

**Saudi Arabia: A Crossroad**

**Between Alliances**

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## Abstract

This study seeks to answer the following question on the kingdom's new era, "In light of global polar turbulence, what are the options for Saudi Arabia's alliances and why?". Four cases will be compared and evaluated based on the strengths and limitations of each diplomatic approach. Then the ideal alliance for Saudi Arabia to cooperate with moving forward with Vision 2030's regional stability and domestic prosperity will be determined. First is the classic alignment with the hegemonic United States, its history and latest status. The second is the prospect of building ties with China and the challenges it may create, as well as the possibility of shifting the global balance of power. Third is the recent U.S.-sponsored endeavor to construct a railway project that promotes trade and interconnectivity from India across the Middle East to Europe. Israel is also a part of this which will alter regional dynamics in its favor. The final case is assessing to what extent the kingdom can play a multi-diplomatic game considering its interests through the core and periphery model. Through examining these different scenarios, this research will give a valuable realist diplomatic approach to a rapidly evolving country in a contested region governed by geopolitics. After evaluating each case, the study found that the multi-diplomatic approach is ideal for the pursuit of Saudi Arabia's diverse national interests.

## Key Terms

Saudi Arabia, Vision 2030, The United States, China, Middle East Politics, Foreign Policy, India Middle East Corridor, BRI

## Contents

Introduction.....	3
Saudi Arabia’s Options .....	6
Alliance with the United States.....	6
Alliance with China .....	9
Taking part of the IMEC.....	12
Playing a Multi-Diplomatic Game.....	16
Table 1: Comparative Advantages of Alliance Choice.....	21
Conclusion .....	22
Bibliography .....	24

## Introduction

Saudi Arabia has vast geopolitical power brought about by large oil reserves that made it the world's largest exporter. The state is a founding member of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) making it a major player in the global energy markets (refer to [Table 1](#)). Moreover, its influence is further inflated by its leadership in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) which is comprised of Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates (Gabori et al.,2020, refer to [Table 1](#)). Location wise, Saudi Arabia is a strategic hub as it connects Asia, Africa, and Europe. Hence, access to the Red Sea and Persian Gulf gives it the upper hand in regional politics and global trade (Ragaban, 2016).

Saudi Arabi's foreign policy is motivated by national interests such as domestic prosperity and maintaining security, stability, and influence in the region. These pursuits are executed through safeguarding its borders, protecting Islamic sites as well as collaborating with other Arab nations and international partners to address political, economic and security disputes. In 2022, Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud (MBS) became the prime minister, serving as the chairman of the Council of Economic and Development Affairs and chairman of the Council of Political and Security Affairs. He coined "Vision 2030" which is a series of economic and social reforms seeking to diversify Saudi's economic portfolio by reducing oil dependency and boosting foreign investment and as well as promoting its culture. There are four paths Saudi Arabia could take in terms of alliances to reach its "Vision 2030" goals: alliance with America or China, taking a part of the IMEC or playing a multi-diplomatic approach. In a realist rapidly evolving world, alliances should be chosen carefully because they may enhance the country's wellbeing or watch it collapse to protect its own interests.

The United States relationship with Saudi Arabia can be simply characterized by oil and security. Aramco, an Arab American company was the first to find oil on the kingdom's territories in 1944 (refer to [Table 1](#)). However, 36 years later the Kingdom bought all foreign shares and nationalized it. Most importantly, the discovery overlapped with the industrial revolution post WWI and oil took coal's place as a primary energy component in the international economy (Khatib,2021). Saudi Arabia cooperated the United States against the Soviets in Afghanistan through recruiting thousands to fight during the war. Even after a rupture in their relationship post-Soviet withdrawal, they restored in 1992 and the Kingdom cemented its place as a middle power. According to Dong-min Shin's definition (2015), a middle power "is a state actor which has limited influence on deciding the distribution of power in a given regional system yet is capable of deploying a variety of sources of power to change the position of great powers and defend its own position on matters related to national or regional security that directly affect it." Saudi Arabia became a vital and irreplaceable ally, and it was able to influence American foreign policy. Evidently, it's role as a middle power came into play when King Fahad threatened to cut off supplies of oil if Israel (strong American ally) did not withdraw from Lebanon.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was coined by China's President Xi Jinping in 2013. It is a route that starts in Asia, stretches towards Africa and Europe through land and maritime linkages to foster regional and international integration for trade and economic growth (ERDB, 2023). The BRI has grabbed international attention not just on the governmental level but also on an institutional level as academics and organization assess its implications on international trade and Chinese foreign policy. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia's national economic and social reform agenda was announced during the 2016 G20 conference in Hangzhou China. Cooperation between the two nations were augmented shortly after to coincide both initiatives through construction.

