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Saudi Arabia's Relations with China and Russia, Hedging and Increasing Relative Power amidst American Disengagement from West Asia: Implications, Change and Continuity*

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Abstract

Saudi foreign policy was mostly affected by its strategic relations with the United States as its primary and sole security provider. However, since the rise of Mohammed Bin Salman, Saudi Arabia further developed its relations with permanent non-Western members of the United Nations Security Council, respectively China and Russia. This study mainly contends that this transformation took place through strategic hedging, with regional and global consequences. It is contended that Saudi Arabia has adopted a triangular foreign policy through hedging, in order to balance its foreign relations with America and achieve regional supremacy. In this article, through a thematic analysis, we will investigate the ways in which Saudi foreign policy adopted hedging, the reasons for this action, and the motifs behind this decision. Saudi Arabia has tried to pursue national interests through hedging. This attempt is affected by a post-Cold War environment, preparing for a possible multi-polarization of the international system. Saudi Arabia also tries to improve its image alongside this approach in foreign policy. Correspondingly, this diversification of Saudi foreign policy is noticeably compatible with its domestic policy of opening up and adopting rapid modernization, which is analyzed through hedging and Neoclassical Realism.

Keywords: China, Foreign Policy Diversification, Hedging, Multi-polarity, Neoclassical Realism, Russia, Saudi Arabia

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1. Introduction

Saudi Arabia is a global powerhouse of fossil energy and has a decisive economic role globally. Saudi Arabia's foreign policy can affect many countries and regions. Furthermore, its foreign policy has an impact across the international system (Bianco, 2024). Saudi Arabia maintained a conservative foreign policy, pushing for promoting its brand of Islam, while preserving the monarchy and domestic stability (Athanasoulia, 2020, pp. 1-13). With the rise of Mohammed Bin Salman, Saudi Arabia decided to go through a transformation alongside the vision 2030. The change in systemic pressures after the Cold War allowed Saudis to further diversify their foreign policy.

Since the end of the Cold War, the change in systemic pressures has forced foreign policy experts to focus on state level analysis. Neo-Classical Realism focuses on domestic issues alongside systemic pressures. This school of realism uses qualitative methodology, case studies and historical approaches, and focuses on foreign policy. Although, systemic constraints limit the actions of leaders, nevertheless there are leaders who make decisions under these constraints. In addition, states try to increase their influence in a manner in which additional influence equals with more relative power. Moreover, hegemonic presence of a great power or strong institutions decrease anarchy. Accordingly, systemic pressures on their own cannot fully explain state foreign policies (Moshirzadeh, 1396 [2017 A.D.], pp. 31-40). Therefore Neo-Classical Realism is a sound theory for investigating Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, since it takes into account domestic factors alongside systemic pressures.

In this case, the Saudis' understanding of a US de-concentration and the role of Saudi domestic forces such as the 2030 vision can

be analyzed. The emergence of a Saudi identity after domestic struggles for controlling the state and systemic pressures all affect its foreign policy (Grabowski, 2021, pp. 82-97). The Saudi perception of the international system and state level priorities, according to domestic policy, matter at the same time.

Since the rise of the new Saudi crown Prince Muhammed Bin Salman and adopting the 2030 vision, Saudi Arabia has tried to pursue a risk averse foreign policy. This foreign policy is focused on economic development, military and technological edge and proactive diplomacy. This approach is enrooted in domestic perceptions of a US de-concentration from the region and an urge for development plans. Thus both systemic pressure and domestic perceptions are playing a role in the transformation of Saudi foreign policy. In order to better understand this transformation, Neoclassical Realism has been chosen to provide a theoretical framework. Data regarding the 2030 vision and areas of hedging have been collected.

This research investigates the way in which Saudi Arabia decided to resort to hedging in its foreign policy and the reasons and motifs behind this decision. In other words, strategic Saudi relations with the United States is a well-known fact. Therefore the analysis and discussion of this study focuses on how Saudi Arabia develops its relations with permanent non-Western members of the United Nations Security Council. It is hypothesized that Saudi Arabia has adopted a hedging policy for gaining extra regional and international leverage for dealing with regional and Great Powers.

Since the appointment of Mohammed Bin Salman as Crown Prince in 2017, Saudi Arabia has been consolidating its regional role and position toward other states including regional rivals such

as Iran. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia is enhancing its position in relations and negotiations with America over a proposed strategic partnership agreement by using hedging and establishing closer ties with Beijing and Moscow, which can balance Iranian power in Western Asia and at an international level; Saudi Arabia is thus using a hedging strategy by seeking additional concessions from the United States through its evolving ties with non-Western Great Powers.

This research explores the way in which hedging is utilized by Saudi Arabia, and what this country seeks through a hedging policy. In addition, the domestic factor of the 2030 vision and its effect on facilitating this hedging strategy is discussed. It is argued that developmental plans of this vision require a transformative foreign policy, which can enhance Saudi global standing and aid it in gaining leverage versus America. According to this research, it is argued that Neoclassical Realism, which has an eye on domestic factors in addition to the international system, can explain the Saudi hedging strategy, which is necessitated by domestic forces playing out since the appointment of Mohammed Bin Salman as Crown Prince in 2017, alongside regional dynamisms and global Great Power competition.

2. A Review of Hedging in Saudi Foreign Policy

During recent years, specifically since 2017 and the rise of Mohammed Bin Salman, as Saudi Arabia sets a more determined foreign policy, inquiries have been done regarding Saudi hedging in foreign policy. However not many have investigated this transformation thoroughly as a separate issue. Most related studies focus on the premise of an emerging multi-polarity and Western decline. Nevertheless, Saudi plans for economic diversification

through ties with China and mending ties with Iran through China are both indicative of hedging. Dialogues with Moscow within the OPEC plus framework are indicative of this Saudi approach as well. Such a foreign policy regarding China and Russia provides more space for maneuver (Stuenkel & Treadwell, 2024).

The hedging attempt by Saudi Arabia can be understood as an effort to define a leading regional role. Thus Saudi Arabia is reflective of internal, regional and global logic as well. Saudi Arabia also understood that Western Asia is losing its significance as an American foreign policy priority. In addition, Saudi Arabia's focus on socioeconomic modernization requires stability. As a result, Saudi Arabia prefers to have trivial foreign policy troubles on its plate in order to focus on domestic issues. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia seeks to improve its strategic position through hedging. A major factor that counts in this transformation in Saudi foreign policy is the perception of a gradual shift towards a multipolarity. This has led to Saudi Arabia acting on every single issue in foreign policy in a case to case manner. Therefore Saudi Arabia no longer acts solely according to American considerations and its partnership with America (Guzansky & Zalayyat, 2024, pp. 89-96).

