

Study

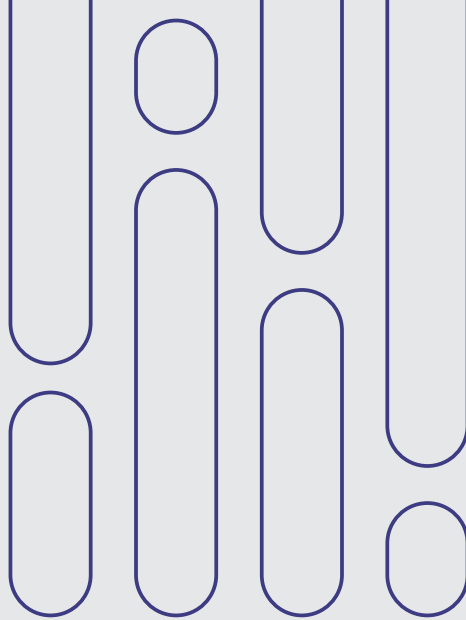
Saudi Options in Light of US-Chinese Polarization

September 02, 2024

Dr. Mahmoud Hamdi Abul-Qassem



RASANAHA
المعهد الدولي للدراسات الإيرانية
International Institute for Iranian Studies



CONTENTS

First: Saudi Arabia and the Transformations in Its Relationship With the US and China	04
Second: Advanced Relations With China and a US Initiative to Regain Influence	9
Third: Saudi Arabia Balancing Its Interests With Both World Powers	13
Conclusion	17

In recent years, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy has evolved significantly due to a range of internal and external factors. These changes have included shifts in its objectives, roles, orientations, behaviors, and the tools it employs on the global stage. A central element of this new approach has been Saudi Arabia's strategy to diversify its international partnerships and engage with multiple global powers, rather than aligning its interests with any single dominant force. This strategy, however, has placed Saudi Arabia at the crossroads of the intensifying geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China. China seeks to strengthen its influence in the Middle East by engaging more closely with Saudi Arabia, recognizing it as a key regional player. Meanwhile, the United States, which had previously underestimated the strategic importance of the Middle East, is reassessing its policy towards Saudi Arabia to prevent China from filling the perceived gap. Given the strategic importance of maintaining strong ties with both the United States and China, Saudi Arabia faces the challenge of balancing these relationships amid ongoing global polarization. The kingdom aims to secure the trust of both powers without compromising its interests or favoring one side over the other.

The study suggests that Saudi Arabia is strategically aiming to maintain a balanced relationship with both Beijing and Washington, avoiding taking sides in the ongoing global rivalry between these two major powers. This approach is seen as a critical national interest for the kingdom, aligning with its recent foreign policy principles of diversifying partnerships and enhancing its flexibility in international affairs. By leveraging the competition between the United States and China and the diplomatic leeway this creates, Saudi Arabia aims to forge a balanced partnership with both nations. This strategy is intended to support its Vision 2030 goals and its ambitions to emerge as a significant player both regionally and internationally.

This study aims to explore the hypothesis using the principles of the realist school of thought, which emphasizes concepts such as power, balance of power, and national interest. The researcher will employ an inductive approach, systematically gathering data and examining interconnected relationships to establish broader general patterns. This method, similar to other scientific approaches, begins by identifying a specific problem or phenomenon, analyzing its details, and determining its causes, before progressing from specific observations to broader generalizations. Within this framework, the national interest approach will be utilized to understand how Riyadh assesses its strategic interests in maintaining a balanced

relationship with both Beijing and Washington, rather than aligning with one power at the expense of the other.

To address the study's questions regarding the nature of Saudi Arabia's interests with both the United States and China, the respective approaches of these two powers amid the current global polarization, and how Saudi Arabia evaluates its national interests to determine its policy options, the study will be organized into the following sections:

1- **Saudi Arabia and the Transformations in Its Relationship With the US and China.**

2- **Advanced Relations With China and a US Initiative to Regain Influence**

3- **Saudi Arabia's Strategy for Balancing Interests with Both Powers**

First: Saudi Arabia and the Transformations in Its Relationship With the US and China

Washington has adopted a strategy of strategic competition on the global stage, and this rivalry has extended its influence into the Middle East. Saudi Arabia has been one of the countries affected by this geopolitical polarization. The effects of this polarization on Saudi Arabia's relationships with both the United States and China can be observed in the following ways:

