belt and Road Initiative and Saudi Arabia's "Vision 2030". Dealing with a country that will be a long-term consumer of gas and oil has obvious advantages, while European clients are growing interested in renewable energy sources. Therefore, China's relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran have also been elevated to "comprehensive strategic partnership", a designation bestowed by Chinese diplomacy to express the ambition to expand commercial and diplomatic ties. Saudi Arabia has an important geostrategic position for China, has worldwide Islamic relevance, and is an energy giant.

Furthermore, China is Saudi Arabia's major economic partner in energy sales and investment in Saudi's "Vision 2030" plan. Currently, China and Saudi Arabia are discussing hedging the Chinese Yuan against the US dollar for Saudi Arabia's oil supplies to the country. This agreement aims to achieve several mutually beneficial goals for the two countries. This would allow Saudi Arabia to reduce American predominance in the oil market, particularly in the Gulf. This would improve China's economy and

establish the Yuan as a worldwide reserve currency. The author Jonathan Fulton (2020) pointed out that Beijing and Riyadh, to advance their bilateral ties, have focused on the 1+2+3 pattern, where one (1) represents energy, two (2) is for infrastructure and trade and investment, and three (3) implies nuclear energy, space satellite, and renewable energy (p. 1).

Regarding the relations with Russia, the authors Bruce McClintock et al. (2021) emphasized that following an oil production pact agreed upon in 2016, King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud became the first Saudi monarch to visit Russia. Recent encounters have included talks on corporate partnerships, cross-border investments, and prospective Russian arms sales to one of the US's most important Middle Eastern allies – Saudi Arabia (p. 8). In this context, it is important to stress that Saudi Arabia is fully focused on Iran. The Russia-Iran relationship is a litmus test for the future quality of Saudi-Russia relations. The Saudis have recently attempted to turn Moscow off from Tehran. In 2019, they presented and actively promoted a regional security model. Russia used to pursue an international peace settlement on another regional issue, the conflict in Yemen, in which Saudi Arabia is directly involved, and Iran is also involved. However, it is very important to acknowledge that regarding the authoritarian nature of the political regimes in both countries, the personal interaction between the two leaders will be decisive because the authoritarian regimes are based on strongmen, not institutions. Namely, MBS leads a brutal authoritarian system. Human rights advocates in Saudi Arabia are often subjected to abuse and torture at the hands of the authorities, which is very similar to Putin's outraged authoritarian regime in Russia. Another source of respect for MBS is Putin's support during the G20 Summit in Argentina, despite the international community's condemnation of MBS for Jamal Khashoggi's murder. Hence, Russia is looking for ways to strengthen its regional status by investigating prospects in the Gulf. In the “Vision 2030” framework, which aims to localize up to 50% of defence spending and boost non-oil industries, the agreement provides Saudi Arabia theoretical parity with the UAE on defence relations with Russia and advantage over other Arab partners and Iran. Russia will not necessarily side with the Saudis against the US because it understands the importance of the Saudi-US partnership. Unlike Russia, the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has frequently criticized several of Prince MBS's actions as undemocratic, authoritarian, and aggressive. Saudi Arabia has formed a friendly relationship with the Russian Federation in recent years, recognizing that the United States may not be able to provide all of the Kingdom's demands in light of the changing global security and geoeconomic landscape.

Russia's relationship with Saudi Arabia is generally built on economic and security pillars. The Kingdom has signed a military cooperation agreement with Russia and announced the preservation of stability and

security in the region as a common goal. Moreover, due to their competitiveness as energy producers, Russia and Saudi Arabia's relations experienced phases of competition and convergence. Russia's tight connections with Iran are also a major impediment to the development of Moscow-Riyadh relations. The Saudi-Russia agreement will inevitably be restricted by the continued strength of US-Saudi relations, particularly the US-Saudi Arabia Strategic Dialogue (2020), which fully confirmed the ambitious “Vision 2030” plan of the Crown Prince with the following paragraph: “The United States recognized the significant strides that Saudi Arabia has made towards implementing Vision 2030 and ushering in major economic and social reforms, and its leadership of the G20 during its presidency year to support the global health and financial response to the Covid-19 pandemic.



The United States welcomed the G20 Leaders' Summit in November. Both sides recognize progress remains essential on core issues of national interest and seek to continue to work closely towards this end through the Strategic Dialogue with an eye toward the future of the strategic relationship”. Large-scale US military and civilian training missions in the Kingdom, as well as long-term cooperating and consultative

initiatives, threaten to limit the scope of any Saudi engagement with Russia. Since its inception in 2005, the US-Saudi Arabia Strategic Dialogue has served as a high-level institutionalized venue for harmonizing the US and Saudi strategic objectives. The Strategic Dialogue is divided into six working groups that address human development, the economy, energy, consular issues, military cooperation, and counter-terrorism. Given China's advances with armed drones, Russia is keen to compete more effectively in the region's arms sales market and gain in circumstances where the United States may limit, postpone, or cancel drone shipments.

Nevertheless, during the International Military-Technical Forum "Army 2021", Saudi Deputy Defence Minister Khalid bin Salman and his Russian counterpart, Colonel General Alexander Fomin, signed an agreement to develop joint military cooperation. Cooperation nevertheless appeals to Saudi Arabia and Russia on several levels as they search for pragmatic deals based on common interests. The agreement reflects the Saudi intention to maintain friendly relations with Moscow, focusing on realizing its potential to develop its industrial-military complex. The Saudi-Russia relationship is evolving in a critical and time-sensitive environment, with the US exit from Afghanistan, the continuation of US-Turkey discussions, Russian engagement with Iran, Qatar, and the UAE, also, the US withdrawal of Patriot batteries from Saudi Arabia, US's lack of backing for Houthi missile assaults on Saudi oil infrastructure, the removal of the Houthis from terrorist lists, and increasing pressure on Saudi Arabia to stop the Yemen conflict. Russia has also made significant agreements with Saudi Arabia for arms trade, peaceful nuclear projects, collaborative GLONASS activities, and electricity. Prince Salman bin Abdulaziz hailed this as an outstanding chance for Russia to enter US-dominated markets. It is important to stress that Saudi Arabia's interest in acquiring Russian armaments was a leverage point for Russia to draw financial investments and political predisposition. At the same time, Saudi Arabia utilized it to influence Russia's Syrian policy.

Nevertheless, the Syrian issue is one of the major points of contention between Moscow and Riyadh. Although Moscow and Riyadh have agreed that Sunni Jihadism is a threat to both regimes and have made joint efforts to combat it, the two have always taken opposing approaches regarding Salafi Jihadism. On the other side, Moscow has used the collective security doctrine to strengthen its connections with Riyadh on several levels: politically, economically, and militarily. The Saudi leadership has appropriately matched Moscow's help for Riyadh in Yemeni matters, including bargaining on oil prices and executing military sales.

Regarding the present context, Saudi Arabia has taken a mixed-policy approach in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and subsequent voting by Middle Eastern nations on the emergency wartime vote in the United Nations General Assembly. The Resolution criticized the Russian invasion and demanded that Russia withdraw its armed forces from Ukraine. Although UN Resolutions have non-binding nature, Saudi Arabia voted favourably. In contrast, Tehran voted against it, calling on the US and NATO to halt their hegemony and respect Russia's security interests. It is important to note that the Saudi government has refrained from criticizing Russian actions. The Kingdom's foreign minister approached his Russian colleague to ensure the two countries' bilateral relations were strengthened. As a result, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy on the Ukraine situation is swinging between Moscow and Washington, signalling that Saudi Arabia is having difficulty balancing its security and politico-economic interests in the new international context. Therefore, with the present sanctions against Russia in place and the quickly changing circumstances regarding Ukraine, oil exports would become another point of conflict between Saudi Arabia and Russia, bearing in mind that Saudi Arabia is now one of the top oil exporters to China.

To summarize, MBS has devised a strategy to maintain a balance of power with the US by breaking away from its longstanding relationship to realize its global ambitions, expanding its influence in the Gulf region to some extent by strengthening economic and security cooperation with China and Russia. As a result, the Chinese military-industrial complex has drawn the attention of Saudi Arabia. Even if Beijing cannot replace Washington as a security guarantee or meet Saudi Arabia's geostrategic ambitions, it has the potential to emerge as a powerful alternative in the country's arms and ammunition supply chain in the future. Despite pressure from the US and the UK to support the West and its allies in the face of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Saudi Arabia has refused. In that context, the present state of Russian-Saudi relations matches Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's approach to reducing threats presented by Western allies, particularly the United States. The key to coherence here is Moscow's continuous bilateral and international backing for the Saudi regime.

Saudi Arabia intends to develop a new oil axis with larger strategic ramifications. If it is formed, it will not only affect geopolitics and the global financial system, but it will also change the world's security perspective. Saudi Arabia aspires to progressively replace the United States as the principal supplier of weapons and ammunition, control the oil market with Russia as a partner, and terminate the United States' monetary monopoly in the oil industry. Another aspect of Saudi Arabia's new attitude is weakening the European Union's economic position against China and military power against Russia in the area.



Aspirations for self-establishment as a global power, especially through the affirmation of “Vision 2030”, flirting and playing alongside the United States, Russia, and China, and simultaneously strengthening its position as a regional hegemon (Iran-Saudi rivalry and the case of Yemen). Namely, it is very important to emphasize that, regardless of the global or rather regional aspirations of the Prince, the new reconfiguration of the new world order could not be immediately assessed as multipolar as the MBS wants or a world in which Saudi Arabia would grow into one of the global poles. However, the United States as a superpower seriously persists on the world political scene. Therefore, as Samuel Huntington says, what can be expected in the foreseeable future is establishing a kind of uni-multipolar world. A uni-multipolar world is one in which critical international issues must be resolved by a single superpower (for example, the US) plus some other major powers (for example, Russia and China).

In such a world, Saudi Arabia, without clear parameters of action and clear positions with the major global actors (the USA, China, and Russia), will hardly be able to gain the status of global power as MBS wishes, but on the contrary, can grow into a “coin for calculation” of the great powers that will dictate the world. The alliance with the United States, as the oldest alliance, definitely guarantees the stability and development of Saudi Arabia. While flirting with Russia and China, especially in terms of strategic and critical infrastructure and security, seems to be an adventure of Prince MBS and exposing Saudi Arabia to a political wind that will not bring anything good to its people in terms of human rights and the rule of

law, as well as in terms of security, political and economic benefits. The repressive rule of MBS and its “Vision 2030” does not necessarily mean a guarantee for a prosperous future for Saudi Arabia. The recalibration of the Prince's foreign policy in a world of emerging global powers such as Russia and China means an attempt to impose his leadership as a strongman and regional hegemon. Nevertheless, at the same time, it is very important to remember that autocracies always start triumphantly but end fatalistically. This can also happen to the MBS and his utopian ambition transformed into “Vision 2030” and the self-confident playing of double games with the United States, China, and Russia.

Hence, the analyses below try to answer the following questions: What are the limitations of MBS’s global ambitions?; Does Arabia has the potential to become a global power?; Does Saudi Arabia have the capacity to compete with the US, Russia, and China?; Should Saudi Arabia lean toward one of the great powers?; and Does the Prince's attitude towards the United States open space for Russia and China to concentrate in the Gulf?

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A RENEWED ROMANCE

SAUDI ARABIA'S
GEOPOLITICAL
RECALIBRATION
UNDER MBS

BY SARMAD ALI KHAN

Introduction

Saudi Arabia's relations with Russia and China have improved considerably in the past two decades. As the oil-rich monarchy is diversifying its economy to not rely entirely on its oil industry, it is also diversifying its pool of allies. Recently, Riyadh has been the subject of sanctions from the E.U. and the US over its human rights record, affecting its trade and financial relations. Saudi Arabia is also diversifying its alliances and choosing countries less inclined to meddle in its internal affairs. Despite recent confrontations with Moscow and older rows with Beijing, Riyadh is increasingly favouring the strengthening of trade ties and the creation of strategic alliances with these countries. Saudi Arabia signed a military cooperation agreement with Russia and has also announced the preservation of stability and security in the region as a common goal.

This two-way relationship is primarily driven by security interests and a lucrative business market for both Riyadh and Moscow. At the geopolitical level, the Saudi-Russia relationship is evolving during a crucial and time-sensitive period following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the continuation of US-Turkey talks, Russian engagement with Iran, Qatar and UAE, and several other factors. While the US and the UK have pressurized Saudi Arabia to side with the West and its allies following Putin's invasion of Ukraine, the kingdom has turned down these requests.

Similarly, Beijing's course of action vis-à-vis Riyadh has also evolved recently as the country announced Riyadh as its priority in the region. The two countries are connecting via the BRI and Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, while also strengthening their strategic relationships on issues such as military cooperation, the Iran nuclear issue, multilateralism, etc. In addition, both countries have given each other the status of "strategic partner" which shows a shifting political landscape in the Gulf. Currently, Saudi Arabia is in active talks with Beijing to price its oil sales to China in yuan instead of US American dollars. This arrangement is aimed at achieving multiple objectives mutually beneficial for both countries, while it also appears to be aimed at sending a message to the US. For Saudi Arabia, this would enable the kingdom to decrease American hegemony in the oil market – especially in the Gulf. And for China, this would boost the country's economy and work towards Beijing's goal of making the yuan a key world reserve currency.

In the broader perspective, analysts argue that the kingdom aims to establish a new oil axis which would have greater strategic implications. If established, it would not only transform the geopolitical landscape and the global financial system but also change the entire security outlook of the world. Saudi Arabia intends to gradually replace Washington as the primary supplier of arms and ammunition, dominate the oil market with Russia as a partner and put an end to America's currency hegemony in the oil sector. The

decline in the European Union's (EU) economic position against China and military strength against Russia in the region is also another dimension of the renewed approach of Saudi Arabia towards the two countries. Putin's invasion of Ukraine marked a new low in the EU-Russia relationship, particularly the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).



