

PEACE AND SECURITY

# THE RELATIONS BETWEEN CHINA AND SAUDI ARABIA

Continuity Amid New Challenges

**Naser al-Tamimi**  
September 2024



The economic and diplomatic ties between the People's Republic of China and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have strengthened substantially in recent years despite considerable obstacles.



The United States' approach to the Middle East, whether involving diplomacy, sanctions, or military actions, significantly affects the success of China's endeavors in the region, especially in Saudi Arabia.



While Saudi Arabia has traditionally upheld close ties with the U.S., it has also forged a closer relationship with China. Thus, it remains to be seen how Riyadh navigates the U.S.-China rivalry along regional challenges.



# Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	4
<b>HISTORY OF RELATIONS: FROM ENMITY TO FRIENDSHIP</b> ....	5
<b>DOMINANT NARRATIVES: BROADEN THE HORIZONS</b> .....	6
Economic Ties: The Essence of Connections .....	6
Political Ties: Developing a Strategic Dimension .....	8
Military Cooperation: Still Limited .....	9
U.S., China, and Saudi: A Geopolitical Triangle .....	10
<b>CHALLENGES AND CHANCES: THE WAY AHEAD</b> .....	13
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	17
References .....	18
About the Author .....	23

# INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the relationship between Saudi Arabia and China has experienced a remarkable transformation, resulting in significantly strengthened ties. A notable moment in this evolving partnership occurred in December 2022, when Chinese President Xi Jinping was warmly received in Saudi Arabia to participate in the “Three Summits”, marking a significant diplomatic milestone.<sup>1</sup> This visit transcended mere formality. Xi actively engaged in three major diplomatic events: the China-Saudi Arabia Summit (marking his state visit to Saudi Arabia), the China-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Summit, and the China-Arab States Summit for Cooperation and Development.<sup>2</sup> These summits underscore China’s expanding political and economic clout in the Middle East and the shifting global dynamics.

The visit drew attention, mainly due to its alignment with China’s crucial role in brokering, a few months later, a landmark agreement to normalize relations between regional powerhouses Saudi Arabia and Iran. This development carries significant implications for both regional stability and global geopolitics. Moreover, Saudi Arabia’s increased involvement in international forums like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) underscores its deliberate effort to diversify its global partnerships. This strategic shift, a proactive initiative to expand its geopolitical influence beyond traditional Western-centric alliances and optimize economic benefits, is a development of utmost importance.

While Saudi Arabia has traditionally maintained a close relationship with the United States, particularly regarding security, economic ties, and diplomatic cooperation, its foreign policy is also influenced by the geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East and U.S. commitments in the region. The country may navigate its relationships with China and the United States based on regional developments and alignments. Still, this delicate balancing act will face challenges in the coming months and years.

---

<sup>1</sup> Niu and Wang 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

# HISTORY OF RELATIONS: FROM ENMITY TO FRIENDSHIP

In a historical context, Saudi Arabia took the initiative to establish diplomatic relations with China in 1939, becoming the first Arab country to forge political connections with China.<sup>3</sup> Their bond grew stronger following the ratification of the Treaty of Friendship in Jeddah on November 15, 1946.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, these diplomatic ties were broken when the Communist Party (CCP) assumed power in China in 1949.<sup>5</sup> The situation deteriorated further when the People's Republic of China (PRC) took power in Beijing. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia maintained diplomatic relations with Chiang Kai-shek's government, even after it had been overthrown by the CCP and had relocated to Taipei (Taiwan). During the 1960s and 1970s, Saudi Arabia actively participated in the World Anti-Communist League, founded by Chiang Kai-shek.<sup>6</sup>

The political system instituted by the CCP in 1949 forced China to align with one of the two superpowers in the bipolar world, leading to a rapprochement with the Soviet Union.<sup>7</sup> Although a friendship treaty was signed in 1950, relations soured again in the late 1950s after Stalin's death. This tension escalated into border conflicts in 1969. Consequently, the Soviet–Chinese rapprochement was only temporary.<sup>8</sup> After forging diplomatic relations with the United States in 1943, Saudi Arabia and the U.S. established a resilient and close partnership in the wake of the historic 1945 meeting between King Abdul Aziz Al-Saud and U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt;<sup>9</sup> this encounter laid the cornerstone for an enduring “new alliance” between the two nations, which persisted for decades.<sup>10</sup>

In the 1950s and 1960s, Chinese leader Mao Zedong aimed to confront what he perceived as the Western imperialist system by fostering cooperation with former colonies in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.<sup>11</sup> This approach prompted China to support liberation and revolutionary movements throughout the

Middle East, including the Gulf region.<sup>12</sup> Saudi Arabia, in response, saw China as a challenge to its stability due to Beijing's backing of anti-monarchy factions in the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>13</sup>

Due to their differing political and ideological stances, Riyadh and Beijing had limited interactions, mainly centered on non-governmental religious matters. During the Cold War, Saudi Arabia and China faced challenges in breaking free from their ideological constraints. Saudi Arabia notably opposed China's UN membership in 1971, supporting Taiwan instead.<sup>14</sup> However, as China's relations with the Soviet Union deteriorated in the 1960s, Beijing reconsidered its Middle East policies. Chinese leaders decided that establishing diplomatic relations with “status quo” states like Saudi Arabia and ending support for revolutionary movements would be more beneficial for their national interests.<sup>15</sup>

In the early 1970s, China began improving ties with the Arab Gulf states, accelerating under Deng Xiaoping's leadership. China's shift to a pragmatic foreign policy aimed at economic development led to efforts to gain recognition from Riyadh.<sup>16</sup> Key reasons included Saudi Arabia's influence in Middle East politics, its role in global energy as an OPEC leader, and as a market for Chinese goods. The Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s reshaped regional dynamics.<sup>17</sup> A pivotal moment was the secretive CSS-2 missile deal in the mid-1980s, contributing to the formal establishment of Sino–Saudi diplomatic relations in July 1990. Riyadh's recognition of Beijing's growing global role, including its United Nations Security Council membership and rapid economic growth, was also influential.<sup>18</sup> On July 21, 1990, China and Saudi Arabia officially began their diplomatic relationship, signifying a crucial development in formalizing connections between the two nations. After establishing diplomatic links, the economic and political ties between China and Saudi Arabia experienced rapid expansion.

<sup>3</sup> Al-Tamimi 2014, 59.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 60.

<sup>5</sup> Mostafa 2019.

<sup>6</sup> See Al-Tamimi 2014, 62, The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica 2024.

<sup>7</sup> Liu 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Wu and Zhao 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Zhang and Xiao 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Yamada 2015, 79-80.

<sup>14</sup> Cengiz 2020, Wu and Zhao 2020, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Zhang and Xiao 2020, 3.

<sup>17</sup> See Al-Tamimi 2014, 64, Shichor 1982, 101–10.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

## DOMINANT NARRATIVES: BROADEN THE HORIZONS

In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the relationship with China is primarily viewed through the lens of partnership, emphasizing the creation of mutual opportunities in key areas of cooperation like energy trade and business ventures. This perspective is rooted in a shared interest to foster economic growth and stability, leveraging the strengths of both nations to achieve common goals.

However, the perception of China in political, military, and strategic considerations is more nuanced. Despite the complexities and challenges within these domains, China is recognized as an increasingly significant player on both the global and regional stages. Its evolving role in international politics and growing military capabilities present prospects and challenges for Saudi Arabia.

