

Saudi Arabia's Strategic Hedging in an Emerging Multipolar World: Balancing Security Ties with the United States and Economic Engagement with China

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Abstract

The evolving global power dynamics and increasing rivalry between the United States and China have presented new strategic difficulties for Saudi Arabia. Current research has primarily focused on Saudi Arabia's security alliance with the United States and its growing economic ties with China independently, with little consideration of how Riyadh balances both partnerships concurrently. This research questions: How does Saudi Arabia manage its enduring security alliance with the United States while increasing economic ties with China in light of the evolving global power dynamics? Utilizing Power Transition Theory and employing a qualitative research approach, the study contends that Saudi Arabia is not supplanting one dominant power with another but is instead following a multidimensional strategy that integrates security collaboration with the United States and economic interaction with China. The results indicate that this method allows Riyadh to broaden partnerships, strengthen strategic independence, and promote its national interests in the context of global power rivalry. The research adds to current academic work by illustrating how a regional power manages power transition via distinct security and economic alliances.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia; Power Transition Theory; United States; China; Strategic Autonomy; Global Power Competition; Security Partnership; Economic Engagement.

Introduction

The structure of today's global order is undergoing deep changes, moving from the post-Cold War unipolar order governed by the USA to a multipolar and competitive order (Kausch, 2015). The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is at the Centre of this geopolitical realignment. Riyadh, known for its insular definition of the rentier state and for its reliance on an explicit "oil-for-security" paradigm with Washington, has been aggressively redefining its foreign policy framework under the wing of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and the "Vision 2030" agenda (Qin, 2025). The Middle East has become a major battleground in great-power competition between the United States and a rapidly rising People's Republic of China (Zhao, 2025). As the American unipolar system becomes structurally weaker and overstretched, Saudi Arabia is by no means a passive recipient of such systemic changes, but instead has been acting as a dynamic, self-reliant middle power (Chaziza, 2026)-a country with a huge reservoir of hydrocarbon resources, sovereign capital and a strategic geographic location at the Afro-Eurasia maritime crossing point.

The pivoting of this dramatic geostrategic shift can be better understood by the prism of strategic hedging. Neoclassical realist literature specifies strategic hedging as an action undertaken by non-hegemonic states to alive the risks of the system and to maximize state autonomy by not outright and distinctly choosing between the great powers (Joufar, 2025). Saudi Arabia has denied any

inclination toward traditional balancing or band wagoning (Chaziza, 2026) as it is constantly challenged by the uncertainty and insecurity of the U.S. security in the Persian Gulf. Rather, Riyadh has intentionally kept its basic institutionalized defense cooperation with the United States and has institutionalized a broad strategic partnership with Beijing (Qin, 2025). This is a dual-track strategy, where the Kingdom takes advantage of the structural nature of great power competition, and secures leverage from one power, while maximizing the concessions from the other.

Most importantly, Saudi Arabia has become China's new economic and technological gateway to the Global South, and Middle East economies. Saudi Vision 2030 and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) offer a complementary fit, with Sino-Saudi ties growing from conventional oil sales to key areas like infrastructure development, artificial intelligence, telecommunications, and renewable energy (Qin, 2025). The pinnacle of this diplomatic shift was the success of Beijing's mediation in the Saudi Iranian reconciliation, reflecting China's intent to invest in its diplomatic influence in regions historically under the hard power of the United States (Chaziza, 2026). Furthermore, Saudi Arabia's inclusion in non-Western multilateral institutions, including becoming a dialogue partner in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and a member of the BRICS countries, enhances its position as a center in the new global multipolar world order.