Saudi Arabia's new understanding was partially affected by the 2019 Aramco attacks. The country's policymakers understood that in order to hedge risks versus Iran, they require diversified ties rather than solely relying on the United States. Some experts reckon a gradual rise of China in all aspects of power in Western Asia, which are appropriate with Saudi concerns and its detente with Iran through Chinese mediation. The Saudi fence sitting in the Ukraine War is another example of such an approach. However this

does not mean a replacement of America as Saudi Arabia's security partner. Saudi Arabia's calibrated position attempts to create additional leverage versus America in order to procure advanced American weapons, security guarantees and nuclear energy. Hedging in Saudi foreign policy has also had regional implications. Saudi Arabia has become more emboldened to lead the Arab world. Old powerhouses such as Egypt are weakened by turbulent times. Saudi Arabia has been bolstering its position in Syria, Yemen, Egypt, Turkey and Sudan among other places (Guzansky & Zalay, 2024, pp. 89-96).

Certain researchers understood the change in Saudi foreign policy as an attempt to recast the country on the international stage. Jacobs sees this as an attempt to decrease Saudi reliance on the United States. Economic diversification plans, reducing dependency on a hydrocarbon economy and reforming a conservative society are all related to this vision, which is underway in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is seeking more foreign investment through foreign policy maneuvers. Saudi Arabia's 2030 vision requires stability and security alongside investment. Therefore, the question of American reliability, in the face of regional challenges faced by Saudi Arabia, contributed to Saudi adaptation of a hedging strategy in which Riyadh seeks creating partnerships and alliances. Nevertheless, the emphasis on Saudi hedging, a comprehensive study of this strategy, and its explanation through a firm theoretical framework seem rarely discussed in current research (Jacobs, 2023).

Higher international standing and future uncertainties regarding Saudi relations with America, the future of oil and the matter of democratic norms have been counted as reasons for Saudis' strategic hedging in general. However further research regarding

Saudi hedging policy through its relations with China and Iran have been recommended by previous works (Kouleas, 2023, pp. 9-23).

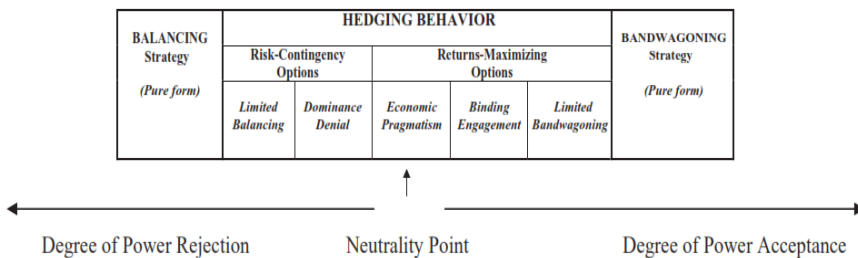
3. Theoretical Framework, Hedging Playing Out in the Context of Neo-Classical Realism

Different Schools of international relations try to provide theoretical explanations for actions and interactions among states. However there are domestic and international settings and situations which facilitate the driving of certain agendas in foreign policy. In addition, domestic politics affect international relations as well. Therefore, Jack Snyder attempts to bridge the gap between domestic and foreign policy while staying faithful to realism. However, Farid Zakaria believes that systemic pressures from the international system and its effects on state behavior must be taken into account as well, and discusses *Innenpolitik* (Zakaria, 1992, pp. 177-190)

Yet, certain thinkers such as Kenneth Waltz believe that external systemic pressures determine state foreign policy. However, the adherents to *Innenpolitik* believe that social and economic factors are embedded in states' foreign policy. Without considering systemic pressures and domestic dynamics alongside each other, it is not clear when and how far systemic pressures affect the international environment. As a result, a sound foreign policy debate has to discuss the effect of international systems on domestic policy as well, and investigate state relative power (Zakaria, 1992, pp. 177-190).

In order to deliver the aforementioned goals, neoclassical realism is used in this study. Neoclassical realism considers systemic and state level variables. Meanwhile, states can pursue hedging at political, military and economic levels. Hedging has been defined as a set of mutually counteracting policies, which signal ambiguity to competing blocs, while maintaining maximum strategic autonomy. Therefore, hedging is a kind of risk management for maintaining state autonomy; it is a pragmatic option for smaller states. Hedging states look for opportunities to cooperate with other powers. One reason that hedging is possible in certain regions is the absence of a bipolarity or a great power imminent threat. Hedging also tries to mitigate risk and create economic rewards (Figure 1). Furthermore, small states try to avoid overdependence on great powers through hedging and preserving autonomy (Marston, 2023, pp. 29-42).

Figure 1. Balancing, Hedging & Bandwagoning



Source: Kuik et al., 2012

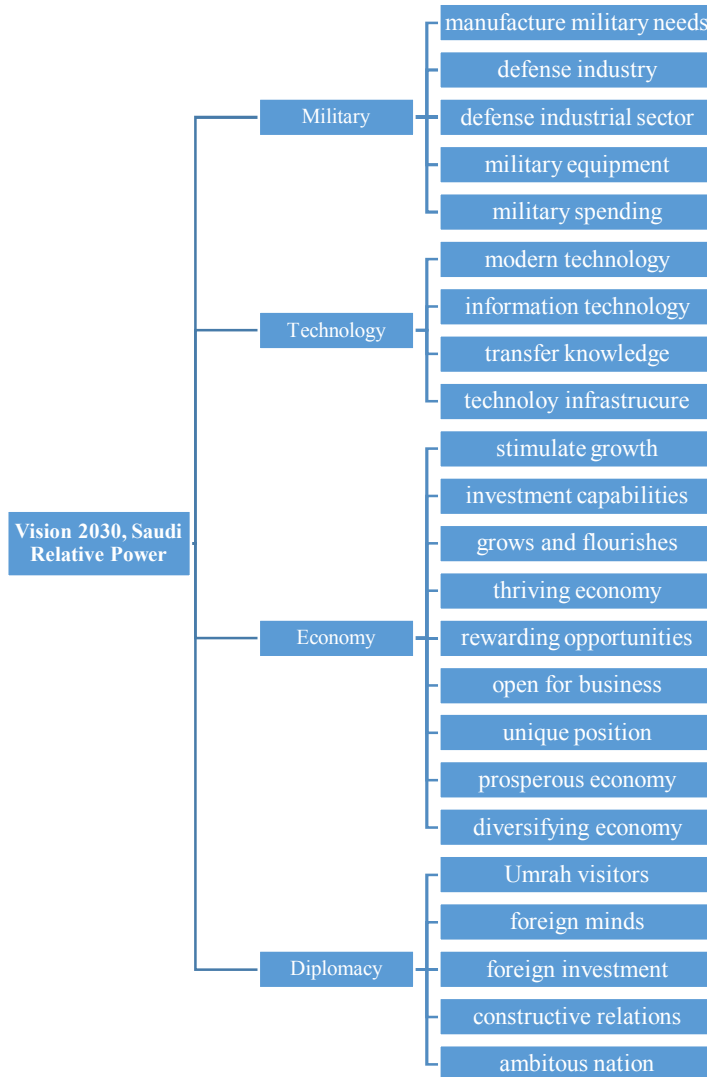
Some scholars dealing with hedging as a theoretical framework, such as Kuick see this strategy as a spectrum between balancing and bandwagoning (Kuik et al., 2012, pp. 315-320). Hedging also borrows from soft power as well (Masterson, 2022, p. 32).