Previously, bilateral associations were made in 2008 and China became Saudi Arabia's primary trading partner in 2013 (Kunar & Singh, 2023). Since then, many projects have been added to their shared programs and there seems to be no intention to stop but rather add more as mutual benefits continue to pile up.

The 2023 G20 conference failed to take a stance against the Russian invasion of Ukraine or on climate change. But it was a success for Western powers due to the new India Middle East Corridor (IMEC) project. The President of the United States Joe Biden revealed a plan to construct a corridor through railways, pipelines, shipping lines and high-speed cables that connects India, the Middle East including Saudi Arabia, and even Israel to Europe. The formal purpose of this project is to enable transfer of goods and renewable resources in a faster and more effective manner (Zaccour & Salman, 2023). The corridor would create more opportunities in different sectors and is set to be discussed in the coming months. The European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen believes the project is much more than a railway rather a "a green and digital bridge across continents and civilizations." (Siddiqui, 2023). The initiative is particularly influential because it will be the first regional project Israel is involved with and its implications on Arab relations can set a route for more normalization or condemnation.

After the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia has shifted its political approach towards the remainder of the Middle East to suit its national interests. This is taking place through bi- and multilateral relations to impact its neighboring states and distant ones. In 2011, the Kingdom intervened in Bahrain to support the ruling family hoping protest would not spill over into its boards and social sphere. They intervened in Yemen in 2015 along with the UAE as well as took part of the Qatar blockade. Likewise, they meddled in Lebanese domestic affairs in 2017 (Demmelhuber, 2019). Egypt, Jordan and Pakistan have also been a political and security partner in the region. The

Kingdom has also provided financial assistance through grants, loans, and investment to maintain their stability (Govt. Saudi Arabia, 2018).

Today, Saudi Arabia is increasing its independency and proactivity in foreign policy in a manner never seen before in history. Scholars are divided on how Saudi Arabia is and should conduct itself on the world stage as wars and regional tensions are escalating. It poses a question whether Saudi Arabia will step up, cooperate and be a part of the solution or stand down and continue to focus on Vision 2030 exclusively. With this being said, what are Saudi Arabia's alliance options moving forward based on foreign policy analysis?

## Saudi Arabia's Options

### Alliance with the United States

Relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia has hit an all-time low. Tensions reached a personal level in 2019 when then candidate Joe Biden said that he has “very little social redeeming value in the present government in Saudi Arabia”, then proceeded to label it as a “pariah state”. In 2022, MBS was asked about Biden's opinion of him, he responded with “Simply, I do not care. It's up to Biden to think about the interests of America” (Chmaytelli, 2022). This shows that Saudi had a rough start with the Biden administration even before he was in office. By outing Saudi Arabia and alienating their membership as part of the international community, Biden set the foundation for a strained relationship between his administration and Riyadh (refer to [Table 1](#)). In a turn of events, after coming into office, the Biden administration expressed its support for Vision 2030. He praised Saudi Arabia for its efforts to deescalate regional conflicts and emphasis its potential to normalize ties with Israel as well as how it's a “national security interest for the United States” (Blanchard, 2023).

Previous studies have almost exclusively focused on oil and how it is the key to a strong tie between Saudi Arabia and the United States. Khatib (2019) argues this is simply not enough. His research delves into how the Gulf state has no other influence or quality that will keep it important to America. In a hegemonic world, there is no other ally as strong as this western country. For now, Saudi Arabia remains reliant on oil profits so it does not guarantee its position as a major economy in a globalized world. Therefore, oil will inevitably no longer appeal to the United States (refer to [Table 1](#)). In the short term, it can be argued that the west needs an ally in the Middle East. Ultimately, it should build a more complex and influential relationship with the hegemon as Israel has done through indigenous lobbying. In a speech that dates to 1986, Joe Biden calls Israel “the best \$3 billion investment we [United States] make” and that the United States should not apologize for it. He continued, “If Israel was not there, then they would have to create one to protect our interest in the region” (Middle East Eye, 2021). Consequently, the west was aware of the instability that the created state made in the region. An inorganic nation in a vast region of Arabs and is an epicenter for the three monotheist religions which the United States did not have strong relations with. Israel is a critical geostrategic player in the middle east in terms of security and energy. Normalizing ties between the oil rich Gulf states who exercises more power over the Arab world would pave the way for further acceptance as part of the region. America can exercise power through Israel and no longer need to upkeep mutual relationships of give and take with middle eastern countries as it was giving military aid (refer to [Table 1](#)) for Saudi in exchange for oil deals. It seems as if the Biden administration is only interested in securing normalization between Israel and the Kingdom, opting to ignore other dimensions of the relationship (refer to [Table 1](#)). Indeed so, when it came time to live up to the security aspect of the relationship, Saudi Arabia got the weak end of the deal. The escalation of Houthi aerial attacks from Yemen and the