1-The United States' Wavering Approach in Its Relationship With Saudi Arabia

The relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia is grounded in several core interests, with Saudi Arabia's security concerns being a primary focus. This has led to a longstanding history of high-level cooperation and coordination, particularly in the areas of security and intelligence. The kingdom has traditionally relied on security guarantees from the United States, especially to counter threats from Iran and other regional adversaries. Furthermore, the United States remains Saudi Arabia's main supplier of military equipment. Riyadh believes that no other country, including China, has the military presence in the region or the commitment to provide the security and defense assurances that the United States offers to both Saudi Arabia and its regional neighbors.⁽¹⁾

The second key pillar of the US-Saudi relationship is their strong economic ties, established since the discovery of oil reserves in Saudi Arabia and

solidified through the petrodollar agreement, which linked oil sales to the US dollar. This agreement created substantial economic interdependence between the two countries. The Saudi economy remains heavily connected to the United States, benefiting significantly from US investments, particularly in the oil sector. US energy and petrochemical companies have a significant presence in Saudi Arabia, and the United States maintains multi-billion-dollar partnerships with major Saudi companies like Aramco and SABIC. In 2023, US companies announced new investments exceeding \$3.5 billion during a technology conference in Riyadh. Additionally, Boeing recently secured a deal with Saudi Arabia valued at approximately \$37 billion. Between 2017 and 2023, Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund invested over \$100 billion in the United States.⁽²⁾

While US-Saudi relations also encompass other secondary areas, their longstanding cooperation, particularly in security, has been significantly tested in recent years. As the Middle East became less of a strategic priority for the United States, it reduced its military presence in the region and shifted its focus and resources to Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean to counter China's influence. Concurrently, Saudi Arabia did not receive the level of security cooperation it anticipated in facing regional challenges. Instead, the United States imposed restrictions on the delivery of advanced weapons to the kingdom and exerted pressure over its involvement in the war in Yemen. These actions have led to a decline in Riyadh's confidence in Washington as a reliable strategic partner.

This decline in trust was preceded by several US actions that further widened the gap in confidence between Riyadh and Washington. The United States leveraged issues like human rights and allegations of terrorist financing as pressure points against Saudi Arabia, complicating their relationship and causing significant distrust of the United States as a partner. Moreover, the US policy agenda in the region, which began under President George W. Bush and culminated in the "Arab Spring" and the ensuing regional instability, was a source of frustration for Saudi Arabia and posed a fundamental threat to its stability and sovereignty.

Similarly, former US President Barack Obama's approach to Iran —highlighted by the nuclear agreement, tolerance of Iran's regional expansion, and interference in some regional countries — fueled instability and created a series of crises around Saudi Arabia. This contributed significantly to the erosion of confidence in Washington as a security ally. Although President Donald Trump attempted to mend relations and adjust US policy towards Saudi Arabia, his actions were largely opportunistic and did not

signify a fundamental strategic shift. The perceived retreat of the US protective umbrella from the region, and its occasional abandonment of Saudi Arabia, particularly evident in its lack of defense support during the 2019 Houthi attacks on Saudi oil refineries, has deepened Riyadh's skepticism about the reliability of US security guarantees.

The onset of President Joe Biden's administration marked a pivotal and challenging period in US-Saudi relations. Relations deteriorated sharply, revealing a perceived abandonment of Saudi Arabia by its strategic ally, despite shared interests in various areas. The Biden administration attempted to pressure the kingdom into adopting a specific oil policy, neglecting Saudi Arabia's critical need for a stable oil market and balanced pricing that benefits both producers and consumers.

The shale gas revolution in the United States had already led to a dramatic fivefold decrease in US oil imports from Saudi Arabia between 2012 and 2022, with China emerging as the largest importer of Saudi oil. This shift had previously reduced the energy sector's significance in Washington's regional calculations. However, the energy issue resurfaced on the US agenda following the war in Ukraine. Saudi Arabia's refusal to increase oil production in response to rising prices after the Russian invasion highlighted the growing rift between Riyadh and Washington. This stance was particularly notable given Riyadh's historical support for US positions, further emphasizing the deepening divide.