Proponents of hedging also contemplate that in a unipolar system that is de-concentrating; this allows other powers to pursue hedging. Hedging encompasses economic, diplomatic and institutional competition. Thus the hedging approach is “the mitigation of risk via diversification of strategic investments and interests” (Garlick & Havlová, 2020, p. 85).

To bridge hedging and Neo-Classical Realism, certain themes could be detected. The method used in the current study consists of thematic analysis, in which certain recurring themes are detected and analyzed. Qualitative data is used to detect patterns and trends. Afterwards, inductive interpretation of the data is carried out. Arrangement of the detected themes is done in such a manner that independent variables, intervening variables and dependent variables are selected.

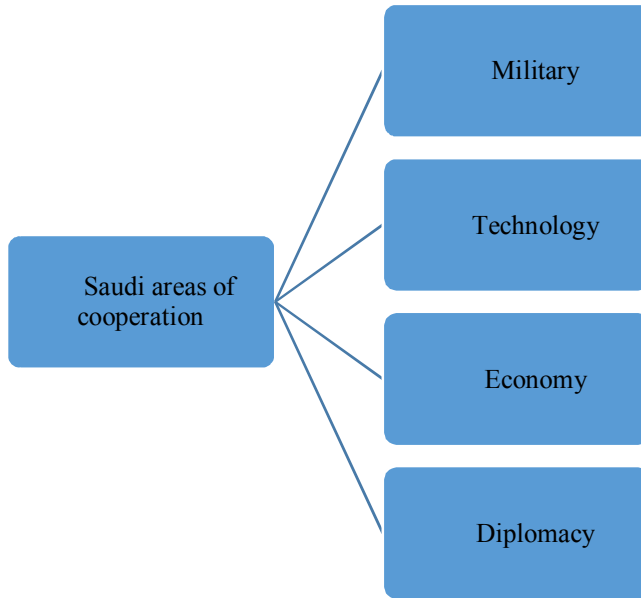
In the following section, the 2030 vision is investigated alongside Saudi cooperation with China and Russia. The areas of cooperation are categorized, which fall under 4 major themes of military, technology, diplomacy and economy, informed by US Department of Defense categorization and themes detected (Piercy, 2023, PP. 2). Overall, an inductive approach is utilized to detect and discuss the transformation of Saudi foreign policy and hedging (Figure 2 & 3).

Figure 2. Underlying Ideas Categorized into Hedging Themes through Reflexive Approach Derived from the 2030 Vision



Source: Author

Figure 3. Saudi Hedging Themes Informed by a Department of Defense Categorization Too



Source: Author

4. Saudi Hedging within the Scope of Neo-Classical Realism

Another concept, which can be used to explain Saudi foreign policy in dealing with great powers alongside hedging is balancing, including how hedging helps balancing and vice versa. Balancing occurs when threat perception leads states to strengthen their security relations with other states externally, while internally it means to utilize all means of power (Masterson, 2022). Due to certain circumstances, which shall be discussed further, Saudi Arabia is conducting hedging. This hedging minimizes risks, while returning yields in terms of survival, security, self-interest and

increasing relative power. This study discusses how and why Saudi Arabia resorts to hedging, while seeking the United States as her major security partner.

Therefore, due to domestic and international reasons that could be explained through Neoclassical Realism, Saudi Arabia uses hedging. Saudi Arabia requires balancing in order to satisfy her regional preferences. Saudi Arabia tries to press the United States by developing ties with China and Russia, which are non-Western veto-wielding members of the United Nations Security Council. This hedging provides Saudi Arabia with leverage in order to extract concessions from the United State as its major security partner. The infusion of these concepts leads to what could be better explained by hedging. Hedging can explain why Saudi Arabia pushes for a treaty or comprehensive non-Nato partnership with the United States.

4. 1. Significance of Saudi Arabia's Transformation and Hedging

Due to aforementioned reasons, the Saudis are appearing competitive in terms of fostering relations with China and Russia in order to pursue hedging and regionally gain leverage over Tehran through these Great Powers as well (Fulton, 2022, pp. 4-17), but this is more complicated than a rivalry with Iran. The alteration in Saudi foreign policy can also be attributed to a US withdrawal from the region. The US is trying to reduce security commitments in the region as well.

Simultaneously, Saudi Arabia tries to diversify its relations with the US as well, trying not to limit relations to arms and oil. The partnership also encompasses business, technology, science and finance among other domains. Saudi Arabia seeks to attract US expertise, investors and tourists (Kenner & Al-Ahmad, 2021, pp. 6-

7). This matches well the Chinese categorization of expanding ties with Saudi Arabia. The Chinese cooperation with Saudi Arabia mentions energy as the core infrastructure, trade and investment as secondary and finally advanced technology as major goals (Garlick & Havlová, 2020, pp. 87-88).

Regarding the increasing Chinese presence in Western Asia, the nature of Chinese presence in Western Asia has a smaller footprint, while comparing it with the United States. Nevertheless, regional powers such as Saudi Arabia are showing increasing interest in striking deals and partnerships with other Great Powers, specifically China and Russia. Consequently, Saudi Arabia has coordinated a foreign policy, which realizes the increasing American desire to decrease engagement in the Middle East. Another aspect in adapting this foreign policy is the way in which it affects Iran. With increasing ties between Great Powers and the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council), Iran will be a less attractive partner for these powers (Wu & Zhao, 2020, pp. 5-6).