2019 Iranian strikes exposed Saudi Arabia's weaknesses especially when civilian lives were at risk. The United States only aid was a supply of intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, and defense system (Hokayem,2022). The limited number of aids combined with the distribution of military in the region increased the question of the western power's reliability.

A more recent interpretation of the relationship argues otherwise. Hokayem (2022) analyzed Saudi Arabia's decision to cut oil production as a powerful move due to its awareness of Washington's displeasure. The United States lobbied for a delay in cuts, yet the Kingdom prioritized economic concerns believing that the former would not have any significant ability to retaliate. Each side interpreted the decision in a different manner and to some degree, trust was lost, and coldness consumed their relationship. Saudi Arabia did not wait till the relationship with the United States died down. MBS built a strong relationship with Putin who he believed was more reliable than democratic presidents. Cementing their relationship through their shared interest of oil and its market stability as well purchasing Russian air defense system to prevent future military weaknesses (She,2023, refer to [Table 1](#)). Meaning, Saudi Arabia could one day no longer need to rely on the United States hoping they would supply them with enough arsenal. After Russia invaded Ukraine, the Kingdom was hesitant to directly condemn Putin's actions which expanded the space between them and the United States (refer to [Table 1](#)). What flew under the radar was that Riyadh did believe that Russia would have a quick victory over Ukraine based on the west's previous failures in Iraq and most recently the withdraw from Afghanistan. Moreover, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has boosted Saudi Arabia's economy due to energy-market disruption (Saadi, 2023). The west began to scramble to find substitute sources of oil and gas in time for plummeting winter temperatures. Considering this energy crisis, the Kingdom's role in the international community was reassessed and the world was reminded of its significant contribution to energy

politics. Crown Prince MBS took advantage and increased efforts to showcase the country as a modern and challenged assumptions of that it is strictly confined to its traditional role of self-proclaimed ambassador and guardian of the Islamic and Arab world. He then rejected American and European requests to increase oil output to fill the market gap after sanctioning Russia (refer to [Table 1](#)). This came after a conference with OPEC+ who Russia is a part of where a resolution was adopted to cut production (Wilson Center, 2022).

Undeniably, treating the Kingdom as a “pariah” state backfired on the Biden administration. The Saudi’s increased their assertiveness as the United States has become uncertain to its commitment to the region combined. Equally, the frustration from Biden’s administration caused them to constantly reevaluate their relationship. Although the United States is a large consumer of its oil, it is not worth sacrificing national interest. Its position as a middle power on the international stage is successfully maintained because they were able to utilize oil as a tool to control the west who desperately needed it. The scale tips to where prioritizing national interest becomes heavier than pleasing and maintaining a relationship with the hegemon.

## [Alliance with China](#)

Khatib (2019) proceeds to assert that relations with other countries are a backup or alternative if American relations deteriorate and are not substitutions. Despite China being the Kingdom’s primary trade partner with \$29.1 billion in exports and \$18.3 billion in imports (refer to [Table 1](#)), the relationship is far from the bond they have with the United States. In 2022, Hokayem (2022) wrote about MBS’s visit to China where he concluded multiple deals and on that same trip, he claimed that China has the right to fight and interrogate the Uyghur population. One of Saudi Arabia’s previous traditional priorities was safeguarding Islam. With Vision 2030, there is more focus on a more “modern” form of Islam. “Modern” meaning less strict and straying away

from being labeled as just an Islamic country with no other dimension to it. China's Uighurs population is an ethnically Turkish minority whose experiencing an ethnic cleansing. The government surveillances, detains, tortures, starves, sexually assaults, and executes them in masses. More than one million Uighurs have been placed into "reeducation" camp in the name of combating extremism (Mooney, 2021). These crimes against humanity have been overlooked by the international community for many reasons including China's censorship law, its economic dominance and lack of effective and enforcement capacity of international human rights law. The Uighur groups have appealed to MBS and asked him to fight for their cause. However, the Prince said that China has a right to protect itself from terrorism and carry out any de-extremism measures. There has not been a negative impact or strain on the relationship between the two countries due to this pressuring human rights issue. As a young leader, MBS believes that this confined perception of the country as highly ideological Islamic-Arab country will hold it back from reforming. Instead, there was a revision of relationships and historical entanglements, and the outcome was prioritizing the focus on geopolitical and economic national interests that enable a transformation. Therefore, the kingdom values their very successful relationship with China over their tradition image of being defenders of Islam.