The purpose of this study is therefore to explore the multifaceted geopolitical and macroeconomic factors influencing the Saudi foreign policy's course today. It examines a nexus of three developments: the decline of U.S. influence; the expansion of Beijing's geoeconomic influence; and Riyadh's regional efforts to assert strategic autonomy, and how the Kingdom is seeking to navigate the choppy waters of international hegemonies. In conclusion this thesis posits that Saudi Arabia is not a satellite of a unipolar security architecture, but is a “key sovereign pivot” which is actively shaping the nature of the emerging multipolar security order through its foreign policy “multi-alignment. In conclusion, this thesis argues that Saudi Arabia is no longer a satellite of a unipolar order in security but is one of the “key sovereign pivots” playing an active role in shaping the nature of the emerging multipolar world order through its “multi-aligned” foreign policy.

To study the effects of the shift from unipolar international order to multi-polar international order on Saudi foreign policy and international orientation, to study the Saudi Arabia's security cooperation with the USA and its growing economic and technological cooperation with China under Vision 2030 and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), to analyze the importance of strategic hedging to strengthen the Saudi Arabia's strategic autonomy, regional influence and emerging middle power status in the changing regional and international geopolitical landscape.

Problem Statement

The international system has changed from the American dominated unipolar world to a multipolar world, which has significantly transformed the strategic choices of middle powers, particularly Saudi Arabia. At the same time, Riyadh has been strengthening its economic, technological and diplomatic cooperation with China, such as the Vision 2030 and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While there is a vast body of literature on U.S.-Saudi relations, the rising importance of Chinese influence in the Gulf, and Saudi Arabia's economic transformation, it largely addresses these topics in isolation, with little analysis of how Saudi Arabia manages its security reliance on the U.S. while simultaneously strengthening its economic relationship with China. This study therefore goes to the missing link by exploring the Saudi Arabia's practices of strategic hedging and foreign policy diversification to pursue national and strategic interests and enhance the country's strategic autonomy in the new multipolar international landscape.

Literature Review

Global Hegemony and the Transition toward Multipolarity

Traditionally, the international system after the end of the Cold War has been considered a unipolar structure, where the United States was the sole power to influence global governance and regional security architectures through its military, economic, technological and institutional power. Charles Krauthammer (1990) called the first post-Cold War years the "Unipolar Moment," one that would shape international politics over the next few decades. Likewise, argues that the liberal international order established under American leadership established enduring alliances and governance structures that further entrenched American control of the world.

The multipolar model is beginning to replace the unipolar model, however, in more recent literature. Geopolitical great-power rivalry is the inevitable consequence of the rapid rise of China's economic power, argues John Mearsheimer (2014); he believes this will inevitably lead to strategic competition between the two powers. Similarly, Graham Allison (2017) says that the structural conflict between a dominant power and the emerging power has a high probability of triggering geopolitical conflict, known as "Thucydides Trap" (Allison, 2017).

The Evolution of Saudi-American Strategic Partnership

Historically, the U.S.-Saudi partnership has been based on the concept of "oil for security." The United States took on the responsibility to protect the territorial integrity of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and to provide reliable access to world energy sources, starting at the meeting of U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and King Abdulaziz, aboard the USS Quincy in 1945.

Ferdinand Gregory Gause III suggests that the collaboration was unaffected by the ideological differences because they both had similar interests in the stability of the region, security of energy supplies, and the containment of rivals. In the Cold War era, Saudi Arabia was a key component of the U.S. strategy in the Middle East, buoying up U.S. interests and offsetting the influence of the Soviet Union (Gause F. G., 2009).

However, there have been recent indications of tensions in the relationship. Bruce Riedel (2018) and Karen Elliott House (2012) list several issues that have led to bilateral tensions: Oil production policies within OPEC+, the Iran nuclear agreement, disagreements over the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia's in search of a more independent foreign policy, and concerns over human rights, after the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. (Riedel, 2017)

Recent literature increasingly shows that the U.S. security umbrella is vital to Saudi security, but Riyadh has ceased to see Washington as the sole strategic partner. Rather, the Saudi policy makers have embraced a foreign policy that is multi-angled, that seeks to minimize reliance on any power from outside.