However, Saudi ties with China are not merely instruments of balancing. Sino-Saudi relations are accompanied by a shared desire to seize economic opportunities. Both China and Saudi Arabia avoid antagonizing the United States. The Sino-Saudi relations are not a replacement for Saudi-American ties. They are driven by a Chinese desire for an energy partnership with Saudi Arabia. This is realized as Saudi Arabia is the primary oil exporter to China. China has also sought to develop economic relations with Saudi Arabia. Chinese exports to Saudi Arabia are worth tens of billions of dollars, while Chinese companies operate inside Saudi Arabia (Chaziza, 2015, pp. 2-3). Yet there is an imperative for investigating the nature and function of these relations through a Saudi lens as well.

Another aspect of Saudi foreign policy in dealing with China and Russia is an emerging pragmatism. The Sino-Saudi Comprehensive Strategic Partnership is an example of such pragmatism. Saudi Arabia took notice of the evolving international system and developed various partnerships based on such an assumption. Such a foreign policy primarily takes national interest into consideration rather than being value based. The decreasing role of ideology has enabled Saudi Arabia to demonstrate flexibility, while dealing with other states. Obviously, this shows that ideology is not the governing principle of the Saudi foreign policy due to its restrictive and rigid nature (Wu & Zhao, 2020, pp. 1-3).

As already mentioned, Saudi Arabia is no longer entangled with ideological constraints in developing ties with China and Russia. Saudi Islam and communism are no longer limiting the development of bilateral relations. This integrates well into the concepts of stability, continuity and monarchy, which are prized by the Saudis. In addition, China no longer promotes socialist revolutionary movements against monarchies in Western Asia (Wu & Zhao, 2020, p. 3).

4. 2. Domestic Forces Playing Out According to Systemic Pressure

The Chinese factor is not an isolated event in Saudi foreign policy. Saudi Arabia is seeking to invest in America's commitment to Saudi-Israeli normalization, while counting on Sino-American competition and Russo-American adversary as well. This model has improved Saudi regional status and enhances Saudi relative power. Therefore, Saudi Arabia benefits from systemic pressure and anarchy, while pursuing the 2030 Vision. As a result, systemic

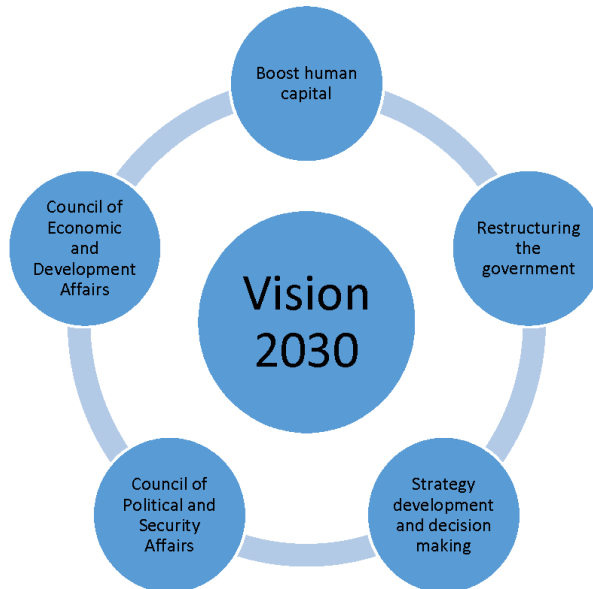
pressure and domestic policy are enhancing Saudi Arabia's relative power through hedging. This is bilateral, which means the more Saudi relative power increases, the more effective the hedging becomes, while the hedging in return increases Saudis' relative power, providing synergy. The Vision 2030 document provides this study with the guiding idea of Saudi Arabia's ongoing transformation. This document demonstrates how exigencies of a certain comprehensive development plan have played a role alongside systemic variables in shaping and guiding Saudi foreign policy.

As complements, Saudi Arabia plans to focus on the custodianship of the 2 mosques and its determination on becoming a trans-continental investment hub. Saudis seek to establish themselves as an epicenter of global trade and employ the young generation in their voyage of diversifying revenues and generating wealth. Saudi Arabia plans to transform Aramco into an industrial conglomerate and the Saudi Public Investment Fund into the world's largest sovereign fund. It also plans to manufacture half of its military equipment. Transparency, efficiency and opportunities are other goals of the Saudi 2030 Vision (KSA, 2016, p. 6).

Thus, Saudi Arabia is undertaking reforms and restructuring the government in order to speed up strategy development and decision making as well. The pace of these reforms is in a measured manner. The entire design is according to economic and social goals. In order to materialize the Saudi 2030 Vision, Saudi Arabia has established certain new government bodies. These bodies are the Council of Political and Security Affairs and the Council of Economic and Development Affairs. These councils are in charge of running the Kingdom with a fiscal balance and diversifying non-oil revenues and better coordinating project management. This

project forecasts a transformation of Aramco, in which Aramco becomes a leading company in various domains rather than staying solely an oil company (KSA, 2016, p. 6).

Figure 4. Domestic Decisions Made by Saudi Arabia According to Vision 2030



Source: Author

Furthermore, Saudi Arabia plans on building the world's largest sovereign investment fund. In order to improve human resources, the Saudi government will try to enhance and boost human capital. Private-public partnerships and initiatives are another aspect of this program. Through the Economic Council, the Saudi government will align national programs according to the 2030 Vision (Figure 4). Privatization and strategic partnerships are among other goals of the 2030 Vision (KSA, 2016, pp. 28-35).

5. Hedging with Great Powers Enhancing Saudi Regional Standing

In response to systemic pressures and domestic agendas, Saudi Arabia has formulated a triad of diplomatic relations with US, China and Russia in order to balance Tehran through multilateral paths. This is more sophisticated than the previous Saudi approach, which depended on the United States both in terms of soft and hard power in balancing and containing Iran. In addition, Iran faces GCC competition in attracting Chinese capital. As a result, once again the Saudi policy in courting China and Russia alongside its alliance with the United States, makes sense through hedging.

Likewise, in economic terms, China and the GCC, which includes Saudi Arabia, enjoy better and superior economic ties compared to Sino-Iranian relations and Iranian aspirations of becoming China's strategic energy partner (Fulton, 2021 pp. 203-216).

The most recent precedent of Iranian-Saudi competition before the current détente materialized itself in Yemen, Syria and Bahrain, with Saudi and Iranian parties each supporting a different side. Apparently both Iran and Saudi Arabia have aspirations of becoming the regional hegemon (Erdogan, 2022, pp. 8-10). Furthermore, the Iranian nuclear program has caused Saudi's to insist on having the full nuclear cycle, a demand which still persists in negotiations with the United States. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia signed a comprehensive strategic partnership with China as well. Saudi Arabia is interested in the Belt and Road initiative, which spans across Eurasia. China is attracted to the idea of placing Saudi Arabia among the interconnections. In the Chinese perspective, Saudi Arabia is an important economic, political and military power (Erdogan, 2022, pp. 1-16).