Kumari and Singh (2023) mentioned that China's endorsement of Arab Chinese relations through publishing the first China-Arab Policy Paper in January 2016 and highlighted its devotion to peace and stability in West Asia. It advocated for the five main areas they will focus on such as politics, trade and mutual investment, social progress, cultural exchange, security, and peace. True to their words, these focus areas were developed during the Chinese President's visit to Saudi Arabia where they promised to launch projects related to military cooperation, energy (renewable and nonrenewable), infrastructure (ports, bridges, and railways) and even aerospace projects. Most

prominently, China is Saudi Arabia's biggest oil consumer (refer to [Table 1](#)). According to the economic ministry of the Gulf, it is invested in cooperating with China on issues such as reducing inflation, supplying crude oil, and even tackling climate change challenges. Saudi's economic minister Faisal al-Ibrahim said, "China is a very important customer. We understand that there have been changes recently in the energy markets, but we continue to be committed to being a reliable energy supplier to the world, including China. We value this relationship very well" (Kumari and Singh, 2023). Unquestionably, there is such a drastic contrast in comparison to what Saudi Arabia's MBS has expressed about American President Joe Biden. From having a cold demeanor to valuing and fostering a sense unity between two vastly difference countries.

In some ways the BRI is China's version of Vision 2030. The project provides roads, railways, and infrastructure with the aim of creating a sphere of influence on a larger scale than ever before. Saudi Arabia's location is strategic for China since it can serve as a hub between Asia and the extensive African market via the Red Sea supply chain as well as increase its participation in the middle eastern market. In a similar vein, the Mecca-Medina high railway was built by China Railway Construction and has been successful because it increased services for Pilgrimage by speeding up the trip from Jeddah airport to holy sites (Fulton, 2019). What is so significant about this project is that it ticks off one of Vision 2030's goals which is strengthening the role of Saudi Arabia in the Arab-Islamic world. As a result, China is cooperating with Saudi Arabia to achieve its reform goals through a variety of projects rather than focusing on a mutual exchange deal under the agenda of integrating the BRI and Vision 2030. Saudi Arabia invested in China's BRI project by funding the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC, refer to [Table 1](#)). To further enhance the benefits, Aramco is working with Pakistani oil companies by building a \$10 billion greenfield refinery project at the Gwadar Port (Rashid& Shirazi, 2023). The CPEC will open a route to

transfer oil and gas between oil rich Gulf countries including Saudi Arabia. Likewise, it will cater towards China's energy problem and alleviate the "Malacca dilemma". As the world's busiest channel, it has become increasingly challenging to freely transport oil and other critical resources for the energy dependent rapidly growing country.

As China is peacefully rising as a global power, Saudi Arabia's alliance with it and the prospects of achieving the goals of Vision 2030 can only get better from here. Nevertheless, there are still risks that need to be considered. Even though Saudi Arabia has eased its religious constraints, it remains a country that practices Islam. For Chinese people, the culture is unfamiliar and to some even mysterious because both civilizations are vastly different (refer to [Table 1](#)). To counter this, some Chinese media have been covering stories on the kingdom's culture. The fact remains that there are still a lot of negative global media about the country which makes integrating cultures more difficult. Conversely, Saudis that are interested in the Chinese language do not know how to study it. More work needs to be done on the cultural exchange aspect of countries' deals. Another risk area for the relationship is energy security. Vision 2030 is looking to diversify the country's economic portfolio; oil cannot be easily replaced. China should continue its energy cooperation with Saudi Arabia while searching alternative energy options. At the same time, China can use its strong industrial capacity to speed up economic diversification for its ally (Chen et. al, 2018, refer to [Table 1](#)).