China's Rise and Strategic Engagement in the Middle East

China's remarkable economic ascent has revolutionized the world of international political economy. David Shambaugh (2013) and Yan Xuetong (2019) suggest that the foreign policy of the People's Republic of China has shifted from Deng Xiaoping's "hide your strength" to Xi Jinping's more aggressive global policy (Shambaugh, 2013). In contrast to the United States, China's Middle East policy is based on three pillars: economic interdependence, non-interference and developmental cooperation. Beijing's aim is to downplay the political aspect and up play the economic aspect, scholars say. Since 2013 China has launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which institutionalizes China's global connectivity approach through infrastructure investments, logistics corridors, digital technology and energy cooperation. The BRI is seen by many as more than an economic project, but as a tool of geopolitical influence, allowing China to gain access to trade routes, diversifying its energy supply, and gaining diplomatic power. Saudi Arabia has a

unique position in this context, as it links Asia, Europe, and Africa, has huge hydrocarbon reserves, and is pursuing economic diversification.

Saudi Arabia within China's Belt and Road Initiative

Jonathan Fulton offers one of the more thorough analyses on the role of Saudi Arabia in the Belt and Road Initiative. Fulton states that Saudi Arabia is the biggest partner for China because of its strategic location, energy exports, and the Saudi Vision 2030 in alignment with the BRI. Fulton points out that China's strategy is one of strategic hedging: Beijing is investing heavily in economic ties with Riyadh, but not actively challenging U.S. military pressure. (Fulton, 2022)

Similarly, point to the convergence of policy measures in the Belt and Road Initiative with those of Saudi Vision 2030. They believe the key points of bilateral relations are cooperation in the field of infrastructure construction and development of industrial parks, renewable energy, financial integration, logistics and technology transfer. (Chen, 2021). Sino-Saudi relations have also moved beyond the current oil sphere, (Chen, 2021), argues, into the field of green technology, hydrogen, renewable energy and carbon capture, digital infrastructure and industrial modernization. This points to the fact that China sees Saudi Arabia as more than a source of energy, as a gateway to the Asian energy production networks and the European and African markets.

Saudi Vision 2030 and Economic Diversification

The launch of Saudi Vision 2030 brought a new paradigm in the Saudi foreign and domestic policy. The literature reviewed confirms that Vision 2030 aims to move towards a less hydrocarbon dependent economy through industrial diversification, foreign direct investment, technological innovation, tourism, renewable energy, logistics and digital transformation. To accomplish these lofty goals, researchers say, international ties must be more diverse than they have been so far, and not just ones that depend on Western economies. Therefore, China has become a perfect partner for both the lending and borrowing side for a number of reasons: it is able to offer infrastructure loans; it is able to provide industrial investment; it is able to offer technological cooperation and expertise; and it is also not imposing any political conditions. A large number of studies highlight the growing participation of Chinese enterprises in Saudi mega projects, such as smart infrastructure, digital technology, telecommunications, logistics hubs and renewable energy, deepening the convergence of Vision 2030 and Belt and Road Initiative. (Chen, 2021)

Strategic Hedging: Between Washington and Beijing

A growing number of International Relations scholars believe that Saudi Arabia is not severing ties with the United States nor embracing China wholeheartedly. Rather, Riyadh has adopted a strategy of strategic hedging by diversifying its security reliance on Washington but increasing its economic ties with Beijing. From this viewpoint, Saudi Arabia is heavily dependent on the U.S. military force, intelligence sharing, sophisticated weapons and regional deterrence, and at the same time fostering trade, technology, infrastructure, and energy links with China. This two-pronged approach allows Saudi Arabia to pursue its national interests, further limit external risks, and adopt a more flexible foreign policy posture in the face of growing Sino-American competition. Saudi foreign policy is not a zero-sum game geopolitical change but rather a balancing strategy as is common in the foreign policies of middle powers in a changing multipolar world. (Qining Qin, 2025)