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia pursues diplomatic efforts in strengthening its ties with China, since Iran is trying to incorporate its zone of influence with the Chinese Belt and Road initiative. Furthermore, Tehran aspires to become the major regional partner of China across the region and play a role in Chinese energy purchases (Shariatinia & Kermani, 2023, pp. 36-43).

Another interesting point at the regional level is the security commitments of the US to Arab states, especially the GCC. Currently China operates through the status quo regional security arrangement, which is preserved by the United States. Even though China strikes deals with both Saudi Arabia and Iran, yet it adheres and operates through the US-backed security arrangement in Western Asia. This arrangement is sustainable as far as there is no divergence of interests in Western Asia between China and the United States (Fulton, 2022, pp. 1-19).

Meanwhile, the United States does not see the region through the preceding lens. This means that overall, regional security in the Western Asia is no longer an urgent priority for the US in the long run. This is partially due to Israel's integration in the region through CENTCOM and normalization deals alongside collective mechanisms of protecting Israel. In addition, the US is attempting to preserve freedom of navigation and energy flow through alliances and coalitions as well, partly relieving itself from burdening commitments.

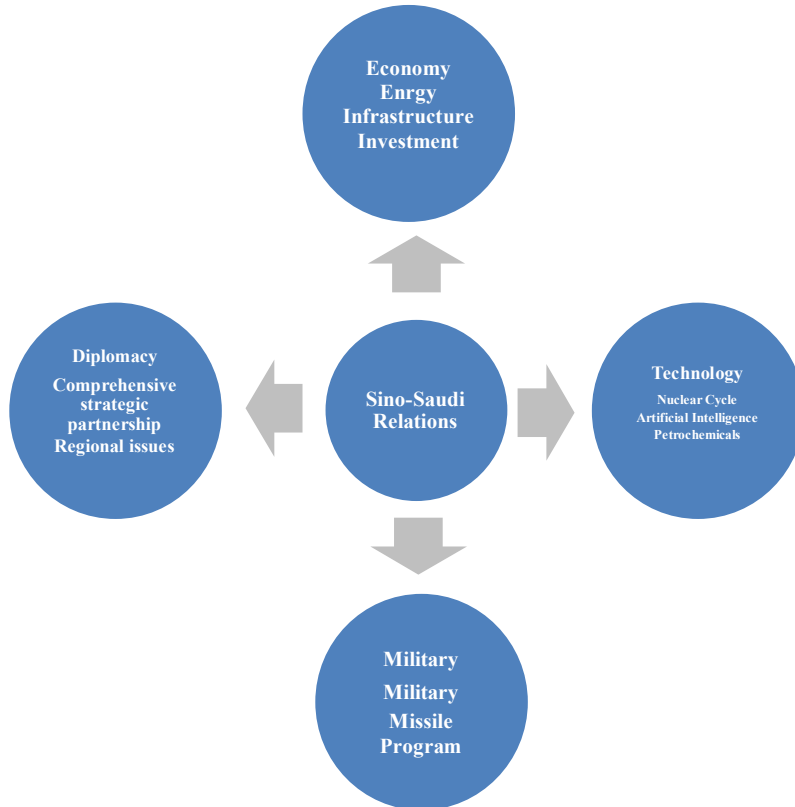
5. 1. Sino-Saudi Relations and Background

In order to better understand Sino-Saudi relations and Saudi hedging, a historic background is required. The historical background of the relations also indicates Chinese effort and

proactive diplomacy in order to establish diplomatic relations, which yielded in 1990 with the establishment of official relations. Saudi-Sino relations have developed ever since based on mutual interests and religious contacts due to the pilgrimage of Chinese Muslims. These interests can be elaborated as economic, trade and human interactions. Therefore Sino-Saudi relations progressed, while social and ideological differences stay put, but no longer play a role as the main variable of the relations. Another desirable aspect of the relations is the two parties' non-interference in each other's internal affairs. Underpinned by economic dynamics, Sino-Saudi trade has increased since the establishment of relations from 400 million dollars in 1990 to more than 60 billion dollars in the late 2010s (Wu & Zhao, 2020, pp. 6-7).

Hence, Saudi Arabia has diversified its economy by picking China as its primary trade partner. In addition, Saudis can access Chinese investments, technology and manufacturing capabilities through the relations. Therefore, Sino-Saudi relations may be mainly based on national interests, and benefit the Saudis through various fields. In return, the Saudis can offer advanced petrochemical technology to China through these relations. Furthermore, the Saudis have the option to link or integrate the Vision 2030 with China's Belt and Road initiative (BRI). With ideology fading, mutual perceptions transform, political flexibility and innovation increase and adapt better with the post-Cold War international environment (Wu & Zhao, 2020). The approach of the Saudi Crown Prince has accelerated this pragmatic trend in Saudi foreign policy. This foreign policy focuses on independence, sovereignty and economic interests (Figure 5).

Figure 5. A Taxonomy of Sino-Saudi Relations Considering Vision 2030 & US De-Concentration and Geo-Strategic Shift



Source: Author

5. 2. Russo-Saudi Relations and Background

Alongside China, Russia is the other Great Power wielding influence through its veto right and other means. Saudi Arabia's hedging encompasses its relations with Russia as well. An increasing Russian presence and mutual realms of cooperation have helped Russo-Saudi relations expand and make hedging relevant.

Russia has increased its presence in Western Asia since its intervention in Libya, Syria and Yemen. In the aftermath of 9/11,

Saudi Arabia tried to symbolically improve ties with Russia as part of a strategy to control the damage done to Saudi foreign policy by the terrorist attacks. Furthermore the 2003 invasion of Iraq incentivized the Saudis to further improve their diplomatic ties with Russia. However none of these motives were firmly arising from domestic politics or an organized proactive diplomacy. Later, frameworks such as “OPEC plus” played a role in expanding GCC and Russian dialogue, including Saudi Arabia as well. Russia’s dependence on oil prices affected its relation with Saudi Arabia through OPEC plus. Russia deems Western Asia as an important region to project power and emphasize on its status as a global power (Issaev & Kozhanov, 2021, pp. 888-890). Moreover, the compound and complex game of Saudis during the Biden administration is partially due to deterioration of relations with the Democratic Party, specifically after the Khashoggi murder (Montgomery, 2019).

Russian intervention in Syria, Libya and Yemen, alongside its relations with Iran and Israel have enabled the country to adopt a bargaining policy on its own terms. During the Saudi military operation in Yemen, Russia supported Saudi Arabia observably. Russia supported UNSC Resolutions 2216, 2266 and 2342, which were supportive of Saudi military operations in Yemen.