### Taking part of the IMEC

An article published by Zaccour and Salman (2023) suggested that IMEC is a bold move by the United States. It allows them to keep their allies united without direct involvement in the region. More specifically, Israel's participation is another win for the Western power since it is strongly pushing for the normalization of ties between Tel Aviv and Riyadh. Saudi Arabi would

be added to the list of normalized ties along with its neighbors the UAE and Bahrain who signed the Abraham Accords in 2020. Additionally, India is the fourth largest bilateral trader for the Kingdom (refer to [Table 1](#)) and as the population is set to increase so will the demand for energy, which is where the IMEC will come into play, tackling the increase before it becomes an issue. The IMEC is an ambitious project that can transform the geopolitical atmosphere across two continents. It demands the attention of China and other major players in the region like Iran. Most analysts agree that one of the most important goals is to normalize ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel by ensuring there is constant exchange through economic ties (refer to [Table 1](#)). Normalization was taking place prior to the announcement of the IMEC and was running smoothly with benefits for both parties. Even if they did not agree to formally normalize there will at least be some form of ties through a collective project, making Israel an unavoidable player in the region. Similarly, a project involving the United States can perhaps to an extent mend relations between the two countries (refer to [Table 1](#)). Adding Saudi Arabia is the hegemon's strategy to ensure or deter any tie strengthening with China and its BRI endeavor. Furthermore, by funding this mass project Saudi Arabia would allow the United States to step its foot back into the region via economic opportunities and continuous backing of Israel's flourishing in the middle east. The implications of bringing back some of the influence the United States had in the region extends beyond the members of the IMEC. While the project is still on paper hopes remain high. With several actors invested in making it come to life, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have the most territory and funds to ensure the project is successful (refer to [Table 1](#)). Therefore, their approval and satisfaction is important, giving them more leverage in this deal. India represents a significant portion of the energy market and figures are projected to grow because its population continues to steadily increase and it is well on its way to become the world's most populous country (Alam and Ahmed, 2016). They already

have strong ties with Saudi Arabia through bilateral trading of goods, so it would be capitalizing and strengthening a previously developed relationship (refer to [Table 1](#)). The IMEC would aid in energy delivery at a faster rate and larger masses as well as to ensure that its oil consumption is not lost to alternative energy. As for the west, they had chosen India as their new hub of production to counter China which means it is set to build its international repertoire (Zaccour and Salman, 2023). China has increased its cost of labor and expanded its skill set, making it the less cost-effective choice for western companies who will now have India to turn to. Even so, India's infrastructure and logistics facilities are less developed in comparison to China and cannot compete with it (Saddiqui, 2023, refer to [Table 1](#)). It will take time to be able to replace the strong assets that the rising power brings to the table.

On the other side of the spectrum an article titled "U.S. Railway Plan a Mere Copycat, Hard to Win Favor from Middle East" by published by the Global Times (2023) takes a more bias Chinese approach. According to Xu Liang, an associate professor at the School of International Relations at the Beijing International Studies University, "This is the revival of the Cold War mentality in the Middle East. The plan is a deliberate containment of China's Belt and Road Initiative". Dr. Ding Long, a professor with the Middle East Studies Institute of Shanghai International Studies University, added that the United States is attempting to save its declining power in the region, and it is failing, making the IMEC a difficult project to achieve. "They care more about their interests and aren't following US lecturing. As their independence and autonomy is increasing, the Middle Eastern countries will not buy into US tactic of forming small cliques," Ding concluded. Informally speaking, one of the goals of the IMEC is to indeed counter China's BRI. Both countries understand that they must do what is best for their respective national interest, but Saudi Arabia should still be careful in how it engages with it. The IMEC could weaken the

strong relationship if China finds that it is taking away any economic benefits that the BRI can utilize (refer to [Table 1](#)). Although they do not take the same route, China's BRI extends on a larger scale. This road map is part of their grand strategy to peacefully rise as an economic power, continue access to markets, importing raw materials and technology, and increasing their access to oil and gas. Interference with such a plan could make China more hesitant in perceiving the Kingdom as a reliable business partner.

Being a part of both the BRI and IMEC is a strong advantage for the kingdom (refer to [Table 1](#)). Not only does it make them stronger stakeholders in transnational projects but also aligns with Vision 2030 in terms of diversifying the economy. Reliance on oil as a primary source of income will be cut at a faster rate since the goal is to increase non-oil exports to 50% of non-oil GDP by 2030. The IMEC was not intended to be a part of Vision 2030, if it indeed becomes a reality there will be more focus on how to utilize it to support local businesses and expand their outreach to an international scale. The stamp of "SAUDI MADE" will be projected across regions as a positive image of an evolving country. Contrastingly, because the IMEC is long term project it will contribute to building a sustainable economy with trade, transport, renewable and non-renewable energy, entertainment, and culture in accordance with the objectives of Vision 2030.