Economic Statecraft, Energy Security and Geoeconomics

The significance of geoeconomics in this context has become more pronounced than the traditional geopolitics in contemporary literature, too. Infrastructure investment, technological cooperation, financial integration and supply-chain connectivity are now key weapons of statecraft, scholars

say. The Chinese cooperation with Saudi Arabia is an example. Instead of building military alliances, Beijing has been focusing on long-term investment in ports and industrial zones, renewable energy, digital infrastructure, artificial intelligence, telecommunications and logistics networks. At the same time, Saudi Arabia, which is one of the world's biggest suppliers of energy, has employed its role as a supplier to draw in diversified investments from East and West. Economic interdependence has therefore expanded and now is a complement-and in some ways an alternative-to military alliances as a source of strategic influence. (Chaziza, 2026)

Research Gap

Previous studies have explored the U.S.-Saudi security cooperation, Chinese economic involvement in the Gulf, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and Saudi Vision 2030, but they have typically examined each topic separately and not in the context of the geopolitical aspects of these issues. The question of how Saudi Arabia manages to reconcile its strategic partnership with the United States and its growing economic ties with China at the same time, while seeking strategic autonomy via economic diversifications, technological cooperation, investment diplomacy and involvement in multilateral forums like BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has received little attention recently. Furthermore, the recent regional developments such as the Saudi-Iran rapprochement, the Israel-Gaza conflict, Red Sea security issues and U.S.-Iran confrontation are not sufficiently accounted for in the analysis of Saudi foreign policy. Another theoretical imbalance is the fact that most studies remain focused on a single theory rather than combining the theories from the Power Transition Theory, Neorealism, Hegemonic Stability Theory, Complex Interdependence Theory, and Strategic Hedging Theory. This study aims to tackle both the empirical and theoretical voids by proposing that Saudi Arabia is moving towards a strategic hedging strategy that will allow it to maintain its security alliance with the United States and further economic cooperation with China in order to bolster its strategic autonomy and influence in the new multipolar global landscape.

Theoretical Framework

Power Transition Theory

The first macro level theory to explain the shifting global balance of power was the Power Transition Theory developed by Organski in 1958 and later elaborated by Kugler and Lemke in 1996. Power Transition Theory is a new theory of international balance which is more concerned with the hierarchy of the international system and the role of a dominant hegemonic power in maintaining international order, rather than the balance it experiences. With the coming of the new power the capabilities grow closer and closer to the dominant power, and the prospect of systemic instability and geopolitical realignment increases. In the current international system, China's astonishing economic growth and technological advances, military modernization, and expanding diplomatic reach have been causing a rebalancing of world power, diminishing the relative influence of the United States.

In this context, Saudi Arabia's changing foreign policy would be better understood. For decades the Kingdom has served as one of the major backbones of the American-led international order, providing stable energy supplies to the world, while also getting its security guarantees from Washington. But China's rise to being Saudi Arabia's top trading partner, its pivotal position in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and its growing infrastructure, renewable energy and digital technology investments have rewritten Riyadh's strategy calculations. Saudi Arabia is not going to substitute the United States for China but, in the process of adjusting to an international system that features multiple centers of power, it is diversifying its strategic partnerships. The Power Transition Theory is thus an effective explanation of the growing strategic autonomy of the

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its attempt to optimize national interests in the midst of transition from the unipolar to the multipolar world.

Research Methodology

The methodology adopted by this research is qualitative interpretivist. This methodology is being used in the study because it intends to comprehend the meanings and strategic narratives in official policies and elite statements, rather than establishing a causal relationship through quantitative techniques. The research uses a single qualitative case study regarding Saudi Arabia as the research focus. Saudi Arabia is considered a strategically important regional player and, therefore, an appropriate case to demonstrate how states work with security ties with one major power while enhancing economic relationship with other powers. The research relies on Power Transition Theory (PTT) as a theoretical framework that explains how changes in the international system influence Saudi Arabia's foreign policy. The information for the study is collected through qualitative document analysis of official documents and authoritative publications related to Saudi Arabia, including Saudi Vision 2030 and the speeches of Saudi leaders. Therefore, the material selected for the analysis is based on the principle of purposive selection that ensures the relevance of the documents.