In addition, Saudi-Russia cooperation continued through the OPEC plus format. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia facilitated Russian relations with Syrian opposition groups. Saudi Arabia did not prevent the UAE and Bahrain from restoring diplomatic ties with Syria. Finally, Saudi Arabia allowed Syrian re-entrance into the Arab league. Nevertheless, neither Russia nor Saudi Arabia abandoned their relations with Iran, Israel or US as a favor to the other party. Regarding economic relations, the Saudis have

invested in Russia through the Saudi Public Investment Fund, which includes a 2.5 billion dollar investment and the Ayar international investment company. In addition, Saudi investment in Russia has had economic benefits in creating support networks at high political levels (Issaev & Kozhanov, 2021, pp. 894-895).

In the wake of the Ukraine war, Saudi Arabia declined to sever ties with Russia or take a powerful stance against Russia (Dene et al., 2022). In addition, the Saudis entered an agreement with Russia through the OPEC Plus framework despite the Biden administration's push to convince Saudis into increasing market supply (Weiss & Alexander-Greene, 2022).

Figure 6. A Taxonomy of Russo-Saudi Relations Considering Vision2030 & US De-Concentration and Geo-Strategic Shift



Source: Author

The Saudis ignored the US calls and sliced down production alongside Russia. In this procedure Saudi Arabia acted as an adamant international player. The Saudis ripped the benefits of a bump in oil prices and made a point by not budging on US demands. This is definitely a demonstration of Saudis' decision in conducting foreign policy even at the cost of being detrimental to US interests (Figure 6).

Nevertheless Russian means of influence over Saudi Arabia remain limited and Russia tries to be an influential non-regional player. Consequently, Saudi Arabia holds political dialogues with Russia regardless of Western pressure not to do so.

5. 3. The Role of Global Economic Transformation

Alongside regional events, great powers and domestic factors, there are other factors affecting Saudi hedging. At a global level, the approach adopted by Saudis is a smart choice for diversifying their foreign policy basket. The Saudis have taken notice that the global economic center of gravity is moving from the North Atlantic to Asia, somewhere in between China and India. The transition from a premised US uni-polarity toward a possible new multi-polarity is a serious possibility. Therefore, the possibility of such a systemic transition will have regional consequences (Fulton, 2022, pp. 1-14).

In addition, regions in Eurasia are becoming more competitive due to the decentralization taking place at the systemic level. New political and economic networks are taking place due to these circumstances. Previously, Saudi Arabia formulated its foreign policy through the GCC. Such an approach could have been explained through the notion of "Regional Security Complex".

However, competition is underway inside the GCC and Saudi Arabia pursues her foreign policy through a national perspective as well. This includes making alliances outside the GCC framework with global powers and regional actors such as UAE (Fulton, 2022, pp. 1-14).

5. 4. Regional Dynamics Playing Out

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia has taken steps to develop its relations with Israel through acts such as allowing Israel to use Saudi airspace (Aljazeera, 2022). The Saudis, well aware of their prestigious role as custodian of the Two Mosques, have conditioned their normalization with Israel and set up terms and conditions for Israel and America (Alrebh, 2023). This is another leverage Saudis use versus America and Israel, making hedging relevant in Saudi foreign policy.

Thus, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy is going through change and transformation. Saudi Arabia, which traditionally adhered to a conservative foreign policy, is now picking up a more proactive foreign policy. This foreign policy allows hedging in the face of perceived regional threats.

Saudi Arabia has been traditionally concerned with Iran and its intentions; it is not at ease with the Iranian sphere of influence, which stretches throughout the region and Yemen southwards. Saudi Arabia is suspicious of Tehran's policies in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon and elsewhere. The prevalent perception among Saudis is a strategic threat from Iran. The consolidation of the Iranian sphere of influence alongside the JCPOA and European countries courting Tehran only exacerbated Saudi concerns over Iran becoming the major regional powerbroker

in interlocution with Europe and the United States (Erdogan, 2022, pp. 1-2).

6. Analysis and Discussion of the Hedging in Saudi Foreign Policy, Regional and International Outreach Levels

As already noticed, the Saudi Crown Prince Muhammed Bin Salman adopted a new course in foreign policy. One which is bent on normalization with Israel and receiving security assurances, military aid and technology from the United States. However one could argue that threat perception and balance of threats is not the sole variable in this re-evaluation of foreign policy. Otherwise, how could Saudi relations with Russia and China, and its reconciliation with Iran be explained?

To this point, various studies have explored the Chinese approach to hedging. However what this study suggests is different, as it tries to demonstrate that Saudi Arabia is in fact a party which adopts strategic hedging in foreign policy and international relations. Specifically hedging assists Saudi Arabia to have strategic autonomy. Saudi Arabia traditionally relied on regional blocks such as GCC and its major international security partner, the US, to balance the perceived threats from Iran. This threat perception intensified in post-Saddam Iraq and Arab Spring eras.

However Saudi Arabia is seeking to diversify its foreign policy portfolio through simultaneous re-engagement with Iran and normalization with Israel, while developing relations with the United States, China and Russia at a global level. This study argues that what Saudi Arabia is undertaking is beyond a simple balance of power or threats versus Iran. Saudi Arabia may prefer a regional order in which Iran is contained too.

Thus, Saudi Arabia prefers to act as a regional leader, even if it means stepping outside its comfort zone. In fact, Saudi Arabia decided to diplomatically enmesh itself into a network of relations with great powers, especially through hedging, while seeking détente with Iran and normalization with Israel, and at the same time, devising a system of deals and agreements with the United States, Russia and China. Nevertheless the United States remains the major Saudi ally, regardless of American attempts to maintain a smaller and smarter presence in the Middle East

Another variable is the asymmetric nature of relations between GCC and the United States; the US reluctance in preserving a hegemonic presence in the long run has incentivized Saudi Arabia to seek other routes and as mentioned, diversify its foreign policy basket. Unsurprisingly, with US priorities set at Eastern Europe and Indo-Pacific, the benefactors of US security presence in the Middle East, specifically China, could revise the security aspects of their regional presence. This is consistent with the discussed changes in Saudi foreign policy in dealing with great powers.