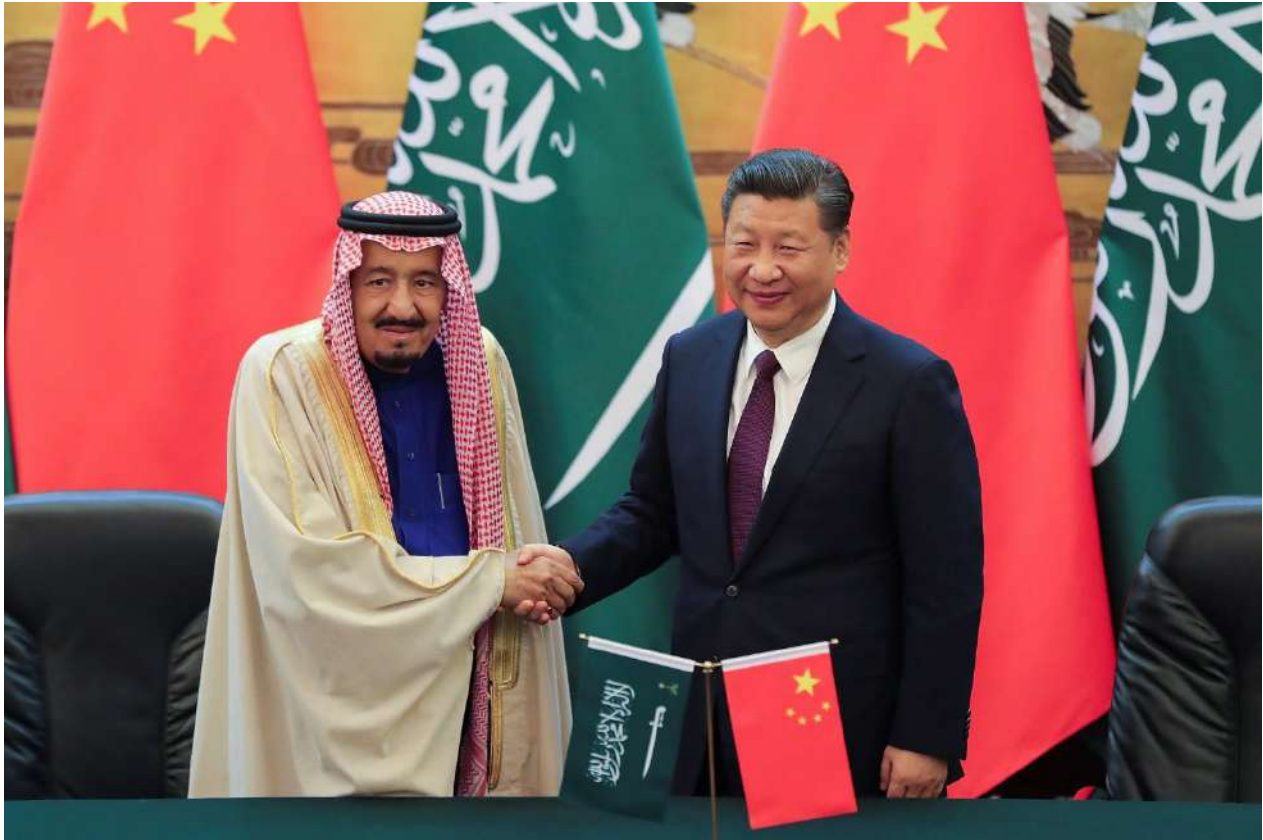
Beijing-Riyadh Relations: Where it all Started

Interaction between China and the Middle East can be traced back to the Han dynasty when relations between the two entities were based on trade. Silk, jade and other commodities were the primary products which led to the formation of the Silk Road. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, relations between Beijing and different countries in the Middle East began. Initially, these relations remained limited under Mao's rule as China focused heavily on developing and strengthening relations within its periphery. However, in 1978, former communist leader, Deng Xiaoping, initiated economic reforms and a modernization process to improve ties with the Middle East.¹

Beijing's unequivocal support of the Palestinians in the Israel-Palestine crisis also sent a clear message to Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia. Former Saudi Crown Prince Fahd's eight-point peace plan, also known as the Fez plan, was supported by China. During the mid-1980s, economic relations between the

¹ 1 Suhail Ahmed Khan, "China's Increasing Influence in the Middle East" (Master's Thesis, 2021), <https://www.e-ir.info/2021/09/20/chinas-increasing-influence-in-the-middle-east/>.

two countries intensified as China's exports to Saudi Arabia doubled from \$133 million to \$227 million, even without formal diplomatic ties. Shortly after the watershed moment emerged when China sold "an unspecified number" of CSS-2 intermediate-range ballistic missiles to Saudi Arabia worth \$3.5 billion. China also helped Saudi Arabia in the space domain by providing services and launching satellites for the country on which Riyadh spent \$3.1 billion.²



Since the development of diplomatic relations between China and Saudi Arabia in the 1990s, the two countries have enjoyed stable and exponentially growing relations. The dawn of the 21st century saw an upward trajectory in bilateral relations between the two countries with trade as the spearheading factor. According to China's National Bureau of Statistics, trade between the two countries was \$5106.89 million

² T. Y. Wang, "COMPETING FOR FRIENDSHIP: THE TWO CHINAS AND SAUDI ARABIA," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (1993): 63–82.

in 2002 which grew to \$72,190.53 million by 2013. Saudi Arabia also became the largest market for Chinese construction services totalling \$4.4 billion in the year 2011.³

Saudi Arabia's China Vision: Strategic Partner or a Counter-Balance?

Recognizing the importance of Saudi Arabia, Beijing designated Riyadh in its list of 'comprehensive strategic partners'. Under its Belt and Road Initiative's vision, Saudi Arabia saw substantial Chinese investment in the development and subsequent expansion of industrial parks and ports. Economic relations between the two countries continue to increase. In 2020, Riyadh became the largest supplier of crude oil to Beijing, accounting for 16% of the total oil exports to the country.⁴ Similarly, the International Monetary Fund (IMF)'s Direction of Trade Statistics (DOTS) highlighted that Saudi Arabia became China's largest trading partner in the Middle East in the same year. Bilateral trade between the two countries was well over \$67 billion, equating to 1.4% of Beijing's total trade volume. On the strategic side, in line with the country's 'balancing policy' in the region, Chinese arms exports to Saudi Arabia grew 386% from 2016 to 2020. Moreover, many reports have underlined the increased role of China in establishing the kingdom's nuclear facilities.⁵

Saudi Arabia has established "oil refineries and strategic stockpiling facilities" of oil in China to dominate the Chinese energy market as competition increases due to the re-routing of energy from Iran and Russia.⁵ Riyadh and Beijing have also established cordial relations in the military sphere, which have not remained confined to arms deals but have snowballed to include defence exchanges, joint military exercises, joint statements, training and capacity building programs. The two countries conducted first of its kind joint anti-terrorism exercises in China in which dozens of special forces participated from both sides. In 2016, the visit of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman led to both countries signing a memorandum of understanding (MoU). In addition, that same year, a five-year security cooperation contract was also signed to enhance bilateral security engagement and increase training exercises. Saudi Arabia has also leveraged this partnership to purchase those weapon systems that were refused by Western countries due

³ Joseph Y. S. Cheng, "China's Relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council States: Multilevel Diplomacy in a Divided Arab World," *China Review* 16, no. 1 (2016): 35–64.

⁴ Steven A. Cook, "Major Power Rivalry in the Middle East," Discussion Paper Series, Centre for Preventive Action (Council on Foreign Relations, March 2021), https://cdn.cfr.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/dp-cook-final-interior-and-exterior_0.pdf.⁵ Angela Stanzel, "China's Path to Geopolitics," Research Paper (Germany: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, February 21, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.18449/2022RP05>.

⁵ Yoel Guzansky and Assaf Orion, "Slowly but Surely: Growing Relations between Saudi Arabia and China," Research Report, INSS Insight (Institute for National Security Studies, 2017), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep08664>.

to Israeli pressure and pressure from non-proliferation regimes. These include ballistic missiles, ISR capabilities, attack UAVs and other high-tech equipment.⁶

Aside from other multi-billion dollar investments in China, Saudi Arabia has funnelled hefty investment in Chinese infrastructural projects, especially in the Pakistani Gwadar Port. To complement the infrastructural growth of the two countries in all spheres, Beijing is helping Saudi Arabia to develop its telecommunication sector and 5G infrastructure which would in turn facilitate the kingdom's commercial and strategic operations. Through this, Riyadh would also decrease its reliance on Western states. Moreover, China has also emerged as a potential partner for nuclear technology. Chinese nuclear companies are competing with Russian ones to collaborate with Middle Eastern countries, especially Saudi Arabia, for nuclear energy cooperation.⁷



In 2021, as the partnership between Riyadh and Beijing strengthened, Saudi Arabia was admitted to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as one of the Dialogue Partners.⁸ It has been highlighted that Saudi Arabia's deep interests in Afghanistan and the emerging alliance structures across Eurasia have pressed the kingdom to join SCO to enhance its political and geostrategic clout.⁹ Earlier, in 2020, China

⁶ 7 Guzansky and Orion.

⁷ Marco Siddi and Marcin Kaczmarek, "Russia and China in the Middle East: Playing Their Best Cards," FIIA Briefing Paper (Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA), November 2019), https://www.fiaa.fi/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/bp275_russia_china_middle-east.pdf.

⁸ "Shanghai Cooperation Organization | Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs," United Nations Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, accessed March 13, 2022, <https://dppa.un.org/en/shanghai-cooperation-organization>.

⁹ Devonshire-Ellis Chris, "Egypt & Saudi Arabia To Join Shanghai Cooperation Organisation As Dialogue Partners," *Silk Road*

regarded Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 as a key alignment factor between the two countries and also included the kingdom in the roadmap of its mega-project. It was not the first time that the bilateral relationship between the two countries was strengthening at pace,¹¹ given the previous inclusion of Saudi Arabia in the Maritime Silk Route (MSR) and the Digital Silk Road. Chinese construction services to Saudi Arabia, its interest in the country's technology market, and most importantly, the centrality of Jazan for BRI's larger connectivity have led to the cultivation of cemented ties between the two countries.¹⁰

For example, in 2019, the two countries signed more than 30 economic cooperation agreements worth \$28 billion with bilateral trade reaching \$78.18 billion.¹¹ In addition, Beijing and Riyadh have also focused on the 1+2+3 framework to take their bilateral relationship forward. This framework emphasizes:¹²

1. Cooperation in the field of space satellites, nuclear and renewable energy;
2. Traditional energy cooperation;
3. Trade, investment and infrastructural cooperation.

Disputes or Disagreements?

One of the primary drivers of disagreement between Saudi Arabia and China is the issue of Iran. Beijing's signing of a 25-year strategic partnership agreement with Tehran in 2020 caused a stir in the Gulf. This friction is based on Beijing's global trajectory of interaction which: (i) presented the country's neutral foreign policy in the region; (ii) is also connected with Beijing's dependence on oil imports from Tehran, and (iii) enables China to have eyes and ears in the Persian Gulf similar to the US presence in the South China Sea.¹³ China had to conduct bilateral naval exercises with Saudi Arabia to balance its relations with the country as China-Iran bilateral and trilateral exercises in the Indian Ocean, the Gulf of Oman and the Persian Gulf strained ties between the two countries.¹⁴

Chinese interests and plans to pour a large amount of money into rapid industrial privatization in Saudi Arabia have grown alarming for the country. On the one hand, Saudis view the Chinese as one of the most suitable partners. On the other hand, their scepticism vis-à-vis the conversion of Chinese economic

Briefing (blog), September 1, 2021, <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2021/09/01/egypt-saudi-arabia-to-join-shanghai-cooperation-organisation-as-dialogue-partners/>

¹¹ Chen Yurong, "Graphics: How Is BRI Bolstering China-Saudi Arabia Ties?," November 20, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-11-20/Graphics-How-is-BRI-bolstering-China-Saudi-Arabia-ties--VzqqKFdXSo/index.html>.

¹⁰ Benjamin Houghton, "China's Balancing Strategy Between Saudi Arabia and Iran: The View from Riyadh," *Asian Affairs* 0, no. 0 (February 9, 2022): 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2022.2029065>.

¹¹ Yurong, "Graphics."

¹² Houghton, "China's Balancing Strategy Between Saudi Arabia and Iran."

¹³ Cook, "Major Power Rivalry in the Middle East."

¹⁴ Stanzel, "China's Path to Geopolitics."

influence into political one makes them reluctant to give Beijing-based investors “enormous ownership stakes”.¹⁵ Some critics have also highlighted the use of Beijing as leverage by the kingdom to pressure Washington. Although it is widely acknowledged that Beijing cannot replace Washington in the short-or-medium term, the rivalry between the two giants is proving lucrative for MBS. Using Beijing as an option has fissured the strategic level of sturdiness.¹⁶



With the gradual increase in Chinese political and security influence in the Gulf, Beijing’s “non-intervention” and neutral policy towards regional countries would be hard to justify. If faced with American pressure, Saudi Arabia would also weigh the costs and benefits of its relations with China and may decide to reconfigure its terms of engagement.¹⁹ Analysts also argue that despite a strengthening Riyadh-Beijing relations, the strategic level policies of the two countries have not fully aligned. The alleged Saudi interference in Iran’s domestic politics, especially activating ethnocultural divides, is not mutually shared by Beijing. To connect it at a regional level, Saudi Arabia’s antagonism and American aggression towards Iran could be manifested by launching proxies from Balochistan which would, in turn,

¹⁵ Samuel Ramani, “The Risks of the China-Saudi Arabia Partnership,” February 17, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/02/the-risks-of-the-china-saudi-arabia-partnership/>.

¹⁶ Yoel Guzansky and Galia Lavi, “Saudi Arabia-China Relations: A Brave Friendship or Useful Leverage?,” Policy Analysis (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), April 2020), <https://strategicassessment.inss.org.il/en/articles/saudi-arabia-china-relations-a-brave-friendship-or-useful-leverage/>.¹⁹ Guzansky and Lavi.

impact China’s Belt and Road Initiative.¹⁷ While these differences appear insignificant, analysis of the larger picture shows that they continue to linger below the surface and may cause ruptures to the emerging multipolar world order – the new blocs.