Thus, it became evident that the United States had come to the conclusion that the region needed to be prepared to address its own issues, aiming to alleviate the unnecessary burden on Washington and redirect its focus towards developments in the South China Sea.

2- Saudi-Chinese Desire to Forge a Partnership and Fill the Vacuum

During a period of mistrust and misalignment in US-Saudi relations, Saudi foreign policy underwent significant transformations under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. One of the major achievements of the crown prince was the effective overhaul of the kingdom's policy, freeing it from historical constraints and rigid alliances. Instead, Saudi Arabia took the initiative to reformulate its foreign policy, adapting its strategies and tools to align with contemporary developments. This shift was managed within a robust institutional framework that balanced internal and external demands while prioritizing Saudi national interests above all other considerations.

From a realist perspective and with a comprehensive vision to strengthen its position and leadership, Saudi Arabia has adopted a foreign policy focused on diversifying partnerships. This approach has enabled the kingdom to achieve considerable independence in defining its interests and priorities, aligning them with national goals rather than adhering to the agendas of major powers. Saudi Arabia aims to avoid the polarization and alignment strategies pursued by international powers, instead promoting regional stability as a foundation for development and cooperation. By navigating a balanced path, the kingdom seeks to avoid the pitfalls of current global polarization.

The void left by Washington in the Middle East, coupled with Riyadh's realization that it could not fully depend on US support or its regional presence — especially after the United States shifted its focus to East Asia to counter China's growing global influence — was a key factor in Saudi Arabia reassessing its foreign policy. Saudi Arabia, having been significantly impacted by the fluctuations in US policy and disillusioned by Washington's regional strategies that allowed Iran to pose a greater threat to regional security and stability, sought to demonstrate through its new foreign policy approach that it has viable alternatives. This shift also served to signal that there are substantial consequences for sacrificing relations with the kingdom to achieve other geopolitical balances.

Similar to Saudi Arabia, China, facing pressures in its regional environment due to US strategies, began to craft a new external approach aimed at shifting the competition with the United States to areas outside its core interests. This alignment of interests between Beijing and Riyadh facilitated the development of their relations. A key milestone in this evolution was the historic visit of the Chinese President to Saudi Arabia in December 2022, which marked the beginning of a comprehensive strategic partnership between the two nations. This visit not only deepened Sino-Saudi ties but also opened opportunities for China to forge stronger relations with Gulf states and the broader Arab world. It provided a platform for advancing China's major initiatives, particularly the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with Saudi Arabia playing a crucial geopolitical role. The kingdom's strategic location, bridging China's ambitions with Africa to the west and Europe to the north, was seen as vital. Additionally, this engagement allowed China to test its strategy of filling the void created by US regional policies that aimed to preoccupy China with crises elsewhere.

While China viewed its engagement with the Middle East as a strategic countermeasure to US pressure, including the Taiwan issue and other re-

gional concerns, Saudi Arabia saw its partnership with China as advantageous for its own interests, aspirations, and national plans. This partnership enhances Saudi Arabia's options and balances its relations among international powers. Both countries aim to develop bilateral relations which are primarily focused on oil and trade into a broader, more comprehensive partnership. This expanded cooperation includes infrastructure projects, the transfer of advanced technology, and even extends to the security and defense fields.⁽³⁾

These efforts have yielded significant results, bolstering trust between China and Saudi Arabia and advancing bilateral cooperation across economic, technological, and political domains. This strengthened partnership facilitated China's historic mediation between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Beijing's involvement in the talks, led by Iraq, played a crucial role in easing tensions and restoring diplomatic relations between Riyadh and Tehran, culminating in an agreement in March 2023. This development has set the stage for a pioneering initiative aimed at achieving regional stability and fostering a framework of understanding between Iran and other regional countries, shifting the focus from confrontation to cooperation.

The Chinese initiative marked a significant breakthrough in the Middle East by introducing a novel security approach that sought to create an opening in the region's security landscape, which had traditionally been dominated by Washington. This move challenged the US security strategy, which relies on establishing competing security structures to manage its interests and exert influence. The agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran provided China with an opportunity to expand its influence and presence in the region, leveraging the newfound stability to increase investments and forge new partnerships. This aligns with the Chinese president's broader global initiatives, which aim to rival US international leadership on both security and economic fronts.