Iran is one of the countries that is excluded from the IMEC. Whereas it was involved in a similar project with India that is somewhat stagnant. They wanted to develop a project at the Chabahar Port in Iran to counter Gwadar Port in Pakistan. The presence of the IMEC could challenge Iran's port that struggling to be completed due to U.S. sanctions. According to Robert Neccia, an Italian diplomat that was previously posted in Tehran, Iran is aware that Saudi Arabia's intentions. "The circle of power in Tehran — interested in this phase to assure the sustainability of the detente with Riyadh — is aware that from the point of view of the Saudis, the corridor is



likely viewed neither as a part of a strategic competition with Tehran nor as a part of any effort to push for a relation with Israel” (Saddiqui, 2023). This is in reference to Iran and Saudi Arabia making amends to their diplomatic relations in early 2023 through the mediation of China (Nawaz et. al, 2023). The IMEC is not meant to break the peace agreement or induce tensions. Saudi Arabia is just looking to maximize its outreach and is looking out for its national interests.

### Playing a Multi-Diplomatic Game

As part of “Vision 2030” in 2023, Saudi Arabia is attempting to build relationships with so many nations including normalizing ties with Iran and Israel. There were also peace talks with the Houthis, reintegrating Syria into the Arab League as well as mediation of a ceasefire in Sudan. Based on Borck’s (2023) understanding of their reformed foreign policy, the Kingdom is trying to place itself in a strategic position where it can build constructive relations with every country including powers that oppose with one another. Any disagreement on certain issues would not lead to cutting ties, rather they can accept the difference and agree to disagree.

According to Hinnebusch (2018), core and periphery dynamics in the Middle East are perceived from a geopolitical lens where core states control and exploit periphery states. Saudi Arabia is a wealthy state with massive control over the oil market but is a middle power on the international stage due to its relationship with the United States. It exercises significant power on a regional level due to its location, size, and dominance over the Sunni Muslim community. Iran is a periphery state due to its large population, natural resources such as gas, coal, and metals as well as its location. However, heavy sanctions have hindered its ability to reach its full economic potential. Most importantly, its influence supersedes borders reaching any country with Shi’a population such as Lebanon. Iran also has close ties to Syria’s Alawi regime which is close to the Shi’a sect. Turkey takes the status of a semi-peripheral power. It has strong industrial power and

a strategic location connecting Europe, the middle east and the rest of Asia but cannot economically compete with Saudi Arabia. Israel is considered a core state from its well-developed systems and significant backing from the west on military and technological fronts. Arab people refuse to acknowledge Israel as a part of the middle east and stand with the Palestinian cause.

Currently, Saudi Arabia is normalizing relations with Iran with China as a mediator (refer to [Table 1](#)). Building relations with a periphery state that was considered an enemy can ease core and periphery tensions. Although this may be a step forward in increasing regional stability, the kingdom is aware that the regime does not have the same concerns (Borck, 2023). As China stands in the middle, Saudi Arabia hopes that it will be able to sway Iran and reduce its security risks. Yet, this deal does not mean that it will stop taking precautions against future Iranian attacks. There will always be some risk of a clash even with a successful deal signing. Comparably, there are peace talks with the Houthis (who control the capital and the northern part of Yemen) who Saudi Arabia knows they cannot defeat militarily. By working with Iran (who also fund the war in Yemen) through Chinese mediation, Oman and in person with the Houthis there is hope for a mutual understanding for a ceasefire against cross-border attacks (refer to [Table 1](#)). These missile and drone strikes could threaten the image Saudi Arabia is trying to project itself as an attractive place for tourism and investment.

In 2022, Crown Prince MBS hosted Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan who was deemed a threat to the kingdom in recent years due to his regional agenda and support for the Islamist movement. Additionally, he had entail about Jamal Khashoggi assassination that was going to be tried in Turkey. After the state visit, the Turkish president allowed the trial to be transferred to Saudi Arabia resulting in deescalating tensions (Hokayem,2022). Currently, ties between the two countries are made up of three pillars (refer to [Table 1](#)). First is economic where

Saudi Arabia has decided to assist in growing the Turkish economy and tackling its inflation crisis by signing multiple bilateral agreements. Turkey is also one of the kingdom's oil consumers. Second is security where Riyadh showed interest in developing Turkish defense even going as far as having high ranking officials conduct state visits for that very purpose. Perhaps this will ease up the Kingdom's state insecurity if they invest in an ally army, especially as semi-periphery. Third is deescalating the ongoing civil war in Sudan (Cengiz, 2023). It is also worth mentioning that Turkey is not part of the IMEC initiative and is part of the BRI. After the G20 summit in New Delhi, the Turkish president proclaimed that "There cannot be a corridor without Turkey. Turkey is an important production and trade base. The most convenient line for east-to-west traffic has to pass through Turkey" (Padmanbhan, 2023). Turkish and American relations are somewhat stagnant, but the hegemon is aware of Turkey's growing influence. Stronger Islamists movements are dangerous for its national interests in the region and for Israel as a core state. The IMEC would only exacerbate its influence. Therefore, excluding it from such as revolutionary project was intentional on the United States' part.