Defining Moscow-Riyadh Relations: History and Beyond

In the wake of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the emergence of the Russian Federation led to the creation of a unipolar world order. At its weakest, the Russian Federation never accepted the unipolar construct. It always worked to gain influence beyond its territorial reach to hinder Washington’s political clout. Although Moscow’s approach towards increasing its global impact was gradual, in 2014, the country accelerated its policy of engagement internationally and re-emerged as one of the primary world powers. This led to the recalibration of Washington’s course of action in different parts of the world with varied geopolitical landscapes.¹⁸ For example, the U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) 2017 and its Indo-Pacific Strategy Report (2019)¹⁹ termed Russia as a “revisionist power” which challenges its “power, influence and interests” across Asia, Middle East, Europe and other regions.²⁰



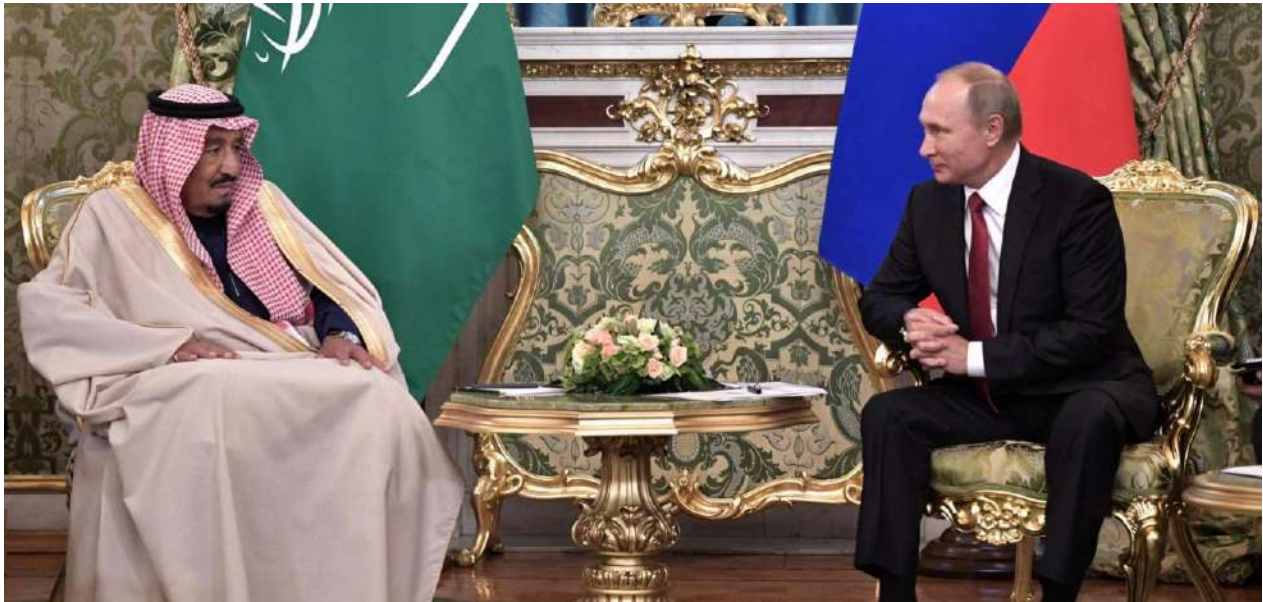
¹⁷ Mercy A. Kuo, “China and Saudi Arabia: The Global Ambitions of Mohammad Bin Salman,” March 20, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/03/china-and-saudi-arabia-the-global-ambitions-of-mohammad-bin-salman/>.

¹⁸ BRUCE MCCLINTOCK, JEFFREY W. HORNUNG, and KATHERINE COSTELLO, “Russia’s Global Interests and Actions: Growing Reach to Match Rejuvenated Capabilities” (RAND Corporation, 2021), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep32528>.

¹⁹ “Indo-Pacific Strategy Report” (Washington, DC: US Department of Defence, June 1, 2019), <https://media.defence.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENCE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPO-RT-2019.PDF>.

²⁰ MCCLINTOCK, HORNUNG, and COSTELLO, “Russia’s Global Interests and Actions.”

Historically, Saudi Arabia has remained in the American camp. It helped the allies during Cold War, supported the Afghan opposition against the Soviet army, and remained an ally of Washington in the United Nations (U.N.).²¹ King Abdullah's visit to Moscow, shortly after the US-led military coalition's invasion of Iraq in 2003, became the icebreaker between the two countries. The visit led to a concrete agreement on the fight against terrorism through collective efforts as part of a bilateral counter-terrorism working group. In addition, Saudi Arabia also facilitated Russia's induction to the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) as a permanent observer in 2005.²²



The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 became the catalyst to help Russia strengthen its ties with Saudi Arabia. Riyadh had warned Washington against the spill-over effects of the invasion on regional security, but the military operation continued as planned, resulting in Saudi Arabia's continued outreach to Russia.²³ Shortly after President Putin visited Riyadh in 2007, the two countries signed an agreement on military cooperation which later resulted in arms deals worth between \$2 to \$6 billion, further sweetening the pot for not only strengthening Moscow's relations with Riyadh but downplaying engagement with Tehran at the same time. In 2008, Russian official foreign policy signalled that Moscow was open to increasing its number of partners in the Middle East. It would also participate in the OIC and the League of Arab States and enable the implementation of a G8 partnership with the Middle East and North Africa. In this regard,

²¹ Anthony H. Cordesman, "Saudi Arabia and the United States: Common Interests and Continuing Sources of Tension" (Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 2016), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep23385>.

²² John W. Parker and Thomas F. Lynch III, "Russia and Saudi Arabia: Old Disenchantments, New Challenges," Research Report (Institute for National Strategic Studies, 2021), <https://www.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/inss/Strategic-Perspectives-35.pdf>.

²³ Cordesman, "Saudi Arabia and the United States."

Saudi Arabia became one of the foremost countries to welcome Russia to the region, largely a byproduct of Riyadh's concerns over its deteriorating ties to Washington.²⁴

Saudi Arabia's Quid Pro-Quo Approach and Russia

In October 2017, King Salman visited the Kremlin to explore options for enhancing partnerships between the two countries. President Putin visited Riyadh two years later signalling Moscow's willingness to strengthen ties and change the country's traditional foreign policy trajectory.²⁵ The visit also finalized an oil production deal which was signed in 2016. Moreover, various other meetings have also concluded multiple cross-border investment deals, corporate deals and Russian arms sales to Riyadh. The kingdom's outreach to Russia aims to:²⁶

- Pursue a compartmentalized approach to building transactional relationships;
- Provide unconditional arms sales;
- Minimize and/or contain American influence;
- Secure influence in major military policy circles for power projection.

Saudi Arabia has moved closer to Russia over the past few years by gauging that the US might not be able to fulfil all of the Kingdom's needs as per the changing global security and geopolitical landscape. Riyadh's shift of reliance toward a more multipolar Gulf in terms of the global powers is a result of Washington's gradual disengagement from the region. The underlining factors include the American withdrawal of Patriot batteries from Saudi Arabia, Washington's lack of support against Houthi missile attacks on Saudi oil facilities coupled with the removal of the Houthis from the list of foreign terrorist organizations, alongside pressure on Riyadh to end the Yemen war. The Ukraine crisis emerged as a litmus test for the world to see how far Riyadh has drifted from Washington; by staying neutral in the war, MBS sent a message to the US and signalled the country's embrace of a multi-vector foreign policy. A precedent was set in 2018 at a summit of G20 world leaders when Putin was one of the only world leaders to greet the Saudi prince, less than two months after the murder of Jamal Khashoggi²⁷

²⁴ Halil Kursad Aslan and Murat Aslan, "Understanding Economic Relations between Saudi Arabia and Russia," Research Report (Center for Middle Eastern Studies (ORSAM), September 8, 2021), <https://orsam.org.tr/en/understanding-economic-relations-between-saudi-arabia-and-russia/>.

²⁵ Cook, "Major Power Rivalry in the Middle East."

²⁶ MCCLINTOCK, HORNUNG, and COSTELLO, "Russia's Global Interests and Actions."

²⁷ Dr. Mohammad Salami, "The Stance of the Persian Gulf Monarchies to the Ukraine Crisis," International Institute for Global Strategic Analysis (IIGSA), March 14, 2022, <https://iigsa.org/the-stance-of-the-persian-gulf-monarchies-to-the-ukraine-crisis/>.



The Ukraine war has served as a bone of contention between Riyadh and Moscow. However, the evident shift in policy of Saudi Arabia hints toward an attempt by MBS to keep all the strategic options open for the country. A recalibration of the US's approach towards its strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia based on formally reviewing the Saudi-led war in Yemen, the plan for a renewed JCPOA, a CIA report highlighting MBS's involvement in the Khashoggi assassination and President Biden's stated claim that he will only talk to King Salman while bypassing MBS has substantially affected the relationship between the two countries. Parallel to these developments, Saudi Arabia reached a comprehensive strategic partnership agreement with Russia in 2020 after which an overhaul in Saudi foreign and security policy was evident. However, Washington's foreign policy's influence has not completely lost its grip.²⁸

On the economic front, Saudi-Russia trade volume has increased exponentially by strengthening their bilateral ties, as discussed above. The two countries' trade volume stood at \$57 million in 2000, which reached the \$367 million mark within a decade. From that point, the magnitude of the trade began increasing ten-fold. By 2019, Riyadh and Moscow were carrying out \$1.7 billion worth of two-way trade as reported by the United Nations. Russian agricultural products and minerals accounted for 45% and 18% of the total trading volume of Saudi imports from Russia.²⁹ Russian nuclear industry has also

²⁸ Parker and Lynch III, "Russia and Saudi Arabia: Old Disenchantments, New Challenges."

²⁹ 32 Aslan and Aslan, "Understanding Economic Relations between Saudi Arabia and Russia."

emerged as one of the most significant niche export sectors to attract Saudi investment. To further bolster cooperation, a co-investment fund (Russia-Saudi Investment Fund) was established in 2017 with a preliminary investment of \$6 billion. Under the RSIF, dozens of projects have been approved in both countries.³⁰

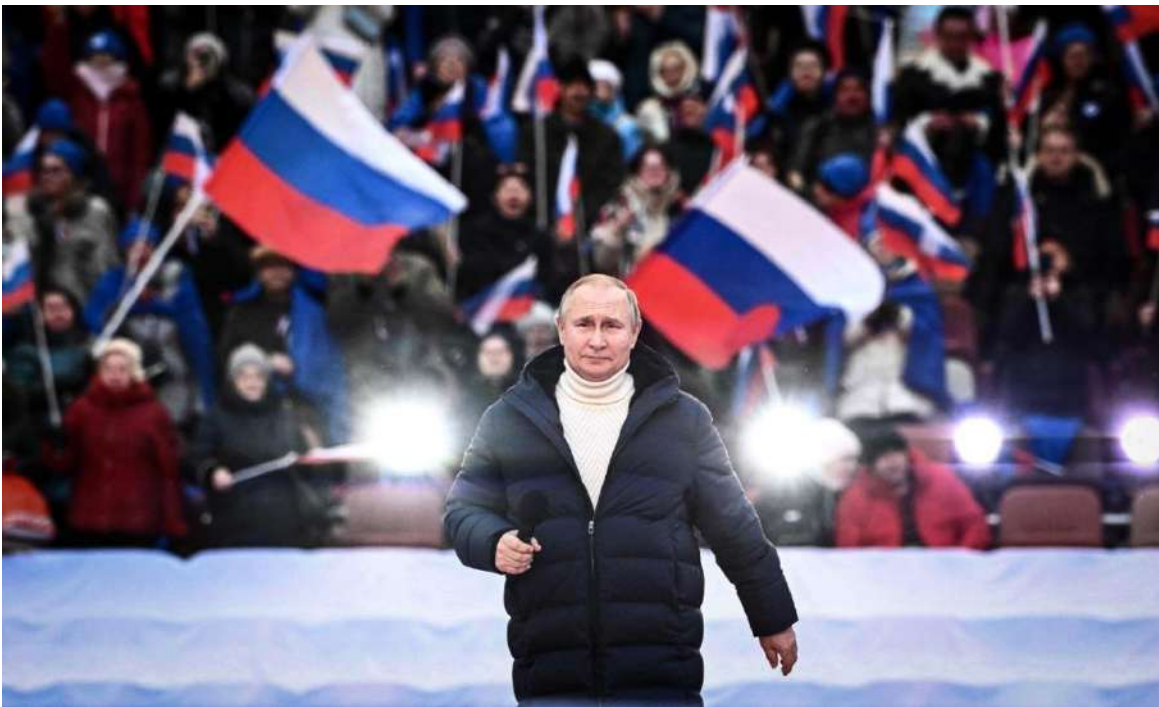


Russia has also extended substantial deals to Saudi Arabia for arms supplies, peaceful nuclear projects, joint GLONASS-based projects and electric power. This was welcomed by Prince Salman bin Abdulaziz and provided Russia with an excellent opportunity to penetrate US-dominated markets. Many Western scholars described these developments as the loss of Washington's influence in the region. However, another school of thought suggests that Russian cooperation with Saudi Arabia has become beneficial for the US. They argue that it is highly unlikely the Saudi pivot towards Moscow will continue in the long term.³¹ Russia's Syrian policy diverged markedly from that of Saudi Arabia which views the region's Shiite movements and their sponsors such as the Assad regime as the greatest threat to the region. Saudi Arabia's interest in the acquisition of Russian arms served as the leveraging point for Russia to attract financial investments and political influence while the kingdom used it to influence Russia's Syrian policy.³⁵

³⁰ Leonid Issaev and Nikolay Kozhanov, "Diversifying Relationships: Russian Policy toward GCC," *International Politics* 58 (2021): 884–902.

³¹ Maxim Suchkov, "Contemporary Russia-Saudi Relations: Building a Bridge of Cooperation over the Abyss of Discrepancies," *Iran & the Caucasus* 20, no. 2 (2016): 237–51.³⁵*Ibid.*

The renewed approach of Washington towards its engagement with Riyadh indispensably changed the outlook of the Gulf. President Biden and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s hardline stance towards MBS ruptured bilateral relations and pushed MBS towards Russia. Blinken has repeatedly condemned many of MBS’s activities as undemocratic.³² For this reason, Saudi Arabia has adopted a quid-pro-quo approach with Russia vis-à-vis global geopolitics and geo-economics³³ as it abstained during a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) meeting on Ukraine and is reconfiguring its oil policy in a way that does not undermine Russian energy leverage. This has ensured Russia’s emergence in the Gulf’s geopolitical and geo-economic arena as a heavyweight.



It is also connected with Russia’s 2019 ‘Concept of Collective Security in the Persian Gulf’, a set of initiatives to launch a multi-format dialogue between key regional players to discuss existing issues in the Gulf in “response to attempts by Westerns actors to impose a western solution on the region”. Moscow has leverage through the collective security concept by furthering its ties with Riyadh and nurturing them politically, economically and militarily. Moscow’s support for Riyadh in Yemeni affairs, bargain on oil

³² Jennifer Jacobs et al., “Oil Thirst Is Forcing Biden to Pivot U.S. Back to Saudi Arabia,” *Bloomberg.Com*, March 21, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-03-21/oil-thirst-is-forcing-biden-to-pivot-u-s-back-to-saudi-arabia>.