As such, while there are hurdles to overcome, there is also a recognition of the potential for China to become a more substantial partner in the future, offering possibilities for deeper collaboration in addressing global challenges and enhancing regional security. This multifaceted relationship underscores international relations' dynamic and evolving nature, where economic partnerships can coexist with strategic caution and optimism for future cooperation.

### ECONOMIC TIES: THE ESSENCE OF CONNECTIONS

Saudi Arabia's international strategic partnerships are pivotal to its economic and geopolitical agenda, with its relationship with China being particularly significant. This partnership is primarily driven by Saudi Arabia's role as a leading global oil exporter and China's status as one of the world's largest oil consumers. This economic interplay is crucial for Saudi Arabia as it seeks to bolster its oil revenues and leverage Chinese expertise and investment to support its Vision 2030 initiative, which aims to diversify its economy beyond oil.

Therefore, strengthening ties with China is fundamental in Saudi Arabia's larger plan to improve its global economic position, achieve sustainable development, and address its broader economic and geopolitical challenges. Bandar Alkhorayef, Saudi Arabia's Minister of Industry and Mineral Re-

sources, recently told the Chinese business and finance site *Caixin Global* that business, not politics, is driving closer partnerships between China and Saudi Arabia. "I'm a true believer that at the end of the day, business drives politics and not vice versa [...] China has a lot to offer regarding how much we can integrate."<sup>19</sup> In this context, China's economy holds significant importance for Saudi Arabia for several reasons.

A large share of Saudi Arabia's oil exports is directed towards China, rendering the Chinese market essential for Saudi Arabia's economy, which is currently predominantly dependent on oil. The demand from China helps sustain oil prices and provides Saudi Arabia with a dependable market for its primary export. The IMF recently noted that China has become Saudi Arabia's biggest oil purchaser, accounting for more than a quarter of its exports. Additionally, China is the top market for Saudi non-oil goods like petrochemicals and plastics.<sup>20</sup>

Saudi officials increasingly see the writing on the wall: China is and will remain their largest oil market for the foreseeable future, underscoring the importance of building strategic relationships with this rising economic power. Reflecting on Saudi Arabia, Chinese President Xi Jinping captured its essence with these words: "An oil kingdom with huge oil and gas reserves, a country with time-honored history which is the birthplace of Islam, and the magnificent setting sun against the vast expanse of the desert: these are the images that Saudi Arabia brings to our mind."<sup>21</sup>

In 2023, Russia overtook Saudi Arabia as China's top crude oil supplier for the first time since 2018, capturing 19% of China's imports due to discounted Russian oil and Saudi production cuts within OPEC+.<sup>22</sup> Last year, Saudi Arabia's share of China's total crude imports fell to 15%, down from 17% in 2022. At the same time, Russia's oil exports to China hit a new peak at 2.14 million barrels per day (mb/d), a 24% rise from the previous year, exceeding Saudi Arabia's exports by 421,000 barrels per day (b/d).<sup>23</sup> Despite this, Saudi Arabia

<sup>19</sup> Zhang and Xu 2024.

<sup>20</sup> International Monetary Fund (IMF) 2023a.

<sup>21</sup> China Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016.

<sup>22</sup> See China General Administration of Customs, Cockayne 2024.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

plans to boost oil exports to China, with Saudi Aramco agreeing to supply up to 690,000 barrels per day to two Chinese refineries.<sup>24</sup> This is in addition to several other petrochemical and refining projects by Sabic and Saudi Aramco.<sup>25</sup>

Since becoming an oil importer in 1993, China's share of worldwide oil consumption has increased from less than 4% to close to 16.2% by 2023.<sup>26</sup> This situation has established Saudi Arabia as the central gravity of China's economic engagements in the Middle East, mainly due to its vast crude oil reserves and considerable production and export capabilities. Indeed, more than two decades ago, the trade between Saudi Arabia and China was small, only about 10% of Saudi Arabia's total trade with the EU and the U.S. However, it has consistently grown almost every year.<sup>27</sup> By 2011, China surpassed the U.S. in trade volumes with Saudi Arabia, and by 2018, it exceeded Saudi Arabia's trade with the entire EU. Today, China is Saudi Arabia's top trading partner, surpassing the combined trade volumes with Western nations.

That said, oil remains the core of Saudi Arabia's energy trade with China. In 2023, China's oil imports from Saudi Arabia amounted to nearly \$54 billion, accounting for more than 83% of its total imports from the Kingdom.<sup>28</sup> The yearly trade value between the two countries reached approximately \$107.33 billion in 2023. This represents a significant growth, almost 257-fold the \$418 million recorded in 1990, when diplomatic relations were initiated, just over three decades ago.<sup>29</sup>

Another objective for Saudi Arabia is to attract foreign investment and reshape its economy by broadening its scope beyond the traditional energy sector. Expanding local industries is vital for Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030 reform plan,<sup>30</sup> which aims to shift the Kingdom's economy away from what he describes as an "addiction to oil". In this scenario, the Saudi government is turning to China to become a key investor in the Kingdom's economy.

Indeed, Saudi Arabia is the foremost beneficiary of Chinese regional contracts and investments. Since 2005, China has entered into significant investment agreements and construction contracts in Saudi Arabia, totaling nearly \$60 billion, more than any other country in the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>31</sup> In 2023, China became the leading source of greenfield foreign direct investments (FDI capital investment) in Saudi Arabia,<sup>32</sup> making up more than 58.3% of the total

FDI.<sup>33</sup> FDI capital investment into Saudi Arabia increased by 111% from 2022 to \$28.8bn in 2023. Approximately one-fifth of Saudi Arabia's capital inflows in 2023 can be attributed to the automotive original equipment manufacturing sector.<sup>34</sup>

Chinese investment in Saudi Arabia is concentrated in the automotive, metals, and semiconductor sectors, amounting to \$5.6 billion, \$5.5 billion, and \$4.26 billion, respectively. The Chinese electric car company Human Horizons invested \$5.6 billion in the automotive industry to form a joint venture for car research and production.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, Saudi investors are keen on Chinese smart vehicle and autonomous driving firms, with seven startups involved by October 2023. This supports Saudi Arabia's objective to diversify its economy beyond oil and aims to produce over 300,000 new energy vehicles yearly by 2030.<sup>36</sup>

Most importantly, Saudi Arabia is expanding its global influence by developing a strategic partnership with China, the world's second-largest economy. This move aims to diversify Riyadh's international ties beyond its traditional reliance on the United States, balancing its foreign relations and enhancing geopolitical leverage amid shifting global dynamics. This strategic shift provides Saudi Arabia with more options and strengthens its position on the international stage.<sup>37</sup>

A report recently released by the official Saudi Press Agency highlights various aspects of Saudi leadership's plan to improve economic partnership with China.<sup>38</sup> "The keenness of Saudi Arabia to develop bilateral relations with the Chinese side is part of its strategic plans to boost its bilateral relations and partnerships with all influential countries and international powers and to establish balanced relations with them to serve the Kingdom's objectives and contribute to protecting its interests."

Saudi Minister of Investment Khalid Al-Falih further stated, "This is, in a way, a multipolar global order that has emerged—it's not emerging. China is a significant player in it (...) I think significantly, we see opportunities for Chinese and Saudi companies to invest internationally in third countries (...) in ways that will bring development to other developing countries."<sup>39</sup> Public opinion in Saudi Arabia also appears to broadly support robust relations with China, with many Saudis considering China's economic model worth following.<sup>40</sup>

Nevertheless, during Xi Jinping's visit to Saudi Arabia in December 2022, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan emphasized that the Kingdom remains open to the United

<sup>24</sup> Cang and Martin 2023.