Discussion and Analysis

Saudi Arabia's Strategic Repositioning in the Middle East

Saudi Arabia has been moving towards a more independent foreign policy gradually. The United States continues to be its major security ally, but Riyadh has broadened its diplomatic and economic ties with other emerging powers, such as China and Russia. Saudi Arabia is building a new competitive edge in the region through Vision 2030, which aims to make it an economic hub and enable it to move away from pivoting around any one great power. This repositioning is in line with the Kingdom's response to the new multi-polar world order (Gause F. G., 2022)

The Gulf Balance of Power and Regional Competition

The security environment in the Gulf has changed from the old system of rigid alliance politics to a more flexible system of balancing power. Saudi Arabia has adopted a tactic of 'strategic hedging', with the Kingdom maintaining close security cooperation with the United States, and at the same time developing economic and diplomatic ties with China and regional engagement with Iran. Riyadh's flexibility in using several external entities to bring regional stability and decrease geopolitical tension was highlighted by its Saudi-Iran reconciliation mediated by China (Kuik, 2021)

Saudi Arabia Between American Security and Chinese Economics

Saudi Arabia is gradually distinguishing between its security and economic needs. The United States remains on Saudi Arabia's side, keeping it militarily protected, sharing intelligence data and offering high-tech defense systems, while China is Saudi Arabia's biggest trading partner and main investor in the country's infrastructure, tech and energy projects. This is a dual-track approach that will allow for the maximization of economic opportunities for Saudi Arabia while preserving its longstanding security relationship with Washington, making Saudi Arabia a leading case of multi-alignment in today's international political landscape.

Energy Geopolitics and the Emerging Multipolar Economy

Saudi Arabia remains the base of its geopolitical power and influence; energy is the focus. In this regard, OPEC+ has been working closely with Russia both to regulate global oil markets and to provide it with the largest supply of crude oil, especially supplies from China. In addition to

hydrocarbons, cooperation has also grown in the field of renewable energy, production of hydrogen, petrochemicals and digital infrastructure. Thus, Saudi Arabia has increasingly turned to its energy diplomacy as a key means to boost regional influence and global strategic significance (BP, 2026)

The Rise of Saudi Arabia as a Middle Power

The shift towards multipolarity has boosted Saudi Arabia's status as a significant middle power. Riyadh attempts to influence regional and global governance through active participation in the G20, OPEC+, the BRICS and the Gulf Cooperation Council. Its rising prominence in the diplomatic arena for mediation and conflict resolution also highlights Saudi Arabia's ability to shape the new regional order, rather than simply react to it (Acharya, 2018)

Implications of the Recent U.S.-Iran Conflict for Saudi Arabia

The current tensions between the U.S. and Iran have further complicated Saudi Arabia's strategic situation. Riyadh had tried to remain out of the conflict, but the crisis revealed its ongoing reliance on the U.S. for security guarantees of its vital energy infrastructure and maritime routes. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia continued to maintain diplomatic relations with Iran to avoid further regional instability to maintain the economic goals of Vision 2030. The war also revealed the critical importance of the Strait of Hormuz for energy supply lines, and Saudi Arabia has been stepping up its efforts to diversify energy supply channels and build security partnership with Washington in the region while maintaining the policy of balancing security cooperation with Washington with economic cooperation with Beijing. The war was not a catalyst for Riyadh to fall into the trap of choosing one power over another, but rather furthered its policy of strategic hedging, or a strategy that aims to enable the Kingdom to run a stable Middle East while maximizing its geopolitical maneuvering room.