³³ Khalid Al-Jabri and Annelie Sheline, “Biden Should Punish Saudi Arabia for Backing Russia,” *Foreign Policy* (blog), March 22, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/22/biden-mbs-oil-saudi-arabia-russia-ukraine/>.

prices and conclusion of arms deals have been reciprocated duly by the Saudi administration. For example, Russia's abstention from voting against Saudi interests at the UN.³⁴

Lines of Division

One of the key areas of divergence between Moscow and Riyadh lies in the Syrian crisis. Moscow is in close coordination with Tehran, causing dismay to the Gulf States, Saudi Arabia in particular. The level of interaction between Russia and Iran can be gauged from the fact that the Russian military used an Iranian airbase to launch operations in Syria. In addition, in early 2020,³⁵ a strong disagreement between Saudi Arabia and Russia was witnessed on the issue of production limit agreements under the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC+) and nine non-OPEC oil-producing countries proceedings.³⁶

Although Moscow and Riyadh have agreed that Sunni Jihadism remains a threat to each regime and have collectively adopted dedicated measures to control it, the two have always adopted a different course of action in terms of countering Salafi Jihadism.³⁷ Russia has faced multiple threats from separatist in its Western territory on religious grounds. Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia are home to such movements and are spearheaded by Islamic ideologies, because of which Moscow has kept its guards up.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine and subsequent voting of Middle Eastern countries about the emergency wartime vote in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) has also attracted a mixed-policy approach by Saudi Arabia. The resolution condemned the Russian invasion and called for the withdrawal of its military from the country.³⁸ Although the UNGA Resolutions are non-binding, Riyadh voted in favour of the resolution while Tehran voted against it calling for the US and NATO to end its hegemony and respect Russia's security interest.³⁹ It is, however, interesting to note that the Saudi government has refrained from condemning Russian actions. The kingdom's foreign minister contacted his Russian counterpart to assure the continued strengthening of bilateral relations between the two countries.⁴⁰ As a result, Saudi Arabia is caught in the middle while attempting to balance its relationships with the United

³⁴ Leonid Issaev and Nikolay Kozhanov, "Diversifying Relationships: Russian Policy toward GCC," *International Politics* 58, no. 6 (December 1, 2021): 884–902, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-021-00286-4>.

³⁵ Parker and Lynch III, "Russia and Saudi Arabia: Old Disenchantments, New Challenges."

³⁶ Akshay Kumar Singh, "The 'Oil War' of 2020 Between Saudi Arabia and Russia: Examining the Underlying Geopolitical and Geoeconomic Compulsions," *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs* 33, no. 1/2 (2020): 24–42.

³⁷ Parker and Lynch III, "Russia and Saudi Arabia: Old Disenchantments, New Challenges."

³⁸ "General Assembly Resolution Demands End to Russian Offensive in Ukraine || U.N. News," March 2, 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1113152>.

³⁹ "The U.N. Resolution on Ukraine: How Did the Middle East Vote?," The Washington Institute, March 2, 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/un-resolution-ukraine-how-did-middle-east-vote>.

⁴⁰ Al-Jabri and Sheline, "Biden Should Punish Saudi Arabia for Backing Russia."

States and Russia. Analysts have argued that the kingdom is having a tough time in weighing its security-laden and politico-economic interests.

While the two countries have mutual interests in nuclear and renewable energy, it is worth noting that they remain two of the largest oil-producing countries with almost identical market shares. As of 2019, Saudi Arabia produced 11,850 billion barrels of oil per day with a global production percentage of 12.4 and Russia contributed 11,550 billion barrels a day, making its global share 12.1%.⁴¹ With the developing crisis in Ukraine, it is worth noting that Moscow is exploring new theatres in which to supply its oil with Beijing emerging as a potential partner. Currently, Saudi Arabia is one of the largest exporters of oil to China. With the current sanctions against Russia in play and the rapidly evolving situation in and around Kyiv, oil exports are another bone of contention between Saudi Arabia and Russia.



Conclusion

In light of the arguments mentioned above, the state and nature of the interaction between Saudi Arabia-China and Saudi Arabia-Russia is an outcome of comprehensive policies between the three countries.

⁴¹ Aslan and Aslan, "Understanding Economic Relations between Saudi Arabia and Russia."

These policies draw support from all major domains, including geopolitics, geo-economics and the security architecture – both global and regional. In the contemporary environment, under MBS, the Saudi administration views China as a critical regional and international player that could help the kingdom achieve its strategic objectives. Since MBS has recognized the importance of trade and geo-economic integration coupled with the alignment of China's BRI with the Saudi Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia's inclination towards China has increased. The Chinese military-industrial complex has also attracted Saudi attention as a spill-over effect. Even though Beijing cannot replace Washington as a security guarantor or fulfil the geostrategic demands of Saudi Arabia, in the immediate future, it has the capacity to emerge as a strong alternative for the supply of arms and ammunition. Of course, the systematic cooperation between Saudi Arabia and China is purely transactional with economic ventures and security ties taking precedence. The relationship continues to warm as a result of China's growing influence in the Middle East. It can be safely stated that President Xi Jinping's vision to engage Saudi Arabia to boost the BRI and MBS's approach to further bring China into the Gulf, in direct confrontation with Western dominance, is a quid pro quo for the national interests of both the countries.

More recently, Beijing and Riyadh are engaged with each other in active talks to use the Chinese Yuan as the main currency for the sale of Saudi oil to China. It is worth noting that Chinese imports account for one-quarter of Saudi Arabia's oil export which makes the proposal an appealing one for Beijing. Both Saudi Arabia and China are aiming to pit the Yuan against the US Dollar as the reserve currency and downplay Washington's hegemony in the global oil trade. Currently, the yuan marks 2.48% of the reserve of the \$14 trillion global oil trade whereas US Dollar accounts for 55%.⁴² If China is able to get the deal honoured, countries all over the world would be obliged to maintain it as a reserve currency, denting the US Dollars global position while strengthening the Chinese economy and a dual-currency global trade structure.

⁴² 46 Samanth Subramanian, "Why It Matters If Saudi Arabia Sells Oil in Chinese Yuan Instead of US Dollars," Quartz, March 17, 2022, <https://qz.com/2143450/saudi-arabia-wants-to-sell-its-oil-in-yuan-not-dollars/>.



With abrupt shifts in global geopolitics and strategic realignments, Saudi Arabia has diversified its approach to include all the major stakeholders in its foreign policy-fold. Unlike Sino-Saudi natural alignment, the recent increase in engagement between Riyadh and Moscow is more consequential. The tectonic shift in American foreign and security policy towards Saudi Arabia has compelled Riyadh to explore other options and increase its ambit of interaction. Saudi Arabia's vision is not only to look for temporary convergences but to build long-term strategic partnerships. The current trajectory of Russia-Saudi relations complements the MBS's strategy of mitigating the risks posed by Western allies, especially the US. Here, Moscow's repeated support to the Saudi administration bilaterally and on international forums is the result. President Putin has moved to exploit this, offering Saudi Arabia both diplomatic and political support, especially by hedging against the US on various fronts. While differences remain on ideological and regional struggles, both countries maintain a relationship of convenience that shows no sign of changing.

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Saudi Arabia's Ambitious Strategic Mechanism and the Presence of Russia and China in the Gulf

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Introduction

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the de facto leader of Saudi Arabia, who was appointed first in the line of succession to the throne after King Salman, is trying to move the country away from its traditional dependence on oil to become an industrial nation. MBS began to show off his status as a reformer by taking a hardline diplomatic stance over the country's neighbours. MBS, who is already in charge of defence and energy policy, holds the greatest power in Saudi Arabia. The transfer of the baton to the younger generation means breaking away from the traditional conservative and patriarchal image of the country, which involves a great social and cultural transformation. The centerpiece of MBS's domestic agenda is the Vision 2030 initiative, which seeks to transform the kingdom's economy by diversifying the government's sources of revenue and reducing long-standing oil export dependence through investment and private sector growth (Lee 2021). Authorities have reduced some consumers and industrial subsidies, and they have introduced and raised a value-added tax. Amid some domestic criticism, authorities also have offered some relief payments, salary increases, and tax exemptions.

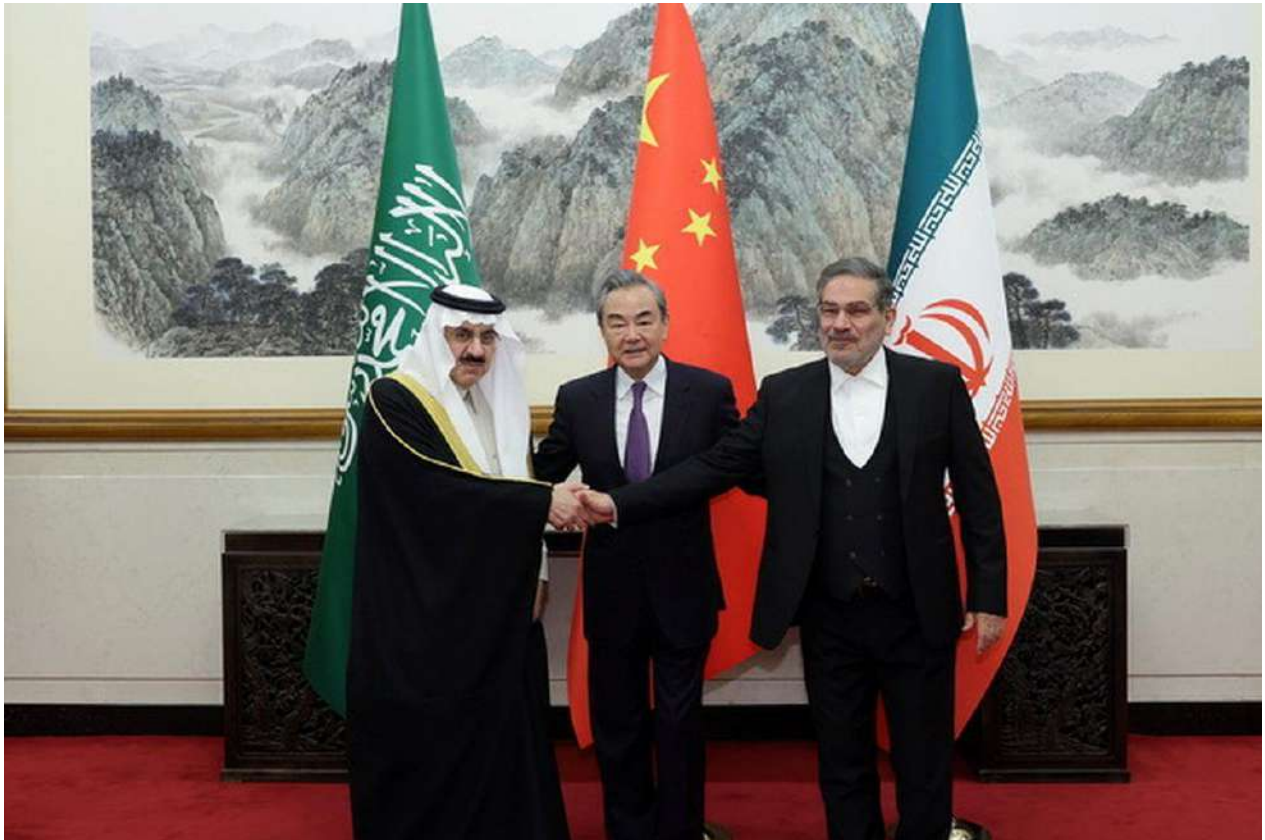


The 2019 Coronavirus pandemic slowed the kingdom's economy and reduced demand for Saudi oil exports during 2020, but Crown Prince MBS continued to implement reform plans, buoyed by economic recovery and higher oil revenues in 2021. Economic transformation has driven social change in the

kingdom since the early 20th century, and the Vision 2030 initiative is being accompanied by significant changes in the state's approach to some sensitive social matters. In line with the situation, the Crown Prince's foreign policy is changing Saudi Arabia's role in the region and in the world. From the beginning of Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen, it was Prince Mohammed's war (Kirkpatrick 2019). It is also known as the crown prince's decision to implement a tough policy of severing diplomatic ties with his brother Qatar. Looking at the background of this shift to a foreign policy that is completely different from the past, the Crown Prince MBS, who believes that Iran has been expanding its influence in the Middle East for the past 10 years, made a single concession with the will to occupy a dominant position in the region. It can be seen as a policy infused with a strong aggressive disposition. Crown Prince MBS is known to have a good reputation among young Saudis who believe that being at the center of Saudi Arabia's government is itself a sign of change. He is very popular with young Saudis, and it is universally evaluated that he is getting a golden opportunity to try to rebuild Saudi Arabia through the Vision 2030.

The kingdom of Saudi Arabia, ruled by the Al Saud family since its founding in 1932, wields considerable global influence through its administration of the birthplace of the Islamic faith and by virtue of holding the world's second most proven oil reserves. In exchange for protection, advice, technology, and armaments from the United States, the Saudi government has welcomed American investment in the kingdom and has served as a security and counterterrorism partner. Since 2015, Saudi leaders' domestic and foreign policy decisions have renewed calls from some U.S. leaders for a reassessment of long-standing bilateral ties. In particular, the Biden Administration has stated that it seeks to recalibrate the U.S.-Saudi partnership while maintaining U.S. support for the Kingdom's security. The United States has maintained honeymoon relations with Saudi Arabia during the previous Donald Trump administration, supporting Saudi Arabia in the Saudi-Qatar conflict and withdrawing from the Iran nuclear deal in 2015. After the 2018 murder of Saudi royal family-critical journalist Jamal Khashoggi by a Saudi agent, the US released an unclassified intelligence report blaming Prince Mohammed for the murder case. After this murder, the relationship was dented in 2019 when the Trump administration failed to respond when Iran attacked Saudi oil facilities with drones and missiles. Relations between the two countries worsened as President Joe Biden, who had criticized the Crown Prince for the murder of Khashoggi during the last presidential election, took office. Saudi Arabia is particularly dissatisfied with the US' restrictions on military aid, including arms sales, after it turned critical of its involvement in Yemen's civil war. On the other hand, relations between Saudi Arabia and China are getting closer and closer. China is the world's largest oil importer and Saudi Arabia's largest trading partner. China also has close ties with Saudi Arabia's regional rival, Iran, which could help Saudi Arabia build ties with Iran. Crown Prince MBS

visited Beijing in 2019 and held talks with President Xi, making efforts to maintain friendly relations between the two countries.



Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022, marking a major escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian War, which began in 2014 following the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity (Deane and Blake 2022.). As Western sanctions on Russia over its war in Ukraine have roiled global energy markets, Saudi Arabia has continued to decline requests from U.S. President Joe Biden’s administration that it increase oil production. Although the kingdom’s refusal to mitigate the pain of skyrocketing fuel prices clearly startled many American observers, inspiring a raft of commentary asking whether the 77-year U.S.-Saudi alliance was still worth maintaining, it should not have come as a surprise (Farouk and Leber 2022). While its relationship with the US has been on the rocks, Saudi Arabia has sought to strengthen its partnership by finding other strategic partners. For instance, Saudi Arabia has been reluctant to pump more oil for the US and it has been considering making a deal with China, which is Saudi Arabia's biggest oil customer. It buys about a quarter of the Kingdom's oil and it pays for it in dollars. In fact, since Saudi Arabia struck a deal with the US in 1974, the Kingdom has required all of its oil customers to use US dollars. In 2022, some Journals reported that Saudi leaders were considering changing that If Saudi

Arabia accepts oil payments in Chinese Yuan, it wouldn't just be a blow to the US. It would also deepen the Saudi relationship with China, and that relationship has already been growing stronger.⁴³ As such, Saudi Arabia appears to be sympathizing with the gradual expansion of Chinese influence in the Gulf through a friendly approach with China. In addition, in 2021, at the International Military Technology Forum (Army-2021), Saudi Deputy Defence Minister Khalid bin Salman and Russia's Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Fomin signed an agreement for the development of security cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Russia (Dudley 2021). In the background, Saudi Arabia feels threatened by Iranian involvement in Yemen, Syria and Iraq. In addition, the rapid collapse of the Afghan government has caused the Saudis and other Gulf states to question the reliability of American security guarantees (Rundell and Gfoeller, 2022). In fact, there are concerns about Saudi Arabia being used in Moscow and Beijing. However, Saudi Arabia, increasingly unsure of the United States, takes up the position to side with Russia and China in the next Cold War as he moves closer to Russia and China in economic and security sectors.



⁴³ Wall Street Journal (Podcasts). As Saudi Arabia Cools on the U.S., It Warms to China. March 17, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/podcasts/the-journal/as-saudi-arabia-cools-on-the-us-it-warms-to-china/46e7073c-88b3-4708-8440-e4f72c8>

This chapter first proceeds with an overall overview of the geopolitical situation surrounding Saudi Arabia and the expansion of influence of China and Russia under this political environment in the Gulf, including the Saudi's 2030 vision and diplomatic strategies, which are the means of the Saudi Prince MBS's ambitions. Next, I fresh out the diplomatic connection with China and Russia amid the changes in Saudi Arabia. Following that, the analysis of the strengthening of cooperation with China and Russia in terms of economy and security is provided to illustrate how this relates to the realization of Prince Mohammed's ambitions. Finally, the exploration of this paper ends with the overview of the projections of China and Russia's power and some implications of China and Russia's presence in the Gulf.

MBS's Ambitions: 2030 Vision and Foreign Strategy

Few people outside Saudi Arabia had heard of Crown Prince MBS before his father became king in 2015. But now, the 35-year-old prince Salman is considered the de facto ruler of the world's leading oil exporter. He has won plaudits from Western leaders for some of the reforms he has overseen in the conservative Gulf Kingdom. However, he has also been heavily criticised for pursuing a war in neighboring Yemen that has caused a humanitarian catastrophe; starting a diplomatic dispute with Qatar that has divided the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC); and cracking down on dissenting voices. In January 2015, King

Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz died and Salman acceded to the throne, appointing his son as Minister of Defence. One of his first acts in the post was to launch a military campaign in Yemen in March 2015 along with other Arab states. They intervened after the Houthi rebel movement, which they saw as an Iranian proxy, seized control of the capital Sanaa and forced President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi to flee abroad. Crown Prince MBS power increased with his appointment in April 2015 as deputy crown prince, second deputy prime minister and president of the Council of Economic and Development Affairs. Saudi's Crown Prince has begun to reveal his ambitions to the outside world by announcing his vision for Saudi Arabia's future. It is a blueprint to express Saudi Arabia's long-term goals and expectations and to achieve its own ambitious goals by reflecting Saudi Arabia's strengths and capabilities. He emphasized that all success stories begin with vision, and successful vision is based on strong pillars.⁴⁴

Saudi Arabia, which has the strength of a hub connecting the Arab-Islamic heartland, an investment powerhouse, and the three continents, has announced Vision 2030. Announcing the Vision 2030 blueprint, the prince Salman expressed strong confidence that the kingdom can take the lead in the world thanks to its geographical, cultural, social, demographic and economic advantages while having abundant resources. To build a progressive future for the country, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's has developed a

⁴⁴ Crown Prince Message, the vision 2030 website, <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/v2030/leadership-message/>

vision based on three pillars⁴⁵ that highlight its unique competitive advantages. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia regional status and stature enables it to take a leading role as the “heart” of Arab and Islamic nations, the Kingdom will use its investment power to create a more diverse and sustainable economy. The Kingdom will use its strategic location to connect the three continents of Africa, Asia and Europe together (Al-Mansour 2019). Crown Prince MBS wants to carry out in-depth reforms in many ways. However, the promise of resolving extremism does not necessarily mean Saudi Arabia's post Wahhabism⁴⁶. This is because the clergy have always adapted well to the reform attempts of previous kings. MBS is sworn in as Crown Prince, marking a new chapter in Saudi Arabia's history. What this implies is that Crown Prince MBS, who became new ruler of Riyadh in June 2017, has set his ambitious with actions and declarations that shake the world. He is revealing his ambitions by starting by realigning Saudi Arabia's domestic and foreign strategies to monopolize power. This ambition will be realized through close control in politics, economy, and diplomacy, but above all, in order for Crown Prince MBS to realize his dream of absolutism, it is necessary to seek changes in his diplomatic strategies in line with the international environment.



⁴⁵ Saudi's vision is based on the following three pillars: a vital society, a thriving economy, and an ambitious nation. These pillars are integrated to achieve the objectives of the Kingdom.

⁴⁶ A Sunni revivalist and fundamentalist movement associated with the Hanbali reformist doctrines of the 18th-century Arabian Islamic scholar, theologian, preacher, and activist Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (Bokhari, Kamran; Senzai, Farid, eds. (2013). "Conditionalist Islamists: The Case of the Salafis". Political Islam in the Age of Democratization. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hit by a fall in the price of oil since 2014, the Saudi kingdom has embarked on an ambitious plan of economic, political and social reforms gathered in a single program: "Vision 2030". The Saudis are thus preparing to experience a real revolution that, if successful, will put the country in the spotlight. With planned investments of \$500 billion (€425 billion), NEOM⁴⁷ is expected to make Saudi Arabia a "hub" both geographically and culturally. A diversity that proves that Saudi Arabia is in full economic and social transformation. In a sense, the Vision 2030 aims to free the kingdom from its dependence on oil, but also to reduce unemployment, increase the participation of women in the workforce, stimulate economic contributions from the private sector and develop cultural and entertainment activities in the country. The financing of this ambitious program is based on the sale of 5% of Saudi Aramco, the largest oil company in the world, whose total price is estimated at \$ 2,000 billion, more than the Italian GDP in 2016 (\$ 1,850 billion) and almost as much as the French GDP in the same year (\$ 2,465 billion). However,

Saudi's Vision 2030 is not simply a response to a depressed economy. This is a profound change in the Saudi economic model, hitherto dominated by the public sector and the subsidy system. Foreign investment is expected to increase gradually to 5.7% of GDP from 3.8%. The Vision 2030 also wants to restore competitiveness to the energy sector by developing renewables and the mining sector. Natural gas production is expected to double and help increase exports of non-oil products, whose share of GDP is expected to rise from 16% to 50%. Moreover, when it comes to civil liberties, the crown prince's plans are no less ambitious. Crown Prince MBS has promised a "moderate" state breaking with religious ultra-conservatism (Daigneault 2017). In the process of implementing Vision 2030 like this, looking at diplomatic relations with China and Russia in terms of diplomatic strategy, first, Greater Saudi energy exports to China have underwritten deepening Sino-Saudi economic and diplomatic ties, leading to new cooperation initiatives. Crown Prince MBS also maintains substantive dialogue with Russia, including coordination on oil policy and dialogue on Syria and other regional issues. The new multipolar reality, characterized by the expanded influence of China and Russia in the region, has pushed Saudi Arabia toward a position of strategic neutrality. China's role as the region's number-one trading partner and Russia's participation in the OPEC+ oil consortium are shaping to a significant degree for their responses to major regional and global developments (Gerald 2022). In some ways, Saudi Arabia's foreign strategy

⁴⁷ Neom is the name of a future planned city to be built in the Tabuk Province of northwestern Saudi Arabia. It is planned to incorporate smart city technologies and to function as a tourist destination (Who is Nadhmi al-Nasri, the new CEO of Saudi Arabia's NEOM?, alarabiya.net).

is also motivated by the fulfilment of Vision 2030, which is a mega comprehensive endeavour to transform the Saudi state and society. These domestic and foreign strategies are eventually understood as the process of realizing the global ambitions of prince Salman. In the following, the process will be examined in detail.

China and Russia in Saudi Arabia's Metamorphosis

The oil-rich Gulf region is in the throes of some major geostrategic power shifts, unseen since the Iranian revolution of 1978/79 that resulted in the transformation of Iran from a pro-Western monarchy to an Islamic republic, with an anti-American posture. The old correlation of forces that featured in the region for most of the Cold War period and its aftermath is in the process of potentially profound metamorphosis. As the US predominance has declined in the Middle East, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have competitively stepped up to fill the gap. Whilst claiming the leadership of the sectarian minority Shia and majority Sunni Islam respectively, the two have sought to widen their foreign policy options and strategic alliances vis-à-vis one another.



However, not only Israel, which remains opposed to the ending of Western sanctions against Iran, but also Saudi Arabia and some of its partners in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have had reservations about the mending of Iran and US relations. They perceive an Iranian threat in sectarian and geostrategic terms, and remain skeptical that Tehran's nuclear program is for peaceful purposes only. In addition to building

up its military prowess, it has tightened its support for conservative forces in the Arab world against any form of secular or religious challenge. Beyond this, it has launched a major diplomatic offensive to strengthen its relations with countries like China, which it once shunned as a 'Godless' communist regime, and to deepen its military ties with Sunni-dominated Pakistan. A deepening of Saudi-Pakistani ties could cause more tension between Iran and Pakistan and complicate their relations. It could also provide more incentive for Iran to improve relations with the US - a development that could dismay Saudi Arabia and possibly Pakistan. All of this, along with the ongoing proxy conflicts between Iran and Saudi Arabia in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, has set the scene for a regional strategic reconfiguration. What the ultimate outcome will be cannot easily be predicted in a traditionally unpredictable region (Saikal 2020).

The kingdom of Saudi Arabia for a long time has been regarded for two things: oil and Islam. The rich oil resources play a significant role in the kingdom's economy that puts the country's future on a prosperous path. At the same time, the official Islam of Saudi Arabia is Wahhabism, the ultra-conservative and intolerant interpretation that is woven into the kingdom's history. The man behind such phenomenal transformation is prince Salman. Following the year 2012, Crown Prince MBS became the head of the Crown Prince Court (CPC) and was later given the charge of the Defence Ministry. He is widely known for his liberal policies that presented a country's positive image on national and international platforms. His policies are more of an amalgam nature. For example, the Crown Prince's ideology is seen as nationalist and populist, with a conservative approach towards national politics and economic and social issues being dealt with more liberally. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is coming with some unexpected changes that were inconceivable just a few years ago. In a recent giant rave party, held in the desert of Riyadh with the blessings of the Kingdom's authorities, artists from all over the world performed at the four-day music festival. What such large events are held is that Crown Prince MBS aims to bring foreign investment and backs the kingdom's tourism and entertainment sectors, which appears to be in stiff competition with Saudi Arabia's permissive neighbors. On the other hand. Since Crown Prince MBS has been in power, there is the proclivity of Saudi Arabia to become more welcoming to the modern interpretation of Islam and leave behind the harsh expounding of Wahhabism (Kahn 2022).

The strategic and geo-economic significance of the kingdom originates from its location and possession of huge oil resources. It borders the world's two immensely significant strategic sea trade routes—the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea, boasts of being the world's largest oil exporter, and is home to Islam's two holiest sites—Mecca and Medina. Although not a militarily significant power, the kingdom's vast oil wealth has gradually and greatly elevated its status as an influential global economic and financial power.

Currently, it is the world's seventeenth largest economy (\$1.774 trillion, 2017 estimate based on purchasing power parity, or PPP) and a member of the elite G20 club of world economic powers. Notwithstanding the economic good fortune, the Saudis have traditionally depended on the United States, especially after World War II, for security guarantees and pursued a foreign policy of restraint guided by preferences for soft power tools like mediation in regional conflicts, financial aid and investments, and diplomatic influence. The kingdom has justified this proactive foreign policy approach as a necessary response to force Shia powerhouse Iran to scale back its presence in Arab countries and to keep Iranian power under check. Lately, the kingdom is pursuing policies to court Israel to jointly square off with their common enemy Iran and weaken pro-Iran Lebanese militia group Hezbollah's military capabilities (Nuruzzaman.2021).