<sup>25</sup> See Reuters 2024, Saudi Aramco 2023a, Saudi Aramco 2023b.

<sup>26</sup> IEA 2024.

<sup>27</sup> Conte 2023.

<sup>28</sup> See International Trade Centre (ITC).

<sup>29</sup> International Trade Centre (ITC), Al-Tamimi 2014.

<sup>30</sup> See Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

<sup>31</sup> See American Enterprise Institute.

<sup>32</sup> A greenfield investment is a type of foreign direct investment (FDI) where a parent company establishes a new subsidiary in a foreign country from scratch (from the ground up), including new production facilities, distribution centers, offices, and residential areas. For more information see European Commission.

<sup>33</sup> Dettoni 2024.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> fDi 2023, Alrashdi 2024.

<sup>36</sup> Fusheng 2023.

<sup>37</sup> Hong 2024.

<sup>38</sup> Saudi Press Agency 2022.

<sup>39</sup> Turak 2023.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. the following section.

States and the West. “There is no doubt that working together with the second-largest economy in the world is vital to Saudi Arabia’s growth, but that does not mean that we cannot continue to work with the world’s largest economy.”<sup>41</sup> This statement underscores Saudi Arabia’s diplomatic approach to maintaining balanced relations in the economic realm, even as it strengthens ties with other global powers like China. Prince Faisal’s remarks highlight the kingdom’s strategy to navigate complex international relationships while pursuing its interests and ensuring it remains a key player on the global stage.

## POLITICAL TIES: DEVELOPING A STRATEGIC DIMENSION

Saudi Arabia and China have been working together more closely on Middle Eastern issues and regional and global initiatives. Crucially, they have concentrated on areas of mutual interest while steering clear of potential conflict triggers, such as issues related to human rights or commentary on internal affairs. This approach to diplomatic engagement has so far been practical and successful.

From Saudi Arabia’s standpoint, China might become the world’s preeminent economy within the next decade, focusing heavily on economic development and leading global energy and oil imports. Riyadh acknowledges China’s dominant role in green energy and unmatched supply chain control. Boasting the largest military force in the world, China is a prominent nuclear state with a defense spending second only to the United States and is swiftly advancing in military technology. China’s increasing economic and military strength significantly bolsters its political influence. Enhancing its strategic autonomy is key for Saudi Arabia, and it views China as a pivotal partner in achieving this goal.

China’s involvement in the Middle East operates through bilateral and multilateral engagements. Bilaterally, it strengthens its geopolitical influence by establishing strategic partnerships mainly focused on economic ties. This approach promotes trade, investment, energy, and technology cooperation, benefiting major Chinese firms in infrastructure and digital projects. Diplomatically, China emphasizes “strategic partnerships”, with the more significant “comprehensive strategic partnerships” reserved for countries with considerable global economic or political influence.<sup>42</sup> Unlike traditional alliances requiring defense commitments, China’s partnerships stress mutual interests across various sectors, offering flexibility and lower risk. This diplomatic strategy prioritizes economic interests, regional influence, domestic stability, trade dependencies, and political ties, emphasizing “pivot states” crucial for boosting China’s regional influence.<sup>43</sup>

Under this strategic framework, Beijing has pinpointed five key states in the Middle East and North Africa as central to advancing China’s interests. These nations are pivotal in their influence and importance. Accordingly, China formed a “comprehensive strategic partnership” with each of these countries: Algeria in 2014, Egypt in 2014, Saudi Arabia in 2016, Iran in 2016, and the United Arab Emirates in 2018.<sup>44</sup> In December 2022, Chinese President Xi Jinping and King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia personally signed the comprehensive strategic partnership agreement between the People’s Republic of China and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.<sup>45</sup>

President Xi Jinping engaged in discussions with King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman. They achieved several key mutual agreements. The agreements include alternating biennial heads-of-state meetings between the two nations, elevating the China–Saudi Arabia High-level Joint Committee to the level of prime ministers, aligning China’s Belt and Road Initiative with Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030, and further enhancing the teaching of Chinese and Arabic languages in both countries.<sup>46</sup>

In this context, China places high value on Saudi Arabia’s role in the Middle East and Islamic world for three primary reasons: its status as the birthplace of Islam and host to two sacred cities; its vital contribution to China’s energy security as a leading oil; and its influential position in the Middle East as a major regional player. For China, nurturing this relationship is a priority to deepen their comprehensive strategic partnership.<sup>47</sup>

In Saudi Arabia, the general sentiment towards China’s involvement in the Gulf, mainly through the Belt and Road Initiative, is perceived positively. According to several preceding surveys by the Washington Institute, a substantial portion of the Saudi public doubted the United States being a reliable ally for the Kingdom. This skepticism had intensified due to unfavorable sentiments within Saudi Arabia in recent years, spanning from the Yemen conflict to the 2018 incident involving the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, and extending to the 2019 attack on the Aramco facilities in Abqaiq (Saudi Arabia), coupled with what was perceived as an insufficient response from the U.S.<sup>48</sup> These factors may have contributed to a Saudi perception at official and public levels that depending on the United States for defense against external threats could be uncertain, leading to them considering alternative partnerships focusing on China.

It also appears that the war in Gaza has deepened the negative perception of the Saudi people towards the United

<sup>41</sup> Demongeot and Bakr 2023.

<sup>42</sup> See Loft, Ward and Curtis 2022, Dezan Shira & Associates 2023.

<sup>43</sup> See Sun 2021, Niblock 2020, Wu 2021.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Xinhua 2022.

<sup>46</sup> China Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2022.

<sup>47</sup> Niu and Wang 2023.

<sup>48</sup> See the results of three surveys: Pollock 2020, Pollock 2021, Pollock 2022.



States. A survey conducted by the Arab Center Washington DC, in collaboration with the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, reveals that most Saudis harbor skepticism about Washington's sincerity in supporting the establishment of a Palestinian state. Overall, Saudi public opinion of the U.S. response to the Israeli war on Gaza is overwhelmingly negative, with 78% seeing the U.S. response as "Very bad" and 13% as "bad".<sup>49</sup>

At the same time, recent findings from the latest Washington Institute polling survey indicate that current events have significantly influenced public views regarding the influence of major world powers in the region. Most participants in Saudi Arabia (67%) concur with the statement: "The United States is no longer a reliable ally, prompting us to seek closer ties with countries such as Russia and China."<sup>50</sup>

Indeed, the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia has significantly weakened over time, influenced by key events such as the Arab Spring, the U.S. "shale boom",<sup>51</sup> Iran's rise, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the growing economic independence of both countries. Although the partnership persists, it is characterized by reduced trust and is mainly sustained by mutual necessities.<sup>52</sup>

That said, a recent European Council on Foreign Relations and Oxford University survey found that the Saudi public viewed China more favorably as an economic partner, with 60% of Saudis choosing trade ties with China over the U.S. Yet the U.S.'s hard power seems to be as appealing to people in many countries as its soft power. Most people in Saudi Arabia (48%) prefer their country to cooperate on security more closely with an American bloc than a Chinese bloc (33%).