Events in the core impact periphery states. Saudi Arabia is normalizing relations with Israel and joined other core states like the UAE and Bahrain in accepting it as a part of the middle east while periphery states are against this. Iran and Turkey seek undermine the normalization as they compete to control the core, and in this case Saudi Arabia's decision. As a headline, Saudi Arabia and Israel normalizing relations seems like a breakthrough since the latter is somewhat aliened from the rest of the middle east. On paper though, Saudi Arabia is asking more from the United States than of Israel. They sought to gain formalized security guarantees as well as support and collaboration of developing the gulf state's civilian nuclear program (refer to [Table 1](#)). Instead of bridging Saudi Arabia and Israel into a united core states as the United States has hoped, the gulf

state is jumping across the waters and seeking to utilize its military strength. The United States' military strength is massive and having it on its borders or guaranteed to be ready to help against any attack from Yemen or Iran will prevent any future insecurity. As for Israel, normalizing would mean bringing in economic benefits (Kurtzer-Ellenbogen et. al, 2023). What was debated is how much the Saudi's were willing to fight for a two-state solution. Israeli's prime minister Netanyahu is completely against this and is not willing to be flexible in cutting back human right's violations against Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza.

For a while now, Saudi Arabia's regional activities are carried out without the consent or knowledge of its longtime friend the United States friends. It was reported by Demmelhuber (2019) that many analysts believe the relationship between these two countries may not be as strong as it was under previous administrations and monarchs. As part of the prince's reform agenda, new alliances are being searched for and formed because the Gulf state's trust is declining. The author cites a quote by Bertelsmann (2018) that sums up their situation, "Saudi Arabia simply cannot afford to continue with the USA as usual". Jordan put forward a proposal to allow Syria to rejoin the Arab league and Saudi Arabia took charge of the initiative hoping to capitalize on it to protect national interests. The west lost most of its interest in Syria as some of it is left in rubbles. Jordan decided to propose this because the Syrian refuges crisis is one of its major concerns. As for the rest of the Arab world, the drug smuggling has gotten out of control. Young people in the Gulf states are one of its highest consumers. Saudi Arabia went has far as banning import of Lebanese agricultural products because they were used to smuggle Syrian drugs into the country (Nowacka, 2023). At this point, there must be some form of trade off. If Syria cannot sell drugs which is its primary sources of income, what will be the alternative? So far it has been humanitarian aid after the disastrous earthquake in 2023. Becoming heavily involved in this reintegration is another

strategy to contain the periphery Iran's power in hopes that it can be pushed out of Syria, enabling it to exercise less influence in the region. Iran and Russia were supportive of Assad's regime and were successful in gaining back territory that was held by rebels (Robinson, 2023). To encourage faster integration, Saudi Arabia and Syria have announced bilateral deals as well as opening the embassy in Damascus much to the west's displeasure (Kardas and Aras, 2023, refer to [Table 1](#)).

The outcome of all Saudi Arabia's diplomatic initiatives remains uncertain. The middle east region is so interconnected and complex where one event or severed tie can impact the rest. There are too many factors that cannot be controlled, such as each state's willingness to keep its promises. Currently, Saudi Arabia is working on reversing structural weaknesses through several ties. Normalizing relations and containing Iran will minimize security risks. Strengthening ties with Turkey and seeking their military assistance in exchange for deals to aid in their economic issues also minimized insecurity from Yemen and Iran. Finally, normalizing with Israel as another core state is a way to secure security guarantees from a powerful non-Arab state outside of regional core and periphery dynamics. The Kingdom must continue to build ties to ensure if one block is removed its whole building doesn't collapse resulting in a vulnerable position with no periphery ally Arab and non-Arab. Otherwise, the state has done a successful job domestically in growing its economy and renewing its image as investments are increasing annually.