The evolution of Chinese-Saudi relations appears to herald a new era of mutual trust and growing common interests. This development marks a strategic repositioning within the current international and regional landscape, focusing on advancing the vital interests of both nations. It also represents a collaborative effort to enhance regional security and stability, which supports the flow of interests between China and Saudi Arabia, particularly in the economic and trade sectors, and reinforces their international standing.

Second: Advanced Relations With China and a US Initiative to Regain Influence

Saudi Arabia's evolving relationship with China has led to a number of interests that have become crucial to Riyadh. This growing alignment has alarmed Washington, which is concerned about the potential geopolitical implications and has sought to counteract this expanding cooperation. In response, the United States has proposed a new initiative aimed at shaping the Middle East in a way that aligns with its own interests. The increasing importance of the Saudi-Chinese relationship, coupled with US efforts to constrain this partnership, can be understood as follows:

1- Growing Saudi Interests With China

Saudi-Chinese relations have deep historical roots and have been significantly strengthened through the development of a strategic partnership. The most crucial aspect of this partnership is the economic dimension, with China emerging as the kingdom's most important international economic partner. China is the largest importer of hydrocarbon exports from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, sourcing over 50% of its oil from the region. Specifically, Saudi Arabia supplies 18% of China's oil needs, making it the second-largest oil supplier to Beijing, after Russia. This position for Saudi Arabia has been reinforced since Western sanctions affected Russian oil exports.⁽⁴⁾

Saudi Arabia is a key partner for China in the BRI. The kingdom has engaged in several partnerships with Chinese companies on infrastructure projects related to the BRI, including developments in ports, high-speed railways, roads and industrial zones along the Gulf region and the Red Sea coast. In the first half of 2022 alone, Saudi Arabia attracted \$5.5 billion in investments and contracts through the BRI, positioning it as the second-largest recipient of Chinese investment under the initiative globally. A key aspect of the Saudi-Chinese partnership is the growing technological collaboration, which has enabled Saudi Arabia to advance its digital infrastructure and embrace new technologies. This includes developments in artificial intelligence, digital transformation, fifth-generation networks, smart city applications, and large cloud data centers. Notably, in September 2023, Huawei launched a new "cloud region" in Riyadh to support government services and AI applications. Additionally, Saudi Arabia

hosts Chinese experts leading institutions and companies focused on AI research. To further strengthen this cooperation, Saudi Arabia is also implementing an initiative to teach the Chinese language in schools, aiming to deepen both official and public connections between the two nations. The cooperation between Saudi Arabia and China spans several key areas, including rare metals, supply chains, electric vehicles, renewable energy, and global energy security. The two countries have signed numerous agreements in hydrogen energy, electric vehicle production, and information technology. Notably, the Chinese Silk Road Fund acquired a 49% stake in ACWA Power, a major Saudi renewable energy company, which plays a significant role in the kingdom's renewable energy projects. Additionally, the China Power Engineering Corporation secured a contract worth 6.98 billion yuan (\$972 million) to build a solar power plant in Saudi Arabia.⁽⁵⁾ This is part of a broader series of renewable energy deals aimed at supporting Saudi Arabia's economic diversification efforts in anticipation of a post-fossilfuel era.⁽⁶⁾

Following a reduction in defense system sales by the United States, Saudi Arabia has significantly increased its cooperation with China in the military sector. Since 2017, the kingdom has collaborated with Chinese companies to develop and manufacture military drones and ballistic missiles. Saudi Arabia has expanded its acquisition of Chinese weapons, including a significant number of combat drones such as the CH4 and Wing Loong models. The two countries have also established a partnership for the design and manufacture of additional drones and the transfer of related technology to Saudi Arabia. Chinese companies had a notable presence at Saudi defense exhibitions in early 2024, overshadowing US participation. US reports suggest that Saudi Arabia is moving towards local ballistic missile production with Chinese support. Additionally, Riyadh and Beijing have signed several agreements in civil nuclear cooperation. During the Chinese president's visit, the two nations finalized partnership agreements valued at \$30 billion, indicating growing and multifaceted defense and technological collaboration.⁽⁷⁾

While China is not traditionally viewed as a primary security provider in the Middle East, there have been indications of its growing security footprint in the region since 2017. A significant development was the establishment of a Chinese naval base in Djibouti, marking the first such military installation outside of China. Following this, the Chinese navy increased its presence with frequent visits to regional ports and engaged in joint naval exercises with Middle Eastern countries, including Saudi Arabia. In October

2023, the Saudi and Chinese navies conducted their second joint exercise, known as “Blue Sword,” in Zhanjiang, Guangdong Province.⁽⁸⁾ This military cooperation extended further as Saudi Arabia’s Ministry of Defense hosted Chinese military officials to exchange expertise.