These surveys come as the U.S. is making a concerted push to normalize relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia as part of efforts to resolve the war in Gaza. Several media reports indicated that Saudi Arabia may be pursuing advantages such as security guarantees, backing for a nuclear program, and the provision of weaponry in return for normalizing relations with Israel. Furthermore, Riyadh anticipates a significant goodwill gesture from Israel towards the Palestinian cause.<sup>53</sup>

At the same time, the U.S. is urging Saudi Arabia to reduce its connections with China. This includes seeking assurances that the Kingdom will refrain from allowing China to construct military bases on Saudi Arabian land. The U.S. also aims to limit the utilization of Huawei technology, and Saudi

Arabia continues to transact oil sales in U.S. dollars rather than Chinese Yuan.<sup>54</sup>

The results of these polls about the public sentiments in the Kingdom are likely to instill caution in the Saudi leadership regarding their upcoming diplomatic initiatives. Simultaneously, these results may enhance their bargaining position with either the current Biden administration or the subsequent American administration. Indeed, some Israeli experts have raised the possibility that the U.S. and Saudi Arabia might reach an agreement that does not include normalizing relations with Israel. As the ties between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia are strengthening, this could enable them to bolster their partnership and reduce the emphasis on Saudi-Israeli normalization.<sup>55</sup>

With this in mind, it's essential to acknowledge that the success of the United States in brokering a normalization agreement between Israel and Saudi Arabia could profoundly impact the evolving relationship between Saudi Arabia and China. This effect is especially significant concerning military cooperation and nuclear development. Whether this diplomatic effort succeeds or fails will likely determine the extent and intensity of the interactions between Saudi Arabia and China in these crucial areas in the coming years.

## MILITARY COOPERATION: STILL LIMITED

Despite growing economic and diplomatic relations, Saudi Arabia's defense collaboration with China is relatively modest, mainly involving joint exercises and drills, counter-terrorism efforts, sales of specific weapon systems, and cooperative production of armed drones.<sup>56</sup> China has been a minor arms supplier to Saudi Arabia, providing 1-2% of the Kingdom's arms imports in the past decade.<sup>57</sup> Saudi Arabia has Chinese intermediate-range missiles like the DF-3, shown in a 2014 parade.<sup>58</sup> Unconfirmed reports also indicate that, with CIA approval, China also provided Saudi Arabia with more precise DF-21 missiles, known as "carrier killers", in 2007.<sup>59</sup>

China's capacity to rival Western arms suppliers is restricted, and the Saudi military's long-standing reliance on American equipment means integrating Chinese weapons with existing systems poses technical and geopolitical challenges. Diversifying arms sources or shifting towards local production is also a lengthy process. Significantly, the solid military partnership between Saudi Arabia and the United States may limit the extent of China's military expansion in the Kingdom in the near term. The U.S. supplied 78% of the Kingdom's

<sup>49</sup> Arab Center Washington DC 2024.

<sup>50</sup> Hamm, Redlich and McDonough 2024.

<sup>51</sup> The United States has successfully reduced its dependence on Middle Eastern crude oil, particularly from Saudi Arabia, thanks to increased production from its shale oil fields. According to the latest official data from the US government, crude oil imports from Saudi Arabia comprised nearly 5.4% of the total US crude oil imports in 2023. See United States Energy Information Administration.

<sup>52</sup> Bohl 2023, United States Department of State 2023.

<sup>53</sup> See Bar'el 2024, Singh 2024, Schecter 2024, Pamuk 2023.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Guzansky and Dekel 2024.

<sup>56</sup> See Jiayao 2023, Blanchard 2023.

<sup>57</sup> IISS 2021.

<sup>58</sup> See Masterson 2022, Cohen 2021.

<sup>59</sup> Xie 2022.

arms imports in the period, including the delivery of 91 combat aircraft, hundreds of land-attack missiles, and over 20,000 guided bombs.<sup>60</sup>

Saudi Arabian leaders view China as a pivotal partner in the economic realm, while they still rely on the United States for security. Riyadh aims to maintain a balanced relationship with both nations. However, the worsening relations between the U.S. and China make this equilibrium more challenging. Importantly, if Saudi Arabia and the U.S. enter a defense agreement, it could hinder the Kingdom's efforts to strengthen its military and technological collaboration with China soon, as Riyadh may find it challenging to have it both ways.

## U.S., CHINA, AND SAUDI: A GEOPOLITICAL TRIANGLE

The Saudi leadership focuses on Vision 2030 domestically, aiming to “revolutionize” its economic and social structures. In this context, there is a widespread belief inside the Kingdom, encompassing the ruling family, government, and business community, that achieving the key goals of the vision necessitates collaboration with Chinese companies. This is attributed to their success in diverse economic and technological fields, their competitive pricing, and, most importantly, in some cases, the fact that Chinese companies share their technical expertise and train Saudi talent.<sup>61</sup>

Internationally, the Saudi government implements a diverse foreign policy strategy, maintaining relations with major powers like the United States, Russia, and China. It is also committed to easing regional tensions in the Middle East, exemplified by its diplomatic accord with Iran in March 2023, facilitated by China. These efforts are key to positioning Saudi Arabia as a prime destination for foreign investments, trade, and tourism, and they are essential for realizing Vision 2030.

Nevertheless, Saudi policymakers are skeptical about China's ability to offer a viable alternative to the American security presence in the Gulf or the broader Middle East. Additionally, China does not appear strategically inclined to undertake such a role. Still, Saudi Arabia is thus challenged by potential U.S. objections to its interactions with China, especially in military matters. Balancing the deepening of its relationship with China, its primary economic partner, against maintaining its long-standing partnership with the U.S. presents a dilemma for the Kingdom.

In response, Saudi Arabia is pursuing a dual strategy: enhancing its military capabilities while actively broadening its economic and military relations with other significant global players. To compensate for the possible reduction in U.S. security support, Saudi Arabia is expected to intensify its de-

fense relationships with European nations, China, India, Brazil, South Africa, and Türkiye. These partnerships could lead to significant investments in Saudi Arabia's burgeoning arms industry. Eventually, the Kingdom might also consider expanding its defense collaboration with China, particularly in developing its ballistic missile program, which already benefits from some Chinese assistance.

Amid this competitive landscape, Saudi Arabia is anticipated to actively seek fresh prospects and assume responsibilities previously handled by major powers to fortify regional stability or increase its sphere of influence. Saudi Arabia will likely endeavor to expand its strategic autonomy by deftly navigating between major players, aiming to maximize gains while avoiding entanglement in unwanted conflicts. Additionally, it may explore the formation of coalitions or the strengthening of regional alliances to project its influence and, in certain instances, collaborate on global challenges.

These Saudi moves coincided with China's launch of the Global Security Initiative in February 2023, “Concept Paper on the Global Security Initiative (GSI)”.<sup>62</sup> The Initiative contains six core values and principles: (1) pursuing common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security; (2) respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries; (3) abiding by the purposes and principles of the UN Charter; (4) taking the legitimate security concerns of all countries seriously; (5) peacefully resolving differences and disputes between countries through dialogue and consultation; and (6) maintaining security in both traditional and non-traditional domains.<sup>63</sup>

The GSI suggests that China could offer security assistance and deepen economic interdependence to help maintain the stability and security of the Middle East. It also highlights the roles of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, BRICS, and the Middle East Security Forum as key platforms to advance the principles of the Global Security Initiative in the region:

Implement the five-point proposal on realizing peace and stability in the Middle East, including advocating mutual respect, upholding equity and justice, realizing non-proliferation, jointly fostering collective security, and accelerating development cooperation, to jointly establish a new security framework in the Middle East (...) The international community should take practical steps to advance the two-state solution to the Palestinian question, and convene a larger, more authoritative and more influential international peace conference, to achieve a just solution to the Palestinian question at an early date.<sup>64</sup>

China acknowledges Saudi Arabia's increasing strategic autonomy, which has drawn heightened attention from other key global players such as Russia and India. For Beijing, this

<sup>60</sup> Wezeman, Gadon and Wezeman 2023.