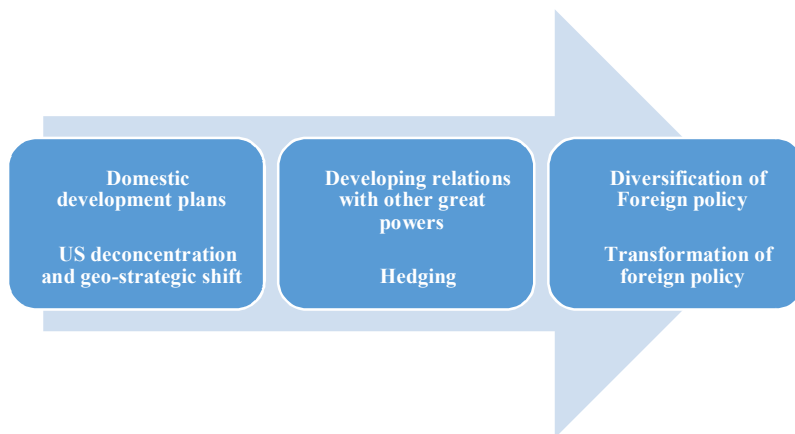
Unsurprisingly, Saudi-Iranian competition for courting China is tight. Interestingly, Saudi Arabia, which has a longstanding alliance with the United States, vies for stronger ties with China too. In addition, the nature of cooperation with China and Russia changes by the emergence of military cooperation. The Saudis had purchased ballistic missiles from China and upgraded them. Furthermore, China is assisting Saudi Arabia in developing an indigenous missile program. China and Saudi Arabia have also developed scientific relations.

This is occurring due to some strategic reasons. Saudi Arabia is seeking insurance in a possible Post-American global order. Even if such an order does not materialize, Saudi Arabia is seeking to

diversify its foreign policy basket by increasing the number of great powers with whom it has close relations through hedging (Figure 7). Additionally, due to Sino-American rivalry, Saudi Arabia gains leverage in relations with America, while becoming an attractive option for the Chinese in order to counterbalance the United States. Such a policy enables Saudi Arabia to reap benefits from all parties at regional and global levels.

The Chinese too have already shown interest in strong relations with Saudi Arabia by assisting the country in developing a sophisticated missile capability and program. The Saudis also seek to balance Tehran by adopting a diversification of foreign policy and improving ties with China and Russia. This could possibly give a say to Saudis in arms deals Russia and China may ink with Tehran, once again balancing Iran.

Figure 7. Neoclassical Realism in Action in Saudi Foreign Policy Trends and Hedging



Source: Author

On the other hand, American indecisiveness and indifference after the 2019 attacks on Aramco has put the Saudi-American relations to test (Holland & El Gamal, 2019). The fundamental question of American security commitment to Saudi Arabia lingers. In addition, Saudi Arabia's interest in having an advanced missile program (Lagrone, 2013) and achieving a full nuclear fuel enrichment program (Davenport, 2023) has urged the Saudis to seek other resources and levers in order to strike a deal on favorable terms with the US. Especially, once facing American reluctance in making such concessions, the Saudis have been emboldened to pursue this leveraging by seeking assistance from China.

Moreover, American plans to reduce and transform US presence in Western Asia (Kuo, 2024) has accentuated Saudi attention to China and Russia. The increasing economic footprint of China and resurging Russian presence in the region has encouraged Saudi Arabia to develop ties with China and Russia. Additionally Saudi interest in restoring relations with Iran and having leverage over Iranian actions has amplified Saudi interest in further development of ties with both China and Russia, specifically since both Beijing and Moscow enjoy good relations with Tehran. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia is containing Tehran's reaction towards the normalization process and meanwhile leveraging its restoration of ties with Tehran to reach a favorable argument with the Americans and Israelis.

Nevertheless, Saudis still regard the US as their main partner and seek three concessions from the US. The triad of concessions Saudis expect to achieve would improve Saudi Arabia's regional standing significantly. These concessions are as follow: advanced arms sales agreements, a full nuclear fuel cycle (Nakano, 2023) and

a security agreement with a NATO clause 5 guarantee enshrined within it (Nakhoul et al., 2023). Therefore one could assume that sending new US marines to protect vessels and safeguard the Strait of Hormuz are initial steps for proceeding with such an arrangement (CENTCOM, 2023). The type of the security assurance can vary in form, such as Major Non-NATO Partner or Saudi Arabia becoming an American Defense Partner in order to bypass a reluctant or suspicious US Congress.

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia is developing a ballistic missiles program with Chinese assistance, alongside upgrading the existing nuclear capable Dong Feng missiles. A yellow cake production plant (Al-Madhaji, 2023) and missile engine manufacturing facilities (Masterson, 2022) are other cooperation undertaken by Saudis with Chinese assistance.

Saudi Arabia seeks to develop a native artificial intelligence program in cooperation with China (Olcott, 2024) and is seeking Chinese assistance in critical and futuristic projects and infrastructure as well (Lons, 2024). Saudi oil and gas fields and pipeline construction are other fields in which China is investing (Paraskova, 2024). Furthermore in order to complete the consecutive steps of the energy value chain, Saudis are investing in Chinese refineries. None of these are taking place without the US taking notice. Therefore Saudi Arabia is hedging and leveraging the expansion of ties with China to put pressure on the US as well.

In addition to an increasing Chinese footprint, in order to reduce Iranian regional pressure and prepare grounds for the Saudi 2030 Vision, Saudis have taken steps towards reconciliation with Iran (Aljazeera, 2023), which could be a win for the Saudis at all odds. The 2030 Vision plan requires a competitive and diverse economy

and a working model of sustainable development. Naturally, China is supportive of calm on both sides of the Persian Gulf. It is noteworthy that the current restoration of ties struck through China is beneficial to Chinese prestige and economic influence across the Middle East.

Meanwhile, as the Ukraine war rages on, Saudi Arabia refuses to allow the GCC to completely join the sanctions regime against Russia. Consequently, Russia is making advantage of regional banking and financial networks in addition to using regional energy markets, thus bypassing Western sanctions. The rather neutral Saudi position on the Ukraine War is welcomed by the Kremlin. Moreover, Saudis and Russians occasionally cooperate in energy markets through frameworks such as OPEC Plus, which would raise eyebrows in Washington (Mathews, 2023). This Saudi move also creates multiple advantages such as balancing world energy markets while utilizing Russian influence to control Russo-Iranian military relations and Tehran's regional behavior, and thus producing leverage versus the US.