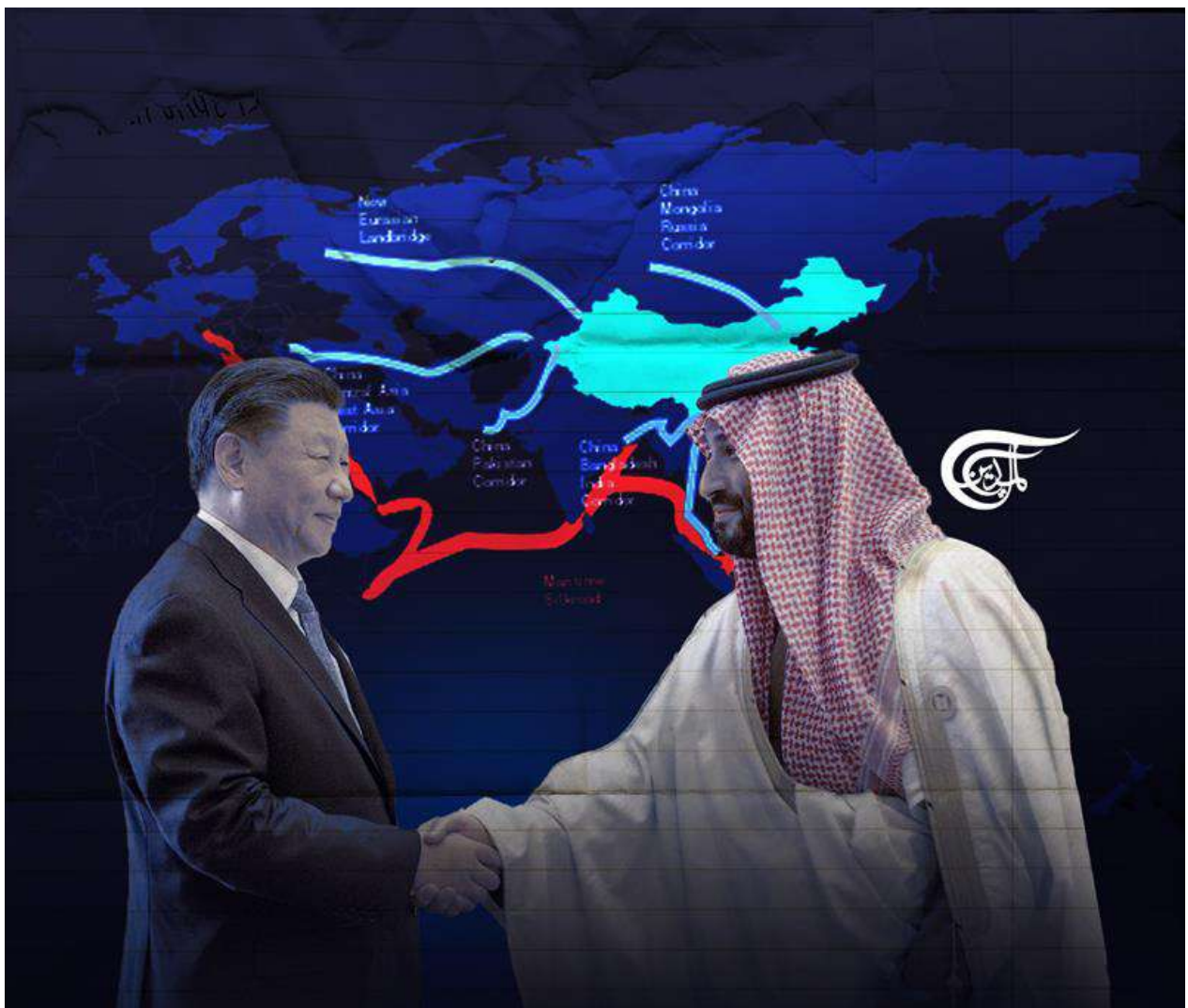
Saudi Arabia's Strategic Maneuvering with China

China and Saudi Arabia are close and strategic allies, with the relationship getting significantly warmer between the two (Gao 2017). In a 2015 public opinion poll, 61.3% of Saudi Arabians expressed a favorable view of China, with 34.2% being very favorable, while only 28.5% were unfavorable. China and Saudi Arabia have been increasing cooperation in the energy and financial sectors, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)⁴⁸, and has signed numerous deals across several areas. Crown Prince MBS also hinted that China could boost its diplomatic footprint in the Middle East, while stating that "Saudi Arabia is willing to work hard with China to promote global and regional peace, security and prosperity" (Gramer 2017).

Gulf countries' strategic calculations in building relations with China show that Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have long relied on offshore partners to help secure difficult regional security. They became accustomed to the idea that the United States would continue to play this role indefinitely, even after the end of the Cold War. However, American interests in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have been transitioning and there's a strong sense in the Gulf – despite continued U.S. military preponderance – that they need to make provisions for a post-American future, or at least one in which the U.S. role isn't quite so central. As a result, this situation could serve as an opportunity for the GCC to develop stronger ties with many other countries. It is not just a matter of choosing between the U.S. or China. The European Union, the UK, India, Korea, Japan, and many more are all playing larger roles.

⁴⁸ A global infrastructure development strategy adopted by the Chinese government in 2013 to invest in nearly 70 countries and international organizations ("Belt and Road Initiative". World Bank. Archived from the original on 19 February 2019). BRI is now under way and financing not only comes from major Chinese-sponsored sources, such as the Silk Road Fund, AIIB, New Development Bank, but also from official and multilateral sources, such as the China Development Bank and the China Export-Import (Pakravan 2019).

China gets more attention because most countries actively engaging in the region are U.S. allies or partners, so the expectation is that they won't challenge the status quo in any fundamental way, while China is America's main strategic competitor and is less likely to bandwagon or accept U.S. leadership. When Gulf countries consider China, they could see a deeply engaged long-term economic partner with a growing importance across Eurasia and the Indian Ocean region. It makes sense to cultivate the relationship with China. For most of this century, it was possible for Gulf countries to think of China as an economic partner and the U.S. as a political and security partner, and pursuing deeper commercial ties with China was a diplomatically and strategically necessary measure.



Deepening Economic Relations

As with most issues concerning the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Riyadh's relations with China are all about oil. China is Saudi Arabia's top economic trading partner because China is the biggest importer of Saudi oil (Riedel 2020). China's recent ardent embrace of Crown Prince MBS, which has been controversial because of the 2018 murder of the Washington post journalist Jamal Khashoggi, is taking shape in various cooperation processes. Ties between Saudi Arabia and China have been deepening for several years already. In 2020, Saudi Arabia was China's largest trading partner in the region, with imports and exports worth over \$67 billion (€60.6 billion) (Welle 2022.). Mostly, these ties have been based on a mutually beneficial economic relationship, one that highlights synergies between China's trillion-dollar, trade-boosting Belt and Road Initiative and Saudi Arabia's own modernization project, Vision 2030. There are obvious advantages to dealing with a country that will be a long-term buyer of gas and oil, while European customers are increasingly looking into solar and wind power. Part of Vision 2030 is about preparing Saudi Arabia for a future when oil is less important, and one aspect is to boost Saudi Arabia's potential as a logistics hub in the Middle East. In 2020, Saudi Arabia exported \$33.4B to China. The main products that Saudi Arabia exported to China were Crude Petroleum (\$24.7B), Ethylene Polymers (\$2.17B), and Acyclic Alcohols (\$1.32B). In 2020, China ranked 28 in the Economic Complexity Index (ECI 0.96), and 1 in total exports (\$2.65T). That same year, Saudi Arabia ranked 32 in the Economic Complexity Index (ECI 0.86), and 30 in total exports (\$167B).⁴⁹

For China, Saudi Arabia occupies an important geostrategic location, has prominence in global Islam, and is an energy superpower, which together make relations with the kingdom a central pillar of Beijing's Middle East policy. For Saudi Arabia, China is its largest economic partner, both in terms of energy trade and as a source of investment in Saudi Vision 2030 projects (DW 2021).

In 2018, Chinese President Xi Jinping made the first visit by a Chinese leader to the Gulf region at a crucial time. In January of that year, tensions rose between Saudi Arabia and Iran, leading to strained diplomatic ties between the region's heavyweights, and sanctions on Iran were lifted some days earlier. In his Middle East tour, President Xi Jinping visited Egypt, Saudi Arabia. A central element of the five-day visit was to gather support for China's Belt and Road plan, an initiative that intends to increase the integration between Asia, the Middle East, Europe and Africa through extensive infrastructure building,

⁴⁹ The economic complexity index (ECI) is a holistic measure of the production characteristics of large economic systems, usually whole countries (Cetinkaya 2017) and a powerful dimensionality reduction technique used to predict and explain future economic growth, income inequality, and greenhouse gas emissions / Refer to the trade data presented above. OEC(The Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), Datawheel, <https://oec.world/en/>

free trade and cultural exchange. All three countries, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iran agreed to collaborate in the Chinese initiative, and all three signed different forms of agreements and announced Chinese investments. China also upgraded relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran to “comprehensive strategic partnership”, a title granted by Chinese diplomacy to signal the intention to strengthen economic and diplomatic ties. According to the Chinese Embassy in Riyadh, President Xi Jinping signed 14 agreements in Saudi Arabia in energy, communications, environment, culture, aerospace, science and technology. A key deal was the \$2.43 billion investment in the building of a nuclear power plant scheduled for completion in 2022, and an additional 15 plants by 2032. Saudi Aramco and China’s Sinopec also agreed to undergo a \$1-1.5 billion expansion in their joint venture Yasref oil refinery, China’s largest project in the region. Like in the case of Saudi Arabia, the details of the deals were not made public, with the exception of a plan to boost trade to \$600 billion over the next 10 years, a tenfold increase from 2015 levels. But all in all, China announced initiatives amounting to \$35 billion in the Middle East, mostly in industrial and energy projects. With half of China’s crude imports coming from the Gulf, turmoil in the region has greater implications on China today. After Crown Prince MBS became the de facto ruler, Total bilateral trade between Saudi Arabia and China grew from around \$42.4 billion in 2010 to \$76 billion in 2019, quickly making China the top trading partner for Saudi Arabia (Mogielnicki 2022). China remained Saudi Arabia’s top import and export partner as of the third quarter of 2021. These recent changes in crude oil trade patterns are partially a result of long-term structural trends within China and the United States and partially a result of recent oil market dynamics. From 2010 through 2018, Energy Information Administration (EIA) estimates that total Chinese petroleum consumption increased from 9.3 million b/d to 13.9 million b/d and that Chinese domestic production increased from 4.6 million b/d to 4.8 million b/d.

As a result, China’s need to meet incremental oil consumption has been met primarily by imports. China’s crude oil imports from Saudi Arabia have gradually increased in recent years, and in March 2019, reached 1.7 million b/d, the highest level for any month since at least 2004. Saudi Arabian crude oil exports to China increased recently, in part, because of the start-up of a new 0.4 million b/d refinery in Dalian, Liaoning Province, which has a supply agreement with Saudi Aramco, Saudi Arabia’s national oil company. Saudi Aramco also has a supply agreement with a 0.4 million b/d refining and petrochemical complex in Zhejiang Province, which started trial operations this year (Barron 2019).

The Security Angle

In 2021, US intelligence showed that Saudi Arabia, a strategic ally of the US in the Middle East, was actively manufacturing its own ballistic missiles with the help of China. Saudi Arabia is known to have purchased ballistic missiles from China in the past but has never been able to build its own. The Biden administration is now confronted with increasingly urgent questions as to whether the kingdom's ballistic missile advancements could dramatically change regional power dynamics and complicate efforts to expand the terms of a renewed nuclear deal with Iran to include restraints on its missile technology - a goal shared by the US, Europe, Israel and Gulf countries. The expansion of the Sino-Saudi bilateral relationship has been a result of mutual interests, an evolving strategic landscape, and the complementary nature of policy initiatives, namely China's Belt and Road Initiative and Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 (Fulton 2020, p.17).



Political and security ties between Saudi Arabia and China have developed far more slowly than their economic relations (Kéchichian 2016). With regard to the security dimension of the relationship, during MBS's 2016 visit to China, he met with Chinese Defence Minister Chang Wanquan. At that time, MBS stated that China was willing to push military relations with Saudi Arabia to a new level. However, the only weapons systems Saudi Arabia has bought from China in recent years have been unmanned aerial

vehicles (UAVs). Not having signed the Missile Technology Control Regime or the Wassenaar Arrangement on Export Controls for Conventional Arms and Dual-Use Goods and Technologies, Beijing does not face the same kind of restrictions in UAV sales that signatory states do. The United States, with tight export restrictions on UAVs, has not supplied its Middle East partners with armed drones. In its place, China has become a major exporting of drones to the Gulf. During a 2017 state visit by King Salman, King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology (KACST) signed an MOU with China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation to build a factory in the kingdom to assemble and service Chinese Ch-4 drones for sale to Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Iraq. Saudi Arabia has purchased five Ch-4, fifteen Wing-Loong 1, and fifty Wing-Loong 2 UAVs since 2014 (Fulton 2020, p.16). Saudi Arabia and China have pledged to expand their cooperation in the field of defence and bilateral military relations, further strengthening ties between the two countries. In 2020, China's Minister of National Defence, Wei Fenghe, and Saudi Arabia's Deputy Defence Minister, Khalid bin Salman, agreed on greater coordination and cooperation in opposition to hegemonic and bullying tactics in the region, while advocating for protecting the interests of developing nations. Wei stated that the Chinese military is willing to maintain strategic communications with the Saudi armed forces in line with the cooperation mechanism planned between them. MBS praised the strategic partnership and progress in military relations between Riyadh and Beijing, stating that it has been steadily developing and reiterated the need for more security cooperation. Saudi Arabia is among the list of Muslim-majority countries which have refused to condemn or investigate the persecution of the Uyghurs, and have agreed to collaborate with Beijing in deporting Uyghurs back to China. (Middle East Monitor 2022). China, as a strategic partner of Saudi Arabia, is deepening political mutual trust and expanding practical cooperation in various fields including the security sector. In the process of strengthening cooperation, the Chinese government has expressed its intention to maintain strategic communication with Saudi forces, make good use of cooperation mechanisms and promote practical cooperation to ensure the continued development of bilateral security cooperation. The comprehensive strategic partnership between Saudi Arabia and China has been developing steadily, as has security cooperation. (Ministry of National Defence 2022). Beijing also sent a secret team to Riyadh to meet with Prince Khalid to engage military-to-military. At that time, Khalid made four trips to China to finalize the details and oversee the transfer (Riedel 2020). In Khalid's book, he states: "In brief, our aim was to give us the capability to counterattack in the event of an attack on us by either Israel or Iran, both in their different ways hostile at that time" (Sultan and Seals 1995, p.142). The missile deal led to the opening of Saudi diplomatic relations with China in July 1990. But it did not lead to additional large sales of military equipment. Reports of an additional sale of more

sophisticated missiles, CSS-5s, have never been confirmed. The Saudis have purchased drones from China, which they use in Yemen (Riedel 2020). Closer military ties with Saudi Arabia are on the cards for China, which is expanding its presence in the Middle East as US influence wanes. Chinese Defence Minister General Wei Fenghe, meeting the Saudi deputy defence chief via video link, pledged to push forward “practical cooperation and strengthening solidarity” between the two armies. General Wei also mentioned that China and Saudi Arabia should “strengthen coordination and jointly oppose hegemonic and bullying practices, to safeguard ... the interests of developing countries together”, in an apparent reference to the United States (Zhou. 2022). Like this, the Chinese government's links to Saudi Arabia have implications for China's expansion of its influence in the Gulf region.