<sup>61</sup> Olcott 2024.

<sup>62</sup> China Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2023a.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

evolving scenario highlights that the Middle East region's importance is determined not solely by the U.S. but through a multifaceted interplay of regional and global influences, with China playing a key role.

From the viewpoint of GSI, there are currently two primary concerns in the Middle East: the peace process in Palestine or broadly in the Middle East and the security arrangements across the Gulf region. Addressing these two matters provides a comprehensive understanding of the Middle East's central and most critical issues today. China successfully mediated a deal for Iran and Saudi Arabia to re-establish diplomatic ties, ending seven years of overt conflict.<sup>65</sup> Beijing views its diplomatic achievement as a safeguard against potential American efforts to create a regional alliance against China or Iran. In contrast, Saudi Arabia views it as an important move to stabilize the region and focus on its economic development and Vision 2030.

China's role in the process came later to offer context for the agreement. Initially, Saudi Arabia and Iran began their discussions in April 2021, with Iraq serving as the mediator in Baghdad. These talks were intricate, addressing security issues like Yemen, Iran's nuclear program, and sectarian tensions. Follow-up meetings in Iraq and Oman continued to explore these issues, with the Muscat (Oman) discussions primarily focusing on Saudi Arabia's concerns about Iran's involvement in Yemen. The concept of China as a mediator emerged during the first Chinese–Arab summit in Riyadh in early December 2022, where President Xi Jinping was present. This summit set the stage for China to facilitate new bilateral talks in Beijing in early March, culminating in a Joint Trilateral Statement that formalized the agreement.<sup>66</sup>

Riyadh engaged China because of its strong political and trade ties with Tehran, believing that China was uniquely positioned to ensure both sides adhered to their commitments.<sup>67</sup> While Saudi Arabia acknowledges that this agreement does not address all its issues with Iran—especially regarding Tehran's nuclear ambitions and support for armed militias—Saudi leaders still perceive the deal favorably. It has enabled the Kingdom to avoid direct involvement in the Gaza conflict and broader Middle Eastern tensions. This strategic partnership with China could bolster Riyadh's standing in future negotiations and regional stability efforts.

Within this context, following approval by its government (March 2023), Saudi Arabia became a dialogue partner of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), marking a notable shift in international politics. The SCO, founded in 2001, comprises China, Russia, India, Pakistan, Iran, and four Central Asian countries and is dedicated to collaboration in political, security, and trade matters.<sup>68</sup> Riyadh's decision to

join the SCO after Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit marks a significant shift in Saudi Arabia's economic focus towards Asia and signals a new direction in China's foreign policy.

This move, representing Saudi Arabia's first major engagement in an Eastern-led multilateral forum, suggests stronger ties with countries outside the U.S. sphere. Saudi Arabia seeks greater strategic autonomy by cooperating more with China and Russia, which is influenced by China's Belt and Road Initiative and the SCO's economic focus. By joining the SCO, Saudi Arabia seeks to reduce tensions in the Gulf region, particularly with Iran, and foster economic links with Central Asia.<sup>69</sup> This move reflects a shift in the SCO's emphasis from security to economics.

Meanwhile, in August 2023, at a Johannesburg summit, the BRICS leaders invited top oil exporter Saudi Arabia and five other countries (Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates) to join their group (January 1, 2024) in a push to expand its global influence.<sup>70</sup> Saudi Arabia strategically leverages platforms such as BRICS and the SCO to broaden its global reach. It employs a strategy centered on multilateralism and protecting national interests to foster a more balanced and multipolar global structure.

Joining BRICS might also help Saudi Arabia decrease its dependency on the U.S. dollar, potentially leading to advantages such as cost reductions, the growth of e-commerce, and enhanced market integration.<sup>71</sup> As the largest economy in the Middle East and North Africa with significant food imports, partnering with BRICS could reduce supply chain costs and improve food security. Saudi Arabia's potential entry into BRICS could strategically boost trade with emerging economies, leveraging the group's collective resources.<sup>72</sup> This step could open new markets and facilitate trade in Saudi and BRICS currencies, spurring economic growth. It may also boost Saudi exports, trade interactions, and investments.<sup>73</sup>

Against this strategic backdrop, Saudi Arabia did not officially join the BRICS group of developing nations as proposed on January 1, 2024. Majid al-Kasabi, the Kingdom's Minister of Commerce, spoke at a panel during the World Economic Forum in Davos in mid-January 2024, stating, "Saudi Arabia has been invited to attend BRICS; we have not yet officially joined BRICS (sic)." This statement came after the proposed joining date of January 1, 2024, had already passed.<sup>74</sup> A month later, a Saudi official informed Reuters that the country was still considering the invitation to join BRICS, which had been extended to them in 2023.<sup>75</sup> Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov confirmed in June 2024 that

<sup>65</sup> China Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2023b.

<sup>66</sup> See International Crisis Group 2024, Pierson 2023, China Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2023b.

<sup>67</sup> International Crisis Group 2024.

<sup>68</sup> Al-Atrush 2023.

<sup>69</sup> Xinhua 2023b.

<sup>70</sup> Bloomberg News 2023.

<sup>71</sup> Dezan Shira & Associates 2023.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Alarabiya 2024.

<sup>75</sup> El Dahan 2024.

Saudi Arabia had not yet decided on full membership in BRICS but noted that the Kingdom actively participates in the block's activities.<sup>76</sup>

Riyadh's decision to refrain from joining BRICS highlights its strategic aim to navigate complex geopolitical interests. By not committing to official membership as of August 2024, Saudi Arabia retains its reliance on U.S. security assurances and the possibility of securing favorable defense terms. This stance allows Riyadh to preserve a degree of "strategic autonomy", benefiting from ties with Western and Eastern powers without binding commitments. Economically, Saudi Arabia evaluates the benefits of BRICS membership against the potential risk of straining relations with Western allies, seeking to negotiate favorable terms with BRICS members before deepening its engagement. Additionally, this approach enables Riyadh to effectively manage regional dynamics, aligning with its national security goals.

Recently, the United States has made efforts to strengthen its relationship with Saudi Arabia as it seeks to prevent a nuclear arms race in the Middle East and address the increasing influence of China in the region. This effort is complicated by Iran's progress in nuclear development and Saudi Arabia's warning that it will respond similarly if Iran obtains nuclear weapons.<sup>77</sup> In an attempt to discourage Iran and ease regional tensions, the U.S. contemplated offering security assurances to Saudi Arabia, contingent on the latter normalizing relations with Israel. However, these discussions were put on hold following the conflict in Gaza. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia is actively engaging in the development of a civilian nuclear energy program.<sup>78</sup>

The United States has the potential to assist, ensuring that it does not lead to the development of nuclear weapons while also reducing dependence on China, which might impose less stringent restrictions. However, this assistance from the U.S. comes with the need for strict safeguards and necessitates a "123 Agreement".<sup>79</sup> While China has supported Saudi Arabia in uranium exploration,<sup>80</sup> Washington expresses concerns over the potential risk of nuclear latency. Nevertheless, mistrust and regional complications could obstruct the path to a nuclear partnership between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. If negotiations falter, Riyadh might look into other avenues for developing peaceful nuclear capabilities, including options involving China.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Tass 2024.