More importantly, for the first time, China is actively engaging in regional conflicts by mediating between Iran and Saudi Arabia, successfully ending the rift between the two countries. This mediation has been pivotal in moderating Iran’s behavior and ensuring its compliance with the terms of the agreement. Consequently, China plays a crucial role in supporting Saudi Arabia’s policy of regional calm and stability, addressing contentious issues with Iran, and managing Iran’s ambitions and interventions that could potentially undermine the kingdom’s interests and stability.

In line with Saudi Arabia’s interest in strengthening its international presence, China has welcomed the kingdom’s initiatives to join multilateral organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS. This aligns with Saudi Arabia’s aspirations to open up to the world, diversify its alliances, and explore various global models. Through this approach, the kingdom is striving to establish itself as a significant international and regional player, demonstrating its emergence as a new rising power within a transforming global system. This system is characterized by expanding geopolitical influence, greater freedom of movement, and a pragmatic foreign policy free from ideological commitments or external dictates. Saudi Arabia aims to maintain a balanced stance, avoiding alignment with any particular global power bloc while leveraging ongoing international conflicts to enhance its own position and influence.

2- US Policy Reviews for Containment and Reclamation of Influence

The United States has been closely monitoring China’s growing presence in the Middle East, particularly noting Saudi Arabia’s role in facilitating this expansion. At the 2022 Jeddah Summit, President Biden reassured Arab leaders that the United States remains committed to the region, stating, “We will not walk away and leave a vacuum for China, Russia, or Iran to fill... The United States is not going anywhere.” The conflict in Ukraine has further heightened Washington’s concerns, underscoring a strategic miscalculation regarding the region’s significance and Saudi Arabia’s influence on the global stage, especially in terms of diplomatic coordination and oil policy. This conflict has also highlighted US apprehensions that Saudi Arabia no longer feels bound by Washington’s diplomatic and security agenda, a sentiment that became evident when the kingdom resisted

US pressure to increase oil production following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The United States perceived Saudi Arabia's recent shifts, particularly its engagements with Iran and China, as potentially undermining its global standing. For decades, Saudi policy towards Iran aligned closely with US interests, maintaining a unified stance against perceived threats. However, Saudi Arabia's unexpected and pragmatic decision to normalize relations with Iran marked a significant departure from this alignment. This agreement was fundamentally at odds with the US approach to regional security, which has emphasized maintaining influence through comprehensive security coordination in the region, including involving Israel, to counter the Iranian threat.

The Gaza war and attacks by Iran's regional allies on US forces across multiple fronts highlighted what some viewed as a strategic error by Washington in reducing its presence in the Middle East. This situation compelled the United States to reassess its strategy, leading to a redeployment of forces and military assets to the region, albeit with diminished coordination with its traditional allies. This shift in dynamics was evident in Saudi Arabia's decision not to participate in Operation Prosperity Guardian aimed at securing trade in the Red Sea — an indicator of the strained relations and divergent approaches between the United States and its key allies.

Recognizing Saudi Arabia's growing influence on the global stage and its capacity for more independent decision-making, especially amid US-China competition, Washington has reconsidered its relations with Riyadh. The kingdom's strategic position in energy and economic sectors has become increasingly critical, especially as the world pivots towards renewable energy sources. Saudi Arabia's focus on technological advancement and financing climate-friendly energy projects further enhances its global significance. Reflecting this reassessment, one notable shift in US policy has been the resumption of advanced weapons and ammunition sales to Saudi Arabia, which had been restricted since 2017.⁽⁹⁾