7. Strategic Regional Implications, Saudi Hedging and Global Influence

Since the demise of Saddam Hussein, the Saudi-Iranian rivalry has gained new geo-strategic and geopolitical aspects. Iran and Saudi Arabia tried to expand their spheres of influence at the expense of their rival. Previously, in Saudi eyes Iraq used to balance Iran. However, all of this changed with the rise of a Shia majority government in Iraq. This rivalry expanded to Yemen, Syria, Lebanon and Bahrain in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Later, Saudi allies such as Bahrain and UAE developed relations

with Israel (Mirza et al., 2021, pp 2-6). This competition carries regional, strategic and global implications. Furthermore, it led to otherization through the Saudi-Iranian rivalry

Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia also vies for global influence, thus expanding beyond its regional rivalry. Saudi Arabia already benefits from the custodianship of the two holy mosques and the prestige it entails. Even so, Saudi Arabia is concerned with a regional configuration, in which its power projection is limited by Iranian influence in Iraq and beyond. After attempts to undermine the new power configuration in Iraq, Saudi Arabia tried to benefit from the re-emergence of Iraqi nationalism and decided to gain influence in Iraq through diplomatic and economic attempts. Later, Saudi Arabia tried to roll-back Iranian influence during the Trump administration, not only at a regional level, but also at an international level by undermining the Iran Nuclear Deal, also known as the JCPOA. The threat perception of Iran, greatly facilitated Saudi-sponsored normalization deals with Israel (Mirza et al., 2021, pp.6-7).

Moreover, as already analyzed and discussed, Saudi Arabia has developed its own comprehensive strategic partnership deal with China. Since China has more economic interests in Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries, which outweigh its economic interests with Iran, Saudi Arabia tries to be reassured that China also adopts a security configuration and regional system, which is beneficial to Saudi Arabia. In addition, the assumption of a US retrenchment accentuates the Saudi perception of a necessity to diversify its foreign policy basket while maintaining the alliance with the United States.

Another aspect of this adaptation is the prominence of mutual interests, which surpass a threat based relation. Therefore, such

dynamism runs through Sino-Saudi relations. While the Sino-Iranian comprehensive strategic partnership has not yet materialized, the Saudi one is being implemented with a joint committee chaired by the Saudi Crown Prince and Chinese premier holding annual meetings discussing progress made (Fulton, 2021, p. 212). Thus, again one could notice the way in which Saudi Arabia seeks advantage through a diverse foreign policy with great powers.

Furthermore, Saudi Arabia has created several windows for cooperation with China, including but not limited to the comprehensive strategic partnership. The China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) creates another window of opportunity for Sino-Saudi cooperation. The Chinese-GCC strategic dialogue is another example of Sino-Saudi efforts in expanding bilateral ties. Sino-Saudi relations pursue operational steps to connect through trade, investment, infrastructure and culture. The Maritime Silk Road Initiative also includes Saudi Arabia. In all mentioned cases, the Saudis have delivered substantial results from the frameworks of cooperation inked with China, while Iran remains isolated (Fulton, 2021, pp. 213-215).

Overall, Sino-Saudi cooperation emphasizes several aspects from the Chinese perspective. The Belt and Road Initiative, trade, infrastructure connectivity and diversified energy supplies are aspects of Sino-Saudi relations, which actually have yields for both parties. China avoids clashes with the United States and maintains good relations with both Saudi Arabia and Iran. China has designed its policy in a manner in which US military presence provides security while China reaps economic benefits. China seeks to expand and increase Comprehensive National Power. Thus, it is

trying to achieve political, economic, military and ideational power, while focusing on economic diplomacy for now. China tries to protect energy security while trying not to get involved with military presence (Garlick & Havlová, 2020, pp. 83-84). As already mentioned, this study contends that Saudi Arabia is hedging in a non-bipolar Middle East, while trying to maintain strategic autonomy which is visible in the cases and examples already set forth.

In addition, Saudi Arabia can leverage through its ties with China, in order to constrain and contain Iran. Again, Saudi foreign policy with great powers shows how it can benefit Saudis at state, regional and global levels. The Saudi's are also advancing their diplomacy with each great power through structures and institutions that have taken shape in relations with each of these states. Institutions, structures including frameworks, agreements and partnerships in all realms are devised and utilized in order to develop the ambitious Saudi foreign policy.

8. Conclusion

Saudi Arabia's diversification of foreign policy through relations with other great powers other than the United States, while maintaining its alliance with America can be understood through the aforementioned areas and means of cooperation. Saudi Arabia seeks to use regional frameworks such as the GCC and the Abraham accords to promote this new approach to foreign policy and use integration and connectivity as means of gaining more regional influence through a proactive foreign policy at both regional and international levels. This study tried to provide an understanding of this approach through investigating Saudi

relations with China and Russia and where they posit in this approach and Saudi-American relations through hedging.

Such an approach does not necessitate a zero-sum game either, since it pursues a hedging strategy. Therefore more parties take advantage rather than a zero-sum game. Saudi Arabia is using economic, diplomatic and military cooperation, which are not exclusive to a certain great power, as means of this diversification. It pursues a risk averse foreign policy.

The restoration of relations with Iran, alongside deepening ties with China through investment, construction and other deals and cooperation with Russia in concluding the OPEC+ agreements are all indicatives of a self-assured, autonomous Saudi foreign policy, which tries to act independently while maintaining ties with all the three mentioned great powers at the international level and waltzing with Iranians and Israelis at a regional level.

Overall, Saudi understanding of regional and global balances of power has enabled the country to formulate this sophisticated foreign policy. Indeed, Saudi Arabia and Iran perceive their mutual threats as well. The current Saudi understanding of Iran apparently acknowledges Tehran as a threshold nuclear state and notices the limitations of American security commitments. The Saudis also notice that Israel cannot solely provide Saudi Arabia with a security umbrella.

However one should ask whether Iran and Saudi Arabia have abandoned the mutual threat perception they have, or this is a unilateral alteration? If this restoration of ties leads to an Iranian retreat of its stance regarding the existing realms of competition in the region, Saudi Arabia, Israel and the United States have realized

one of their goals in rolling back Tehran through Chinese mediation. The validity of this scenario is largely dependent on the bargaining that has been done between Iran and Saudi Arabia and how it has affected Iranian positions in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon and elsewhere.

Still the scope of the transformation taking place in Saudi foreign policy is not limited to a Chinese mediated détente with Iran. While Saudi Arabia maintains its military and economic ties with the United States, it is using the windfall of economic power and surplus of resources in order to develop ties with China and Russia. This hedging and diversification is not solely intended at competing with Iran and containing it. It also encompasses the understanding that while the US is reducing its burden of hegemony, there is space and rationality in developing ties with Russia and specifically with China. Thus the Saudis will not be caught off-guard even if a new multi-polarity emerges. In addition, the composition of economic power and security can enhance Saudi relative power. The new approach in Saudi foreign policy also includes economic benefits alongside security concerns.

Saudi Arabia has developed flexibility and adaptability in foreign policy through hedging. Diverse relations with great powers and a pragmatic approach to each power allows Saudi Arabia to reap benefits, while avoiding risks and uncertainties of the international developments and preparing for potential power shifts.

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