<sup>77</sup> Aitken 2023.

<sup>78</sup> International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) 2009.

<sup>79</sup> "Section 123 of the U.S. Atomic Energy Act generally requires the conclusion of a peaceful nuclear cooperation agreement for significant transfers of nuclear material or equipment from the United States." For more details about section 123, see United States National Nuclear Security Administration 2024.

<sup>80</sup> Ghana 2022.

<sup>81</sup> See Said, Hua and Nissenbaum 2023, Al-Atrush, Schwartz and Zilber 2023, World Nuclear Association 2024, Alberque and Ibraheem 2023.

# CHALLENGES AND CHANCES: THE WAY AHEAD

The collaboration between Saudi Arabia and China is expected to see substantial growth in the years to come, driven by the alignment of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and China's Belt and Road Initiative. This partnership is set to catalyze the expansion of several new sectors, with tourism, mining, and renewable energy industries particularly positioned for robust growth.

The travel and tourism sector is crucial in fostering increased people-to-people cooperation between the two countries. The Saudi Ministry of Tourism seeks to turn China into one of its top three markets by 2030, aiming for 5 million Chinese tourists. In 2023, Saudi Arabia welcomed 140,000 Chinese visitors for tourism and business, while over 30,000 Saudis visited China.<sup>82</sup> The country has partnered with major Chinese travel platforms like Trip.com, Ctrip, and Skyscanner to boost visibility and bookings. Strategic alliances with Chinese tech giants Huawei, Alibaba, and WeChat are also in place, alongside plans to increase direct flights between the two countries.<sup>83</sup>

However, the number of Chinese tourists visiting Saudi Arabia remains relatively modest compared to other nationalities. According to the Saudi Ministry of Tourism's 2023 report, the country saw a record-breaking 27.4 million inbound tourists, including 16 million for non-religious purposes. Bahrain topped the list with 3.4 million visitors, followed by Egypt with 2.6 million and Pakistan with 2.5 million.<sup>84</sup> The report highlighted the diversity of tourist origins: 7.9 million from Asia and the Pacific, 5.6 million from the Middle East, 2.7 million from Europe, and 2 million from Africa. The Americas accounted for 470,000 tourists, with the United States leading at 331,000. Algeria was the top African source country with 523,000 visitors, while Egypt led the Middle Eastern sources (excluding GCC countries). Türkiye was the leading European source, contributing 680,000 visitors.<sup>85</sup>

In the coming years, Chinese companies might also increase their involvement in the Saudi mining sector. Under Crown

Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030 plan, Saudi Arabia aims to diversify its economy by developing mining and mineral processing as its third primary industry, following oil, gas, and petrochemicals. The country plans to tap into an estimated \$2.5 trillion worth of domestic mineral resources with assistance from Saudi Aramco and state mining group Ma'aden.<sup>86</sup>

Nonetheless, the advantages of these initiatives might not be apparent for years, or possibly decades, due to issues like water scarcity, a lack of skilled mining engineers, and the scarcity of top-tier mineral deposits. Therefore, Riyadh is looking to draw in China's investments, banking on the extensive and innovative experience of Chinese companies in this sector and their commitment to long-term strategies. Or, as Saudi Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman put it bluntly, "We came to recognize today's reality that China has taken the lead and will continue to take that lead [...]. We do not have to compete with China; we have to collaborate with China."

China's growing role in the renewable energy supply chain and Saudi Arabia's emphasis on clean energy sources like solar and green hydrogen strengthen the ties between the two nations. As market conditions align in both countries, businesses can collaborate on environmental initiatives, leveraging common values and technological advancements. This cooperation includes bringing in Chinese expertise to help localize production within the Saudi Arabian sector.<sup>87</sup>

Yet significant obstacles still exist despite the recently strengthened relations between China and Saudi Arabia. The United States' approach to the Middle East dramatically influences this scenario. Whether the U.S. engages diplomatically, enforces sanctions, or undertakes military interventions significantly affects the prospects of China's initiatives in the Middle East and its expanding partnership with Saudi Arabia.

Indeed, Washington is growing concerned about Riyadh's deepening ties with China in sectors like telecoms, security,

<sup>82</sup> Jan 2024.

<sup>83</sup> See Shen 2024, Casey 2024.

<sup>84</sup> Ministry of Tourism of Saudi Arabia 2024.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Dempsey and Cornish 2024.

<sup>87</sup> See Raffoul and Keller 2024, Fitch Solutions 2024.

and defense, particularly with companies like Huawei and SenseTime, both sanctioned by the U.S. This includes a significant Saudi Arabian investment in a joint AI lab venture with SenseTime.<sup>88</sup> Saudi Arabia expresses interest in discussing the transfer of technology to the Kingdom and developing a local technology hub that leverages the expertise of Saudi talent. In this regard, Chinese electric vehicle companies plan to establish manufacturing plants in Saudi Arabia, which aligns with the Kingdom's aim to develop a domestic industrial base and make a significant mark on the global stage.<sup>89</sup>

U.S. efforts to limit China's technological growth might affect Middle Eastern countries like Saudi Arabia, which heavily invested in AI development. The Kingdom relies on U.S. tech, such as Intel and Nvidia chips, for AI projects, but Washington's policy targeting Chinese tech could create challenges.<sup>90</sup> The Public Investment Fund, Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund, is facing greater scrutiny in the U.S. The Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States is reviewing several multibillion-dollar deals because it fears they could pose a risk to national security.<sup>91</sup>

A severe slowdown in China's economy is another challenge that presents a significant risk that may considerably impact Saudi Arabia's oil and non-oil GDP owing to lower oil prices and demand. As a primary global oil importer, China plays a crucial role in the Kingdom's oil revenue, mainly as over 25% of Saudi Arabia's oil exports are currently directed to China.<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, their robust trade relationship means a slowdown in China's economy, which might also affect Saudi Arabia's non-oil GDP. China is a top market for Saudi exports such as chemicals and plastics and also contributes to Saudi Arabia's diversification program through tourism and investment.<sup>93</sup>

At the political or strategic levels, China is concerned (due to escalating tensions in the Middle East) about the potential breakdown of the Saudi Arabia–Iran agreement, which it helped facilitate in March 2023. Saudi Arabia and Iran share this concern, as the deal is crucial for regional stability and aligns with their interests. At the China–Saudi Arabia–Iran Joint Commission Meeting in Beijing in December 2023, Foreign Minister Wang Yi emphasized the importance of avoiding external interference in Saudi–Iran relations.

China fears renewed Saudi–Iran competition could undermine its Global Security Initiative and regional security strategies.<sup>94</sup> In this situation, Saudi Arabia is concerned that the current conflict between Iran and Israel and the Red Sea involving Ansar Allah (the Houthis rebels) and the United States

may jeopardize the de-escalation in the region and, eventually, the peace talks between the Yemeni government and the Houthis, potentially leading to its breakdown in the worst-case scenario. Consequently, there is a heightened risk of increased political tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

To be sure, the Houthis retain a degree of autonomy from Iran. They might independently renew attacks on Saudi interests if the Gaza conflict persists, if Saudi Arabia moves toward normalizing relations with Israel, or if cease-fire talks in the Yemen Civil War break down.<sup>95</sup> A media report suggests that Saudi Arabia is making concessions to the Houthis in Yemen to prevent confrontation with the group, which has shown notable advancements in its capabilities, as demonstrated by its recent attack on Tel Aviv, Israel.<sup>96</sup>

Amid escalating tensions in the Middle East, particularly between Israel and Iran, Saudi Arabia is prioritizing three key objectives: protecting its territory, ensuring the security of maritime trade routes, and mitigating perceived geopolitical risks.<sup>97</sup> In this context, Saudi Arabia strategically seeks to reduce regional tensions by balancing the interests of Iran and the U.S., focusing on diplomacy rather than military alliances. Consequently, a direct medium-term security partnership between the U.S., Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other GCC countries against Iran seems unlikely. The GCC's strengthened ties with Tehran suggest that diplomatic efforts are seen as a more practical solution for regional security than military means.