The expansion of logistics, transportation and energy networks across the Middle East and North Africa has positioned the region as a central hub in global trade networks. This is due in part to established routes like the Suez Canal, as well as new and proposed trade corridors. Additionally, the region's ports and airports have taken on an increasingly significant role in international trade. These developments have further enhanced the geopolitical and commercial importance of the kingdom's strategic location.⁽¹⁰⁾ From this perspective, the United States sought to manage its differences

with Saudi Arabia by initiating a strategic dialogue in early 2023. During these talks, Washington presented its vision for regional security, which included a proposal for Saudi Arabia to normalize relations with Israel and join a comprehensive defense alliance in the Middle East that would include Israel and be led by the United States. Later in the discussions, Washington introduced the idea of an international corridor project linking India to Europe through the Middle East, specifically via the UAE and Saudi Arabia. This initiative aims primarily to counter the influence of China's BRI. However, Saudi Arabia responded with specific conditions, seeking a strategic and sustainable security guarantee akin to the US partnership with Japan to address its security concerns and rebuild trust in the United States as an ally. Riyadh also requested a project to construct a nuclear power plant with uranium enrichment capabilities to bolster its energy sector and balance nuclear activities in Iran and Israel. Additionally, Saudi Arabia called for a clear strategy for resolving the Palestinian issue.⁽¹¹⁾

The US approach is clearly motivated by a desire to regain regional influence while curbing the expanding reach of China, particularly in its relationship with Saudi Arabia, the region's most significant power. Washington is notably focused on ensuring that Riyadh continues to conduct its oil transactions in US dollars rather than in China's currency, the yuan. Additionally, the United States aims to limit the expansion of Saudi Arabia's trade relations with China, especially in the technology sector.

Third: Saudi Arabia Balancing Its Interests With Both World Powers

It is evident that Saudi Arabia seeks to maintain a balanced and advanced relationship with both China and the United States, while avoiding taking sides in a way that could compromise its national interests. The complex web of Saudi interests with these two major powers, including the intersections and dynamics involved, as well as the kingdom's anticipated strategy, potential benefits and challenges, can be outlined as follows:

1- An Expected Approach

Maintaining a balanced relationship with both Beijing and Washington is crucial for Saudi Arabia, reflecting the kingdom's desire to position itself strategically on the global stage. This balanced approach is difficult to abandon as it is rooted in solid principles that have become a cornerstone

of Saudi foreign policy: diversifying partnerships, maintaining independence, and avoiding polarization.

This strategy underscores Saudi Arabia's recent foreign policy, which has been marked by a blend of realism and pragmatism, continuity, and a focus on national interests. Furthermore, Saudi policymakers have gained resilience against external pressures, as their policies enjoy legitimacy and broad domestic support. This is particularly true in light of the ambitious national projects underway and the kingdom's success in achieving significant progress, positioning it favorably on various fronts.

Saudi Arabia's stance on its relationship with Washington is that it should not come at the expense of its ties with Beijing, and vice versa. While Washington does not seek a complete severance of relations with Riyadh, such a break is unlikely given the essential, sustainable and interconnected interests that define their partnership. The United States remains a key security provider, defense partner, and crucial source of weaponry in the region. Although the United States appears to be advancing initiatives to address Saudi security concerns and strengthen ties, Riyadh does not aim to revert to the historical model of alignment where it merely followed Washington's lead. Instead, Saudi Arabia seeks to recalibrate this relationship based on balanced principles and mutual interests.

Simultaneously, Riyadh is not inclined to forfeit its relationship with Beijing to favor Washington. Saudi Arabia's engagement with China is not driven by a desire to spite or retaliate against the United States, but rather reflects internal dynamics, the vision of its leadership, and the new principles shaping its international role. This approach also acknowledges the global context, China's significant rise, and the potential benefits of collaboration across various sectors. China's focus on comprehensive development aligns well with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, suggesting that this national vision could be harmonized with China's major initiatives, such as the BRI.

It is noteworthy that Saudi Arabia has established strong and enduring relationships with both Russia and China. Reversing these relationships could damage the kingdom's image, reliability and standing on the international stage. Consequently, Saudi Arabia is unlikely to back down from these partnerships under any external pressure or demands. The kingdom aims to consolidate these efforts into a new foreign policy approach that is acceptable to all parties. Crucially, all sides recognize Saudi Arabia as an indispensable political and economic partner both regionally and globally, allowing for a balanced and reciprocal relationship.