Recommendations:

1. **Maintain Strategic Balance:** Saudi Arabia should continue to pursue a balanced approach to foreign policy, one that does not overly rely on any one global power, while continuing to invest in fostering close ties with China and other emerging powers, as well as maintaining close security relations with the United States.
2. **Strengthen Vision 2030 Implementation:** The Kingdom should diversify its economy by investing in advanced manufacturing, artificial intelligence, renewable energy, digital infrastructure, logistics and knowledge-based industry and reduce the long-term hydrocarbon reliance of the economy.
3. **Enhance Regional Diplomacy:** Saudi Arabia to keep up the process of dialogue and conflict resolution with its regional partners, including Iran and neighbouring Gulf States, to create a secure regional setting for sustainable economic growth.
4. **Institutionalize Multi-Alignment:** such as BRICS, G20, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the economic clubs in the region, and maintain positive relations with the western institutions on a priority basis in order to increase its diplomatic flexibility in a multipolar world through the institutionalization of multi-alignment.
5. **Develop Indigenous Strategic Capabilities:** The massive investment in defense industries, cyber security, technological innovation and critical infrastructure in Saudi Arabia will increase the kingdom's strategic autonomy and mitigate the vulnerability it faces due to external geopolitical competition.
6. **Expand Energy Leadership Beyond Oil:** Saudi Arabia should continue to play a leading part in the global oil market while building its position in renewables,

- hydrogen, carbon management, and critical minerals to be an indispensable energy partner during the global energy transition.
7. **Manage Great-Power Competition Prudently:** Saudi policymakers must not become the theatre of a strategic rivalry between the United States and China, and should continue to pursue issue-based cooperation, strategic neutrality and decision making based on national interest.
 8. **Strengthen Crisis Management Mechanisms:** Saudi Arabia needs to further strengthen crisis management mechanisms, regional security coordination, maritime security cooperation, and diplomatic crisis management measures, in view of the Israel-Gaza conflict, the instability in the Red Sea, and the military confrontation between the U.S. and Iran recently.

Conclusion

The world is changing from the days of one great power to many, and great powers are contesting power using military, economic, technological and diplomatic means. In this metamorphosis, Saudi Arabia has become one of the most geopolitically important middle powers, having made a successful transition from being essentially a U.S. security ally to a central economic and diplomatic hub between east and west. The Kingdom, however, is not losing its strategic ties with the United States but has been taking a pragmatic stance of strategic diversification by enhancing the security cooperation with the United States and strengthening the comprehensive economic and technological cooperation with China. The foreign policy is multidirectional and is part of Riyadh's quest for strategic autonomy and efforts to enhance national interests in today's fiercely competitive global landscape.

The study also shows how Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, energy diplomacy, involvement in China's Belt and Road Initiative, increasing relations with emerging powers and the more diversified relations it has developed with the BRICS has collectively made the Kingdom a pivotal role in the changing geopolitical landscape of the global political economy. Meanwhile, normalization of relations with Iran, the evolving security situation in the Gulf, the Israel – Gaza situation and security in the Red Sea, as well as the U.S.-Iran military standoffs, all make it more important for Saudi Arabia to give due importance to diplomacy, regional de-escalation, and economic sustainability rather than direct geopolitical alignment. The developments suggest that the Saudi foreign policy is moving towards a more nationalistic development orientation, as opposed to ideological or bloc commitments.

Saudi Arabia is making a strategic pivot in the new multipolar international order where middle powers are adopting a more flexible and influential role. The Kingdom is no longer just responding to the global hegemonic transition, but is making a stand for economic integration, energy governance and geopolitical stability in the region. But in the face of increased competition between the United States and China, Riyadh will have to balance challenges from great power competition, regional security, economic diversification, and strategic neutrality. Saudi Arabia's future influence, then, will depend on its ability to make a geopolitical balance into a permanent economic, technological and institutional regional and global leader.

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