Saudi Arabia’s Strategic Maneuvering with Russia

A return to the wake of US Middle East policy does not prevent Saudi Arabia from making efforts to strengthen its position as a regional leader. In this regard, the recent truce with Qatar is of particular importance. Thus, it was possible to avoid a split within the ‘integration group’ of the Gulf caused by the failure of the Saudi initiative to create a military alliance. alongside the divergence of members of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf in relation to Iran. Participation in the settlement of the problem of Palestinian unity remains an important basis for Saudi regional leadership. Saudi Arabia has also traditionally positioned itself as the main counterweight to Iran in the Sunni-Shiite confrontation

in the region. From this point of view, the Syrian conflict is of fundamental importance for Saudi Arabia, as well as the confrontation in Iraq and Yemen, where Iranian influence is especially noticeable. Significant for the kingdom is the victory in the Egyptian direction. In many ways, Cairo's military cooperation with Saudi Arabia in the fight against a common enemy in the face of the Muslim Brotherhood strengthens the Kingdom's position in the country for the Arab region.



In this political environment in the Middle East, Russia's position on the new Egyptian authorities is similar to that of Saudi Arabia, but it is hardly possible to talk about cooperation between Moscow and Riyadh even in this direction. Apart from the Kremlin's fateful slowness in understanding the full scale of the pandemic's impact on the global economy, President Vladimir Putin may have misread the Saudi leader. Putin's famous high-five greeting with Prince Salman during the 2018 G20 summit in Argentina—at a time when MBS was under attack internationally following the murder of Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul—created the impression of a rapport between the Russian president and the Saudi crown prince. Moscow did not use the journalist's murder to try to ostracize MBS, and Putin's gesture was aimed at creating a lasting relationship. Putin, who has gained much experience managing the region's strongmen, from Syria's Bashar al-Assad to Turkey's Recep Erdogan to the Iranian leaders, is probably unperturbed:

Saudi Arabia remains a key player in the region where Moscow has returned after a quarter-century absence. While the Russian and Saudi leaders looked unable to resolve their dispute, former US President Donald Trump intervened personally to help them reach a deal. While Trump's intervention may have irritated Putin, the trilateral accord placed Russia alongside Saudi Arabia and the United States as a member of the world's Oil Big Three. Even though Trump did not assume any formal commitments, he made the United States a party to a global oil compact. In principle, this newly formed triangle could be an asset for Moscow's foreign policy in the future.

Russia will not necessarily align with the Saudis against the United States: it appreciates the strength of the Saudi-US connection and should be wary of Riyadh playing Moscow off Washington. In the kaleidoscope of Middle Eastern geopolitics, Saudi Arabia foots Egypt's bill for Russian military hardware and neighbouring Libya, Riyadh and Moscow are on the same side backing the army of General Khalifa Haftar and the eastern Libyan authority in Tobruk. On other regional issues, however, Russia and Saudi Arabia have serious differences. Saudi Arabia is fully focused on its regional rival, Iran. The Russo-Iranian relationship is outwardly friendly, but competitive, squarely based on interests rather than trust. The Saudis have been recently trying to wean Moscow off Tehran. In 2019, they unveiled a security concept for the region and actively sought to promote it. On another regional issue, the war in Yemen by facilitating the Southern Transitional Council's (STC) entry into UN-brokered peace negotiations. However, these efforts have slackened in the past two years. Thus, amid the pandemic, Russia-Saudi ties have faced a serious test, and have largely survived. Typically, for Moscow's current relations with the countries in the Middle East, a few shared interests with its partner are flanked and occasionally overshadowed by serious divergencies. This produces an inherently unstable mix and calls for a highly pragmatic approach. For Russia to succeed in pursuing its regional interests—upgrading its geopolitical standing, securing strategic outposts, promoting arms sales, co-setting oil prices, luring investment to Russia, and so on—it needs to have active relations with the key Middle East powers, including Saudi Arabia. Given the nature of the political regimes in both countries, much will depend on the personal relationship between the two leaders (Belenkaya 2020).

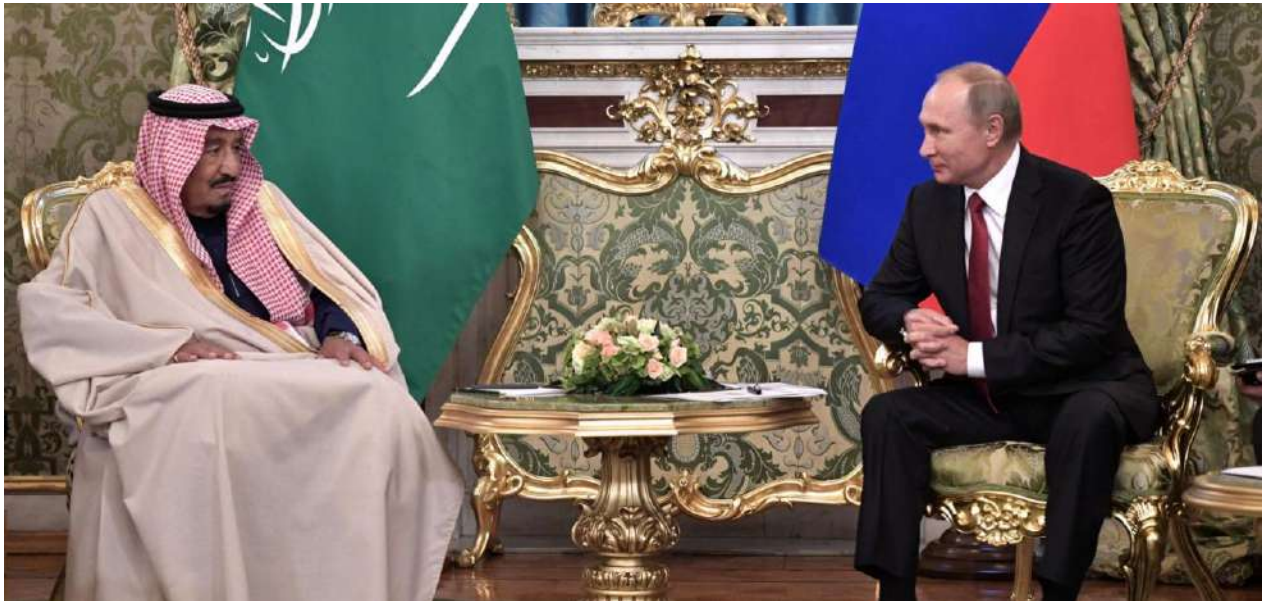
In 2021, Several Western and Arab media sources reported that the Saudi Deputy Defence Minister Prince Khalid bin Salman had signed a “military cooperation agreement” with one of his Russian counterparts at the seventh annual International Military-Technical Forum. Prince Khalid made the announcement in a tweet on August 2021 stating that the agreement was “aimed at developing joint military cooperation between the two countries”. In another tweet, the Saudi deputy defence minister said

that he met with Russian Defence Minister Sergey Shoygu “to explore ways to strengthen the military and defence cooperation” between the two countries and discussed a “common endeavour to preserve stability and security in the region” and “shared challenges”. The Russian Defence Ministry website noted the meeting between Prince Khalid and Shoygu but only cited what the prince said about it: According to the military leader, “the cooperation that exists between his country and Russia will contribute to a common response to all modern challenges, which we will carry out together.” He added that “the challenges that exist will require even greater cooperation and efforts from us.” Defence Minister Shoygu made the statement that the meeting aims for progressive development of cooperation in military and military-technical fields on the entire spectrum of issues that pose mutual interest (Katz 2021). When looking at the factors that bring about strategic change, the relationship between Russia and Saudi Arabia has traditionally been placed within broader regional geopolitics since the Cold War period. The unfriendly relationship was caused by differences in ideologies and regional struggles for interest and threat perceptions from both sides (Mikail, et al 2016, pp. 497-495).



Economic Relations on a Roller Coaster

In 2019, a significant impetus to the development of cooperation between Russia and Saudi Arabia was given by Russian President Vladimir Putin during his visit to the Middle East. The two countries agreed to promote peaceful interaction in the economic, political and cultural spheres, of course, in the interests of both parties. In light of the dramatically changing situation both in the Middle East and in the world as a whole, Saudi-Russian cooperation may receive new impetus. The two countries are pursuing a remarkable cooperative relationship in the economic sphere such as projects on hydrocarbon raw materials, innovative areas and the development of the latest technologies. In spite of this situation, the Saudi business elite and military elite are closely connected with the United States, which largely ensures that the current ruling Saudi dynasty is in power. This factor plays an important role in the conduct of Saudi foreign policy and may hinder the development of Russia-Saudi cooperation (Dolgov 2019).



Russia's relationship with Saudi Arabia, in general, is said to be based on two pillars: economic interests, and security concerns. Among these two fields, a greater relationship between the two countries can be found in the economic field. While these two countries are major oil producers, energy is an essential driver in discussing bilateral relations, but trade and investment relations also play an important role. While the trade volume between the two countries was as low as \$57 million in 2000, the volume increased after 2010. In this context, the trade volume in 2012 approached \$1.4 billion. Between 2012 and 2015, the volume remained above \$1 billion. However, it experienced a sharp decline in 2016, before

recovering in 2017, and reaching a level of nearly \$1.7 billion in 2019 (Aslan 2021, p. 52). Russia has always maintained its position as a country that enjoys a trade surplus with Saudi Arabia since both countries are rich in fossil energy and the substantial percentage of foreign currency earnings of both countries are heavily dependent on fossil energy exports. These factors have played a significant role in preventing a deepening of commercial activities between the countries.

According to the Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies (IFS), the Russian power system is based on three different power elites, popularly called ‘clans’.” These three clans decide what happens with the country's money and other resources. Putin must constantly ensure that the balance between them is maintained. This is where researchers believe that Russia's major economic problem lies (Amundsen, 2021). Russia’s poor economic performance has also pushed it to attract funds from Gulf countries. Russia has made an aggressive effort to attract investments from the region and create co-investment funds (Robison et al 2021). There are two wealth funds in collaboration: Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), a Russian sovereign wealth fund, and Public Investment Fund (PIF), a Saudi Arabian sovereign wealth fund.



The RDIF was established in 2011 with an initial capital of \$10 billion. As of mid 2020, the RDIF had struck co-investment deals with sovereign wealth funds and investors in Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the UAE. Although a variety of deals and funds have been announced, it is not clear exactly how much investment has been realized (Kaye et al. 2021). The positive momentum in global economic growth prompted a further surge in global energy demand, which ended up pushing oil prices up in the early 2000s. Although there have been some ups and downs, the average global oil prices were relatively high until 2014, and the oil-exporting countries made huge profits during this “glorious period”. Even though there was some slowdown during the 2008 global financial crisis, the oil market recovered relatively quickly. Saudi Arabia’s economy is much more dependent on oil revenues than Russia. The share of fossil energy revenues in the country’s total revenues, in terms of exports, GDP, and budget, is extremely high. Despite this dependence, a serious financial or economic crisis did not occur in Saudi Arabia after the collapse of global oil prices in 2014. The negotiations between Saudi Arabia and Russia to stop the decrease in oil prices did not come to a reasonable conclusion. Afterwards, the two sides stated that they would increase their output in the following days, which caused global oil prices to plunge to historic lows. Another example is the competition between Saudi Arabia and Russia to make more sales to China and the EU. While in 2019, Russia was the top oil exporter to China, it lost the lead to Saudi Arabia in 2020. In July 2019, Saudi Arabia decided to sell oil to Europe at a discounted price. This pushed Moscow to leave the OPEC+ arrangement.

In relation to economic cooperation, Saudi Arabia and Russia have agreed on the second stage of the roadmap for the development of scientific, technical and economic cooperation. According to a report in the Saudi newspaper *Al Riyadh*, the adopted document includes more than 50 projects in 60 different areas of cooperation, which, thus, triples the number of available programs at the current stage of the implementation of the roadmap, which will last until 2023. On the adoption of these agreements, MBS expressed the opinion that the current level of partnership between Riyadh and Moscow is the strongest in the history of bilateral relations. During the meeting, the parties discussed the development of relations in 11 different areas, including healthcare, energy, space, industry and tourism. Both Russia and Saudi Arabia are aiming to increase trade turnover to \$5 billion by 2024 through the liberalization of mutual trade and preferences. In addition, during the meeting of the intergovernmental commission in 2021, Russia offered Saudi Arabia the possibility of cooperation in the field of nuclear energy in third countries, including in the design of nuclear power plants (NPPs) with low-power reactors (TASS 2021).