As such, Saudi Arabia seeks to maintain cooperation with Iran on both regional and bilateral issues while avoiding any escalation that might provoke renewed attacks from Iraq and Yemen on Saudi interests. Moreover, Riyadh might be turning to China for assistance in managing this delicate situation without putting undue strain on Iranian–Saudi relations. By involving China as a mediator, Saudi Arabia aims to promote regional stability and create a peaceful environment that supports its diplomatic and economic objectives. At the same time, Riyadh considers Beijing's close economic and political links with Iran as factors that may contribute positively to the sustainability of the agreement.<sup>98</sup>

Most importantly, the possible signing of an official defense treaty between the United States and Saudi Arabia could have significant implications for China, considering the geopolitical and economic contexts. A U.S.–Saudi defense treaty could strengthen American influence in the region, potentially countering China's growing presence. China's Belt and Road Initiative, which includes investments in the Middle East, could face challenges due to increased U.S. influence in the region.

China could see an official defense treaty as an attempt by the U.S. to encircle it with alliances as part of the broader

<sup>88</sup> The Economist 2022.

<sup>89</sup> Wiggins, Raval and Kerr 2023.

<sup>90</sup> Thompson 2023.

<sup>91</sup> Bartenstein 2023.

<sup>92</sup> International Monetary Fund (IMF) 2023b.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Niu 2024, Ziwen 2023, Han 2024, Xinhua 2023a.

<sup>95</sup> RANE Network Inc. 2024.

<sup>96</sup> Dagher and Hatem 2024.

<sup>97</sup> BMI 2024a.

<sup>98</sup> International Crisis Group 2024.

U.S.–China strategic rivalry. This could increase tensions between the two powers, impacting various aspects of international relations, from trade to technology. The treaty could increase U.S. sophisticated arms sales to Saudi Arabia, impacting the regional military balance.

China has been trying to position itself as a neutral player capable of engaging with various Middle Eastern countries, including Iran, a regional rival of Saudi Arabia. A U.S.–Saudi defense treaty might complicate these diplomatic efforts, forcing China to recalibrate its regional strategy. Closer U.S.–Saudi ties might lead to increased cooperation in areas like 5G technology, potentially at the expense of Chinese companies like Huawei.

The possibility of a U.S.–Saudi defense treaty could influence China's foreign policy, potentially pushing it closer to Iran. This scenario would unfold within the larger context of geopolitical alignments and strategic interests. Suppose China perceives the U.S.–Saudi defense treaty as an attempt to contain or counterbalance its influence in the Middle East. In that case, it might seek to strengthen ties with other regional powers, like Iran, to maintain its strategic foothold.

This could include increased military cooperation, though it would likely be a decision with many considerations. China would likely proceed cautiously, balancing its strategic interests with the risks of escalating regional tensions or damaging its international relations. However, China might intensify its use of economic and diplomatic channels as tools for supporting Iran, counterbalancing the U.S.–Saudi alliance. This could involve increased trade, investment, and efforts to circumvent international sanctions against Iran.

That said, China would need to weigh the benefits of supporting Iran against the potential costs in its relations with other countries, including those in the Gulf region, the broader Middle East, and the West. While the potential of a U.S.–Saudi defense treaty could push China closer to Iran, the extent and nature of this realignment would depend on various factors, including international reactions, the specifics of the treaty, and ongoing regional dynamics. China's approach will likely be pragmatic and calculated, seeking to balance its regional interests with its broader global strategies.

At the same time, Saudi Arabia is navigating a delicate balance in its international relations by pursuing new defense agreements with the United States while ensuring these do not disrupt its growing economic ties with China. This strategic hedging requires diplomatic finesse, clear communication, and the ability to maintain a delicate equilibrium to effectively manage its relationships with both superpowers.

Saudi Arabia has insisted that normalizing relations with Israel must be contingent upon the establishment of a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital. Saudi officials have consistently stated that establishing diplomatic ties with Israel will only be possible with substantial and irreversible progress in this regard. However, the current Israeli government, supported by a Knesset reso-

lution, is rejecting the establishment of a Palestinian state, complicating the situation for the Saudis. Additionally, a U.S. defense agreement with the Kingdom that excludes normalization with Israel would likely face political challenges, as it would struggle to gain approval in Congress (see Table 1).<sup>99</sup> This disagreement has hindered a crucial U.S.–Israeli–Saudi deal, a cornerstone of President Biden's Middle East strategy. Nevertheless, regional and global dynamics remain unchanged, indicating that the next American president may finalize the deal once the urgency of the Gaza situation diminishes.<sup>100</sup>

Importantly, the chances of the U.S. Senate ratifying a defense agreement with Saudi Arabia without normalizing relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel are slim. This situation presents a significant challenge, as ratification necessitates a two-thirds majority in the Senate. The complexities introduced by a divided Congress, where Democrats emphasize human rights and Republicans advocate for robust defense alliances, underscore the importance of a well-rounded strategy.<sup>101</sup>

Although these complexities are expected to persist in the near future, U.S.–Saudi relations may steer in different directions depending on the outcome of the 2024 U.S. presidential and Congressional elections and the impact of the Gaza conflict. These factors might challenge Saudi Arabia's ambitions as it seeks to balance its foreign policy by maintaining close security ties with the U.S. while expanding its economic cooperation with China.<sup>102</sup>

<sup>99</sup> Farhat 2024, The Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf 2024.

<sup>100</sup> Gause 2024.

<sup>101</sup> See Fantappie and Nasr 2024, Leber and Huggard 2024, BMI 2024b.

<sup>102</sup> Gause 2024.

Table 1  
**Potential U.S.-Saudi Relations Post-2024 Election**

Scenario	Kamala Harris Wins	Donald Trump Wins	Outlook
<b>U.S.–Saudi Relations</b>	Emphasis on human rights could increase pressure on Saudi Arabia.	Closer ties are based on strategic and economic interests, focusing less on human rights.	U.S.–Saudi relations will be shaped by Middle Eastern geopolitics, energy markets, and U.S. domestic politics.
<b>Policy Consistency</b>	Likely to maintain a balance between human rights and strategic interests.	There is less emphasis on human rights and more on arms deals and economic cooperation.	Harris: Expected to continue Biden's approach. Trump: Likely to restore his previous administration's stance.
<b>Defense Agreement Without Israel Normalization</b>	U.S. is unlikely to support a defense pact without progress in Israel's normalization, but it may support gradual steps.	It will likely support a defense pact without normalization, prioritizing immediate benefits.	Harris: Unlikely without progress on the Palestinian issue. Trump: Possible without normalization.
<b>Regional Impacts</b>	Diplomatic focus on human rights may strain relations if enforced. U.S. efforts to contain China economically may complicate Saudi hedging.	More robust defense and economic relations but less emphasis on human rights, possibly leading to regional instability. Increased pressure on China and Iran may complicate Saudi balancing and its détente with Iran.	Strategic alignment against Iran, with varying regional tensions and domestic political impacts.
<b>U.S. Congress Position</b>	A divided Congress could face difficulties; Democrats favor human rights conditions, and Republicans resist.	The Republican majority is likely to push through despite potential Democratic opposition.	Senate approval of defense agreements requires a two-thirds majority, making it challenging without bipartisan support.