Saudi Arabia is keen to maintain constructive ties with both major global powers without becoming entangled in any polarization or regional cold war. This stance is particularly important given that, through its relationship with China, Saudi Arabia has successfully shifted its relations with Iran from conflict to appeasement and managed differences more effectively. Both countries appear committed to a new type of relationship that, while not necessarily reaching full cooperation, avoids outright confrontation, with China acting as a guarantor of this agreement. This strategy aligns with Riyadh's interest in fostering regional stability and avoiding conflicts that could drain its resources and hinder its ambitious development goals.

Saudi Arabia has come to recognize the importance of maintaining balance within the global power structure, particularly because it believes that the lack of balance and the resurgence of competition have undermined global security and peace, sparking conflicts and wars. The kingdom also views the Western system with some skepticism, particularly regarding the agenda the West attempts to impose on other nations, which has contributed to numerous crises. In contrast, the Eastern models, represented by China and Russia, do not push such an agenda. They refrain from imposing conditions on other countries, respect national sovereignty, and avoid interfering in internal affairs. Additionally, some modern Western values conflict with the Islamic values upheld by Saudi Arabia. Therefore, fostering balanced relationships with global powers not only allows Saudi Arabia to resist external pressures and dictates but also provides it with alternatives and leverage to safeguard its interests. This balanced approach enhances its role as a mediator, widely regarded as impartial and acceptable to all parties, and a role that it is increasingly called upon to fulfill.

Another factor influencing the kingdom's strategy to balance its relationships with global powers is its desire to protect itself from the West's unpredictability and its growing tendency to use sanctions against both adversaries and, at times, even allies. For example, the West's seizure of Russian assets to finance Ukraine's conflict illustrates a readiness to control financial assets and resources in disputes and even use them to fuel military conflicts, rather than relying on international law.

Saudi Arabia is on the brink of significant achievements and projects, such as hosting Expo 2030, organizing the 2034 FIFA World Cup, developing winter sports initiatives, launching major tourism ventures, and more. The kingdom aims to attract broad international participation in these endeavors. Therefore, it is not in its interest to become involved in polarizing

conflicts that could jeopardize the success of these future projects, which are critical to its strategic goals.

2- Gains and Potential Challenges

Amid the current dynamics among global powers, the ongoing international competition offers Saudi Arabia flexibility and freedom in its decision-making. This environment elevates the kingdom's significance to major powers and opens up opportunities for forming multilateral alliances that align with Saudi Arabia's national objectives. It also provides the kingdom with various alternatives, partners, diverse sources of weaponry, and strategic options to counter external pressures. This balanced approach supports Saudi Arabia's development agenda and Vision 2030. By diversifying its partnerships, Saudi Arabia has effectively communicated that, contrary to the US perspective, it can forge its own path in multilateral international relations that aligns with its projects and national interests. This stance has prompted the United States to reassess its approach towards the kingdom, leading to new cooperation initiatives aimed at addressing Saudi concerns and moving away from policies of pressure and imposition. Thus, a balanced strategy appears to best serve Saudi interests. However, maintaining a balanced relationship to protect its interests poses significant challenges, given the intensifying polarization between Washington and Beijing, which increasingly influences the trajectory of international relations. As the United States strives to uphold its global influence, it may become less tolerant of not only its adversaries but also allies who strengthen coalitions perceived as counter to its leadership. Saudi Arabia, in particular, is viewed as a longstanding strategic ally of Washington, having maintained close ties for nearly a century. There is a growing sentiment among Americans across the political spectrum that countries aligning too closely with the Chinese Communist Party cannot remain US partners.

Saudi Arabia faces several unresolved issues with Washington, including the desire for a defense treaty that Riyadh views as essential for security cooperation. The kingdom is also seeking support for a peaceful nuclear program, access to advanced US weaponry, relaxed restrictions on transferring sensitive technologies, and a faster review of Saudi investments in US technology and critical infrastructure. These complex issues are unlikely to be resolved easily given the ongoing geopolitical competition between the United States and China. If Washington does agree to these demands, it

is expected to attach conditions that may not be acceptable to Riyadh. Key among these conditions could be restrictions on Saudi Arabia's relationship with Beijing, which would undermine the kingdom's interests and international credibility. Other potential conditions might include normalization with Israel and joining the Abraham Accords, a prospect that seems increasingly unlikely. This is particularly true as Saudi Arabia's demand for a clear, irreversible path to a Palestinian state clashes with the extreme positions of the Israeli right, which is driven by religious and expansionist ideologies. Additionally, Saudi Arabia is wary of participating in a security framework that does not aim for comprehensive peace and could lead to a regional cold war with Iran, which would undermine the kingdom's interest in maintaining regional stability essential for its Vision 2030 and ambitious development plans.⁽¹²⁾