Since its establishment, Saudi Arabia has always been distant towards the Soviets and then Russia, including during the Cold War. Since the beginning of the 2000s, the decline of US hegemony and the establishment of new power balances have created a positive atmosphere in relations between the two countries. Since 2003, significant improvements have been observed in Russia and Saudi Arabia relations. However, periods of competition and convergence followed each other in Russia and Saudi Arabia relations due to their rivalry as energy producers. Russia's close ties with Iran are also an important factor limiting the deepening of Moscow-Riyadh relations. Nobody knows what the future will bring for Russia; however, it will likely remain as one of the great powers due to its nuclear power, geography and permanent membership of the UN Security Council. In addition, considering global and regional developments, it would be useful to make some general inferences about both Russia-Saudi relations and the future of the region. The most important parameter determining relations between Russia and Saudi Arabia will be the course of the power equations in the global system. However, in particular, an important factor determining the foreign policy approach in all oil-exporting countries, including Russia and Saudi Arabia, will be the transformations in energy markets and the ability of oil-exporting countries to adapt their economies to technological development in the new era and to diversify their economies accordingly

The Security Angle

Saudi Arabia and Russia recently announced a \$110 billion defence capabilities package. In 2021, the State Department made a determination approving the possible sale of 3,000 GBU-39 Small Diameter Bombs and related items. In contrast, Riyadh has collaborated with Moscow only sporadically in recent years, including a \$3 billion deal in 2017 that stalled and a yet-unimplemented agreement allowing Saudi Arabia to produce Kalashnikov rifles domestically. The Saudi's recent move to re-engage Moscow demonstrates that the market for security cooperation has become a strategic field in which the United States must compete against its major rivals (DW 2021). At the international military-technical forum 'Army-2021', Moscow and Riyadh signed a memorandum on military cooperation. US experts have warned the White House that Saudi Arabia has long been focused on Washington, but now the situation is changing dramatically, and these changes pose a huge danger to America. It is also important that the agreement between the Russians and the Saudis was signed during the American withdrawal from Afghanistan. At the same time, the Middle East is significantly reducing the number of deployed MIM-104 Patriot Air Defence systems and Theater High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) (Kandara 2021)

During the International Military-Technical Forum, Saudi Deputy Defence Minister Khalid bin Salman and his Russian counterpart, Colonel General Alexander Fomin, signed an agreement aimed at developing joint military cooperation between the two countries. Khalid bin Salman earlier held talks with Russian



Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu to explore ways to strengthen military and defence cooperation. The agreement is consistent with the Saudis' long-standing approach of seeking relative autonomy through building a number of sourcing arrangements with key international actors and accumulating diverse international partnerships rather than relying exclusively on the United States (Mason 2021). In this situation, US diplomacy with Iran and its response to the Arab uprisings have created particularly fertile ground for Saudi-US tensions to surface in recent years. Further, the Saudis were particularly dismayed over US inaction over Egypt when President Hosni Mubarak was ousted during the Arab Spring. In addition, former President Trump's repeated calls to withdraw US troops from Syria exacerbated the Saudis' sense of frustration. For these reasons, Saudi Arabia is forced to seek strategic changes, including

a strategy to strengthen security cooperation with Russia. The high level of militarization in Saudi Arabia is reflected in its high level of military expenditure. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) estimates that Saudi Arabia was the third largest military spender in the world in 2017 and by far the largest military spender in the Middle East. Looking at the decade 2008–17, its military spending increased by 74 per cent between 2008 and 2015 to \$90.3 billion, the highest level ever. Following the fall in oil prices—and thus in government revenues—military spending fell by 29 per cent in 2016 (Wezeman 2018).

However coincidentally, given the overall situation, after MBS seized power, it increased again by 9.2 per cent in 2017 to \$69.4 billion, equivalent to 10 per cent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP). In comparison, all the other countries among the top 15 military spenders in the world dedicate less than 4.2 per cent of GDP to the military. Saudi Arabia's per capita military spending was higher than any other country in the world in 2017. The suspension in January of this year of arms sales that had been negotiated under the former Trump administration, renewed US interest in the JCPOA, and continued fallout after the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi and over the Yemen conflict are sources of ongoing discontent in the bilateral relationship. The Saudis grew concerned when the United States removed the Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) system that had been temporarily deployed in the kingdom in 2019 after drones and missiles targeted oil installations. The seven THAAD batteries the Saudis are purchasing for missile defence that are scheduled for delivery between 2023 and 2026 will most likely be delivered to the kingdom, but there is more uncertainty over offensive munitions from the United States. In 2021, the Biden administration announced that the United States had ended support for a grinding five-year Saudi-led military offensive in Yemen that had deepened suffering in the Arabian Peninsula's poorest country, calling the move part of restoring a US emphasis on diplomacy, democracy and human rights (Knickmeyer 2021). Accordingly, the US has blocked the sale of precision-guided munitions and may yet extend the suspension of other offensive weapons, such as fighter jets and drones. Although the circumstances are very different from those of the Gulf, the US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan raises further questions about US commitments to Saudi Arabia and may highlight the advantages of Saudi security partnerships with other powerful global or regional actors. In light of these accumulating sources of uncertainty in its relationship with the United States, Saudi Arabia has been forced to assume a greater defence burden. As such, Saudi Arabia has adopted a two-pronged approach. First, it has sought to mend fences with the United States, including by leading mediation efforts with Qatar before and at the Al Ula GCC summit. Second, it has sought to expand its energy cooperation and security relations with Russia in response to the ambiguity caused during the Trump administration and

uncertainty caused by congressional and executive branch action during the current US administration. Riyadh quite likely communicated to Washington the shape and form of the latest agreement with Russia due to concerns about being caught up in the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act and possibly to underscore Saudi interest in reverting to the status quo ante in US-Saudi relations. The Saudi-Russia deal is bound to be limited by the continuing strength of US-Saudi relations, including the 2020 US-Saudi Arabia Strategic Dialogue.⁵⁰



Cooperation is nevertheless appealing to both Saudi Arabia and Russia on a number of levels as they search for pragmatic deals based on common interests. The agreement reflects the Saudi intention to maintain friendly relations with Moscow with a Saudi focus on realizing the potential of developing its military-industrial base. It serves to build relations with the Kremlin at a time when Russia appears to be returning to the Middle East primarily through its intervention in Syria and through relations with Iran. If Syria rejoins the Arab League or normalizes relations with Saudi Arabia, it may give the kingdom renewed influence in Syria and thereby remove one of a few policy areas where the Saudis have sought to engage Moscow as a matter of priority. Russia is eager to compete more effectively in the region's arms sales market given China's inroads with armed drones and benefit in cases where the United States may limit, suspend or cancel drone sales. Moscow also seeks to consolidate its regional position in other ways by exploring opportunities in the Gulf. In the context of the Saudi Vision 2030, which seeks to localize up

⁵⁰ As a result, it draws these states together against common threats in the region, continues security and intelligence cooperation, proposes technical work on infrastructure, and promises other forms of cooperation. Large-scale US military and civilian training missions in Riyadh and long-term cooperative and consultative programs similarly promise to constrain the scope of any Saudi cooperation with Russia. The United States-Saudi Arabia Strategic Dialogue, inaugurated in November 2005, has constituted a high-level institutionalized forum for coordinating US and Saudi interests. The Strategic Dialogue consists of six working groups focusing on human development, economy, energy, consular affairs, military cooperation and counterterrorism. See International Religious Freedom (2010): Annual Report to Congress, DIANE Publishing, p.133

to 50% of its defence expenditure and grow non-oil sectors, the deal gives Saudi Arabia theoretical parity with the UAE on defence relations with Russia and an edge over other Arab partners, as well as Iran.

A closer Saudi-Russia relationship certainly adds credibility to Russia's security-centric offerings, enhances the prospect of Rosatom's⁵¹ participation in constructing nuclear power plants in the kingdom, and supports the Kremlin's proposals for Gulf security to undermine and push back on US influence in the region. In this deal, amid US strategic change on policing the world and potentially limiting arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the current Gulf milieu, which values joint cooperation strategies, Saudi Arabia is positioning itself to build greater interdependence with Russia.

China-Russia Great Power Projection in the Gulf

Russia and China are often mischaracterized as allies. There is a perception that their revisionist preferences for international order align, and that their desire for a less US-centered international order means they are collaborating toward this end (Futon and Sim 2022). The challenge they pose to the United States has been acknowledged by successive US administrations and "great power competition" (GPC) or "strategic competition" has replaced counterterrorism at the centre of US strategy. The Biden administration's 2021 Interim National Security Strategy Guidance states that "we face . . . growing rivalry with China, Russia, and other authoritarian states." It describes China as "the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system," and Russia as "determined to enhance its global influence and play a disruptive role on the world stage".⁵²

In the case of China, historically, the Middle East has been of low to middling importance to Chinese foreign policy. However, China's meteoric ascent to the world stage as a global power has altered its strategic stance, and its ambitions have stretched westward. China has meaningful and strategic interests in the Middle East, especially since the region is home to six of China's top ten sources of oil, a crucial resource for its economic growth. The Pentagon's "2+3" framework for GPC has China and Russia as the two primary threats, and North Korea, Iran and terrorism as the three secondary threats, reinforcing a two-tiered system that implies that "China and Russia are similar threats while the others are lower in priority" (Iyer 2021). In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), their behaviour feeds into the perception that they have a coordinated agenda to push out the United States, or at least to challenge its dominance there

⁵¹ A Russian state corporation, established in 2007, headquartered in Moscow that specializes in nuclear energy, nuclear non-energy goods and high-tech products. Manaranche, Martin (2020-05-04). "Russia Signs Contract to Build World's Largest Nuclear-Powered Icebreaker". Naval News.

⁵² White House, "Interim National Security Strategic Guidance," March 2021, 6, 9.

(CENTCOM 2021). In the end, it was vetoes on Syria at the United Nations,⁵³ mutual anger about Libya, arms exports to traditional US allies and cooperation with Iran despite multilateral sanctions that led to this situation (Foot 2020).



In a February 2021 speech by General Kenneth F. McKenzie, commander of the US Central Command overseeing MENA and Central Asia, he noted that “the United States faces increasing competition in the Gulf region from Russia and China, both vying for power and influence through a combination of diplomatic, military and economic means. This adds another layer of tension and instability to an already complex and challenging region.”⁵⁴ Crown Prince MBS has faced sharp Western criticism over the 2018 murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, Riyadh's human rights record and the Yemen war. US President Joe Biden has, so far, refused to deal directly with MBS. With US-Saudi relations at a low

⁵³ Definitions of MENA vary. The US State Department does not include Turkey, but China and Russia do. Since China's multilateral forums are based on Arab League memberships, some countries that are not usually considered part of MENA appear throughout. For Russia's definition of MENA, see regional maps in the state-owned Russian Export Center: www.exportcenter.ru.

⁵⁴ The European Union (EU), UN, and United States use a range of sanctions against Iran, and some Chinese and Russian companies fall afoul of US sanctions; see “US Sanctions Chinese, Russian Firms over Iran Dealings,” Al Jazeera, November 28, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/28/us-sanctionschinese-russian-firms-over-iran-dealings>.

point, the MBS has responded by strengthening ties with Russia and China steadily, even though the kingdom still has close security ties with the US (Yaakoubi et al. 2022). Taking advantage of this opportunity, Russia and China are expanding their presence in the Gulf through various strategic means, and such strategic actions are expected to expand further in the future. In addition, these strategies will lead to strengthening economic or security cooperation if Saudi Arabia can find a common denominator from the point of view of its own interests. Ultimately, this will serve as an opportunity for MBS to use it as a strategy to achieve his global ambitions.



Conclusions

A new wind is blowing over the kingdom of Al-Saud. A new reign is being prepared and will arrive eventually. MBS has not stopped making international headlines since his appointment, partly because of Vision 2030, which is supposed to modernize the country and diversify the economy in 15 years. He is trying to formulate a strategy to balance power in the Gulf by moving away from US influence and turning toward China and Russia. Before the Jamal Khashoggi killing, MBS was determined to do whatever was necessary to bring the United States back to the Middle East. However, Saudi Arabia's failure to explain the Khashoggi killing convincingly caused friction with the United States. He either realizes that power is not absolute and must be managed or he's emboldened. This emboldened position could further complicate relations with the US and impact relations with China and Russia. Specifically, Saudi Arabia must manage the geopolitics of energy with Russia trying to manipulate energy markets, despite heavy Gulf investment in Russia. In addition, Saudi Arabia's weapons acquisition from Russia,

including the S-400 defence system, as well as Russia's role in Syria and relationships with Iran and China underscore the high stakes in an extremely fluid geopolitical landscape.

As noted above, China and the Saudis have signed at least one nuclear agreement that allows Saudi Arabia to put certain building blocks in place. During King Salman's visit to China in 2017, he agreed with China to establish the first factory in Saudi Arabia for Chinese Hunter Killer aerial drones (Chan

2017). Bolstering the country's military capabilities is aligned with MBS's vision for building an industrial military complex. Military relations between Saudi-China particularly in terms of arms sales will raise issues in US-Saudi Arabia relations and could be a key indicator of the direction in bilateral relations. In addition, MBS's ambitious economic "vision" to diversify the economy could include 5 million new jobs for the kingdom. That may even include a plan to turn Saudi Arabia into a global logistics hub between Asia and Europe. In this context, MBS has been shaking up Saudi Arabia with efforts to reform the economy and his goal of turning it into a major force in the world economy — beyond oil. He has responsibility for the economy and, with that, the most powerful aspects of the Saudi portfolio — the military and the energy sector (Domm 2016). When China set the BRI goals to invest hundreds of billions of dollars in linking infrastructure and trade with Central Asia, South Asia, Africa and Europe by developing overland transport infrastructure, the Middle East was a crucial component of the plan. As such, China's interests in the Gulf region include not only ensuring the safe and reliable flow of oil from the region but also ensuring geopolitical stability so that China can further its development projects both on land and at sea. In this regard, from Saudi Arabia's perspective on China's BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) project, Saudi Arabia, a central hub connecting Asia, Africa and Europe, has been a significant part of the initiative. Moreover, Saudi Arabia is one of the first countries that has responded positively to the BRI project. The BRI brings China much closer to Saudi Arabia. In the case of Russia, Putin sees the Middle East as critical to Russia because security challenges originating in the region influence the Russian sphere of influence. Russian involvement in the Syrian civil war had primarily consisted of supplying the Syrian Army with arms and equipment. This intervention has allowed Russia to re-emerge as a leading actor in the Gulf region, mostly thanks to the use of hard power and coercive diplomacy. Russia looks to solidify its presence in the region and to capitalize on the military foothold in Syria through its naval base and air power presence in order to exert more political influence in the Gulf region than ever before. Russian presence in the Gulf, therefore, is multi-dimensional and includes military, diplomatic, informational and economic facets (Citrinowicz and Yellinek 2021).

In sum, MBS has a strategy to maintain a balance of power with the United States by moving Saudi Arabia away from its long-standing relationship to realize his global ambitions, expanding the country's influence in the Gulf region to some extent by strengthening economic and security cooperation with China and Russia. Although Russia and Saudi Arabia had an uncomfortable relationship with each other due to oil prices, they have been getting closer to Russia since 2018. However, the relationship has multiple dimensions, is dependent on too many outside factors and is still far from offering an ideal formula for adequately marrying each other's interests. However, despite this diplomatic situation, Saudi Arabia and Russia have made steady efforts to strengthen cooperation in various fields for mutual benefit. China's entry into the Gulf region is likely to become more extensive in the future given the BRI and other mega-projects, although its trade and cooperation have been relatively recent. Considering China's growing status on the world stage and its presence and Russia's historical presence in the Gulf, they will further increase cooperation with Saudi Arabia in economic and security aspects in the future. However, this has the potential to lead to geopolitical conflicts in the region.

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