Table 1: Comparative Advantages of Alliance Choice

Option	Advantages	Disadvantages
The United States	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Historical relationship: Aramco</li> <li>-Military relationship</li> <li>-An oil consumer</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Current relationship is strained and may be subjected to change based on presidential administration</li> <li>-Biden administration emphasized working on normalizing ties with Israel and not their direct relationship</li> <li>-Biden administration treated Saudi Arabia as a pariah state until they need them to increase oil production</li> <li>-Displeased with its strong ties to China</li> <li>-Displeased with Saudi Arabia's lack of condemnation for Russian invasion of Ukraine</li> <li>-Displeased with Syria's reintegration into the Arab League</li> </ul>
China	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Relationship based on trade and investment + being a part of the BRI</li> <li>-An oil customer</li> <li>-Normalizing ties with Iran with China as a mediator</li> <li>-Investments in its corridor with Pakistan</li> <li>-China can use its strong industrial sector to help speed up the kingdom's economic diversity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-America is trying to push back this relationship</li> <li>-There needs to be more work done on cultural exchange</li> </ul>
IMEC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Strengthen ties with America over a common project</li> <li>-Strengthen ties with India</li> <li>-Strengthen ties with Europe</li> <li>-Strengthening ties with UAE</li> <li>-Strengthening ties with Jordan</li> <li>-Can be a part of both the BRI and IMEC</li> <li>-Increasing Saudi's outreach of domestic products</li> <li>-Normalizing relations with Israel for trade</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-May interfere with relations with China</li> <li>-This project needs heavy investments, time, and planning.</li> <li>-India has very weak infrastructure in comparison to China.</li> </ul>
Multi-Diplomacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-China as an ally, business partner and mediator</li> <li>-Russia as a business partner via purchase of arms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-America is displeased with closeness with China and Russia</li> <li>-America is displeased with normalizing ties with Iran</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-India as business partner</li> <li>-A member of OPEC</li> <li>-A member of GCC</li> <li>-Normalizing ties with Iran, China as a mediator</li> <li>-Peace talks with Houthis in Yemen</li> <li>-Bring back Syria into the Arab league and building relations to push back Iran</li> <li>-Bilateral trade, security training and mediation with Turkey</li> <li>-Investing in the China-Pakistan corridor</li> <li>-India is a bilateral trade partner</li> <li>-Normalizing relations with Israel if America provides security guarantees and support for civilian nuclear program</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- America is displeased with Syria's reintegration into the Arab League</li> </ul>
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## Conclusion

As flexible as Vision 2030 is, so is Saudi Arabia's foreign policy which is by doing whatever it takes to ensure domestic development and secure its borders. Continuously focusing on United States as their primary ally is risky because the relationship is subjected to changes in accordance with the agenda of the residing administration. It creates gaps and uncertainty where the Saudi's having to anticipate America's approach with each election. Indeed, what Bertelsmann (2018) said is true, "Saudi Arabia simply cannot afford to continue with the USA as usual". The Biden administration has deteriorated the relationship drastically, only seeking the gulf state at their convenience. As for the relationship with China, it is a relationship based on exchange of oil (the current source of primary income) and business. This shows that the alliance can withstand the test of time once the Kingdom has a diversified economy. Both the Asian and global hegemon are non-Arab peripheries from the international sphere that have entered the region. The former through diplomacy and the latter through imperialism and military intervention. The IMEC fosters

cooperation between Arab and non-Arab key players to replace China with India's industries and opening a new market to Israel by cooperating with another the core state Saudi Arabia. Approaching foreign policy through multi-diplomacy presents the strongest case. To an extent, it ensures that the knot is tied at every corner. Just like Vision 2030, diversifying the alliance portfolio ensures that there is always a country to cooperate on a certain issue or a partner to conduct business with. Using core and periphery dynamics, Saudi Arabia can bid countries against one another to evaluate which one can provide stronger security guarantees.

As Borck (2023) said, Saudi Arabia is trying to build constructive relations that ignore any issues of disagreement and simply accepting that there's a difference in opinion. However, trying to be as politically neutral as Switzerland in an instable, unpredictable regional may backfire. Afterall, the belief "either you or with us or against us" is not in favor of the kingdom. The 2023 war between Gaza and Israel placed normalization on hold as citizens of the world unite to condemn Israel for its war crimes while some governments continue to back it. As of November 10, 2023, Saudi Arabia said that normalization is still on the table if the Palestinian issue is resolved. The kingdom has laid its cards on the table and Israel along with its backer the United States have the next move. Saudi Arabia now stands as a middle power on the international stage, a former safe guarder of Islam, an up-and-coming nation, and a key player in the region. What is sure is that will continue to tug on as many strings as possible whether it's through the United States, China, or regional powers, till it reaches the full potential of its national interest.



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