Conclusion

Despite the heightened polarization between the United States and China, it is unlikely that Saudi Arabia will choose to sever its ties with the United States or fully align itself with Beijing. Instead, Riyadh is expected to adopt a cautious and strategic approach, aiming to strengthen its relations with both powers in a manner that advances its critical interests. By leveraging its growing ties with Beijing, Saudi Arabia seeks to maximize its benefits from Washington. Realistically, Riyadh cannot afford to forgo a balanced relationship with both major global poles. The United States remains an irreplaceable security partner in the region, with an unmatched military presence and importance for the Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia. The kingdom continues to coordinate closely with Washington on security matters. In contrast, the recent Gaza conflict has highlighted China's reluctance to assume a regional security role. China appears indifferent to the US presence in the region and seems unwilling to bear the costs and consequences of military involvement. Instead, it may view US engagement as a way to divert Washington's focus from its own regional challenges, such as those in the South China Sea. Nonetheless, China remains an essential economic partner, particularly in the energy sector. While Washington is likely to be open to deeper Sino-Saudi economic and trade relations, it may have reservations about expanding cooperation into sensitive areas like defense, security, and technology. From this perspective, Saudi Arabia can effectively balance its interests by advocating for its needs with both Washington and Beijing, avoiding becoming a contentious issue between

the two powers. By strengthening relations with both, the kingdom may position itself as a key mediator in mitigating and managing future tensions, thus advancing its internal goals and enhancing its regional and international stature.

ENDNOTES

- (1)** Ali Shihabi, “A Saudi-American Alliance?” Hoover Institution, July 2023 ,6, accessed August 2024 ,21, <https://n9.cl/dytfbt>
- (2)** Felicia Schwartz and Andrew England, “How Saudi Arabia Won Back Biden,” Financial Times, June 2024 17, accessed August 2024 ,21, <https://n9.cl/fnaqe>
- (3)** Christopher S. Chivvis, Aaron David Miller, and Beatrix Geaghan-Breiner, “Saudi Arabia in the Emerging World Order,” Carnegie Endowment, November 2023 ,6, accessed August ,21 2024, <https://n9.cl/c730e>
- (4)** “Russia Overtakes Saudi Arabia as China’s Top Oil Supplier,” Al Jazeera, March 2023 ,20, accessed August 2024 ,21, <https://n9.cl/vu2wd>
- (5)** “China’s Silk Road Fund Acquires %49 Stake in ACWA Power RenewCo,” Power Technology, May 2020 ,11, accessed August 2024 ,21, <https://n9.cl/4igr8>
- (6)** “China Energy Engineering Signs 972\$ Million Solar Deal With Saudi Partners”, Reuters, August 2024 ,13, accessed August 2024 ,21, <https://n9.cl/q3whfj>
- (7)** Ali Jumaa al-Obaidi, “Is Saudi Arabia Drawing the Lines of the Security and Geo-Economic Future?” Al Jazeera Net, January 2024 ,5, accessed August 2024 ,21, <https://n9.cl/mbp05>
- (8)** Duncan Bartlett, “China and Saudi Arabia: A Partnership Under Pressure,” The Diplomat, November 2023 ,20, accessed August 2024 ,21, <https://n9.cl/loroa>
- (9)** “US Lifts Ban on Offensive Weapons Sales to Saudi Arabia,” CNN, August 2024 ,10, accessed August 2024 ,25, <https://n9.cl/3f5wy>
- (10)** Barin Kayaoglu, Stephen Kenney, “The United States and China in the Middle East: Three Scenarios to 2050,” Middle East Institute, April 2024 ,30, accessed August 2024 ,21, <https://n9.cl/m173wk>
- (11)** Hisham al-Ghannam and Omar al-Omran, “Saudi Arabia Will Not Abandon China for America,” Eight, August 2024 ,3, accessed August 2024 ,21, <https://n9.cl/hd9xn>
- (12)** Andrew Exum, “The Saudi Deal the U.S. Actually Needs,” The Atlantic, May 2024 ,31, accessed August 2024 ,21, <https://n9.cl/mz708s>