Sources: The author compiled the table using the following references: Leber and Huggard 2024, Gause 2024, Fantappie and Nasr 2024, Farhat 2024, BMI 20244b, BMI 2024c.



## CONCLUSION

Saudi Arabia is maneuvering through a complex global landscape by pursuing a pragmatic foreign policy. It's bolstering economic and technological ties with China yet still upholds a robust security partnership with the United States. Recent actions, like Riyadh's impartial attitude towards Russia during the Ukraine conflict, contemplating oil trade in yuan, considering membership in the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and intensifying tech collaborations with China, are testing this equilibrium.

The Biden administration values the U.S.–Saudi security partnership and recognizes China's growing regional influence. The U.S.–China competition in the Middle East will focus on diplomatic and technological areas rather than military. Stability in the region requires balancing U.S. security ties with Chinese economic partnerships. As U.S.–China tensions escalate, Saudi Arabia must navigate this complex geopolitical scene, considering its alliances and the broader implications for stability. It could eventually be pressured to make tough choices.

China and Saudi Arabia share an increasingly broad economic partnership. Although there have been significant successes, their relationship has not yet reached the depth of the region's traditional security ties with the West. Still, both countries are committed to deepening and expanding their collaboration in response to a more multipolar, competitive global landscape and uncertain American foreign policies.

Saudi Arabia's recent diplomatic initiatives underscore that maintaining strategic solid ties with the U.S. is a top priority for Riyadh, regardless of the U.S. presidency, as long as Washington respects Saudi interests. Simultaneously, Riyadh is open to exploring alternative avenues in the shifting multipolar global landscape. The outcomes of U.S.–Saudi defense negotiations could significantly influence Saudi Arabia's involvement in BRICS and its steps towards de-dollarization, potentially reshaping U.S. foreign policy in the region.

Saudi Arabia is determined to form a defense and security partnership with Washington that aligns with its national interests. Simultaneously, it aims to retain the freedom to build political and economic ties with China, Russia, and Iran. This complex balancing act presents a significant challenge for Congress, especially the Senate, as they try to reconcile

these conflicting priorities. The outcome of this situation could greatly influence Saudi Arabia's strategic priorities and the US foreign policy in the region. Moreover, the decisions may reshape the geopolitical landscape, impacting global alliances and power dynamics for years to come.

## REFERENCES

- Aitken, Peter.** 2023. "Bret Baier Interviews Saudi Prince: Israel Peace, 9/11 Ties, Iran Nuke Fears: 'Cannot See Another Hiroshima.'" *Fox News*, September 20. At <https://www.foxnews.com/world/bret-baier-interviews-saudi-prince-israel-peace-ties-iran-nuke-fears-cannot-see-another-hiroshima>, accessed January 10, 2024.
- Alarabiya.** 2024. "Saudi Arabia Has Not yet joined BRICs: Minister." *Alarabiya*, January 16. At <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/saudi-arabia/2024/01/16/Saudi-Arabia-has-not-yet-joined-BRICs-Minister>, accessed July 29, 2024.
- Al-Atrush, Samer.** 2023. "Saudi Arabia Moves Closer to Joining Chinese Security Club." *Financial Times*, March 29, 2023. At <https://www.ft.com/content/419c552d-141e-4128-b0e5-59d6cb55c681>, accessed January 6, 2024.
- Al-Atrush, Samer, Felicia Schwartz and Neri Zilber.** 2023. "Saudi Arabia weighs nuclear power offers from China and France in bid to sway US." *Financial Times*, August 26. At <https://www.ft.com/content/ec613036-86ab-479e-becd-99d152030c34>, accessed July 29, 2024.
- Alberque, William and Amnah Ibraheem.** 2023. "Saudi Arabia's partner in pursuing civilian nuclear power: China or the US?" *IISS*, November 17. At <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2023/11/saudi-arabias-partner-in-pursuing-civilian-nuclear-power-china-or-the-us/>, accessed July 29, 2024.
- Alrashdi, Mayed.** 2024. "Saudi Arabia: Greenfield FDI inflows rose 110% y/y in 2023." Emirates NBD, March 27. At <https://www.emiratesnbdresearch.com/en/articles/saudi-arabia-greenfield-fdi-report-2023#:~:text=Saudi%20Arabia%27s%20greenfield%20FDI%20inflows,record%20of%20USD%2034.26bn.>, accessed August 22, 2024.
- Al-Tamimi, Naser.** 2014. *China–Saudi Arabia Relations: Marriage of convenience or strategic alliance? 1990–2012*. London and New York: Routledge, 2014: 59.
- American Enterprise Institute.** n.d. China Global Investment Tracker. At <https://www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/>, accessed January 19, 2024.
- Arab Center Washington DC.** 2024. "Arab Public Opinion about Israel's War on Gaza." Arab Center Washington DC. At <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/arab-public-opinion-about-israels-war-on-gaza/>, accessed March 6, 2024.
- Bar'el, Zvi.** 2024. "Normalization with Saudi Arabia Will Be Decided in Gaza, but Israel's in No Hurry." *Haaretz*, March 5. At <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-03-05/ty-article/premium/normalization-with-saudi-arabia-will-be-decided-in-gaza-but-israels-in-no-hurry/0000018e-0e3e-dc37-a9ae-de7e3d230000>, accessed March 6, 2024.
- Bartenstein, Ben.** 2023. "Mideast Wealth Funds Draw Greater U.S. Scrutiny over China Ties." *Bloomberg*, November 26. At <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-11-24/mideast-wealth-funds-draw-greater-us-scrutiny-over-china-ties>, accessed January 16, 2024.
- Blanchard, Christopher M.** 2023. "Middle East and North Africa-China Relations." *Congressional Research Service*, March 23. At <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/details?prodcode=R47482>, accessed January 6, 2024.
- Bloomberg News.** 2023. "BRICS Latest: Bloc Invites New Members, Plans Two-Tier System" *Bloomberg*, August 24, 2023. At <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-08-24/brics-summit-2023-south-africa-bloc-invites-saudi-iran-four-others-as-members>, accessed January 10, 2024.
- BMI.** 2024a. "GCC Countries Will Pursue Delicate Balancing Act Between The US And Iran As Regional Tensions Mount." Fitch Solutions, April 25. At [https://bmi.fitchsolutions.com/research/BMI\\_6E48391F-2174-493C-B6FE-AC93269964F3](https://bmi.fitchsolutions.com/research/BMI_6E48391F-2174-493C-B6FE-AC93269964F3), accessed July 26, 2024.
- . 2024b. "Trump Second Term Scenario: Implications For The Middle East." Fitch Solutions, July 9. At [https://bmi.fitchsolutions.com/research/BMI\\_D1305514-8F6F-42E7-82C9-8AD74B61D092](https://bmi.fitchsolutions.com/research/BMI_D1305514-8F6F-42E7-82C9-8AD74B61D092), accessed July 27, 2024.
- . 2024c. "US 2024 Election: Kamala Harris's Policies Compared To Biden's." Fitch Solutions, July 30. At [https://bmi.fitchsolutions.com/research/BMI\\_FB243CF9-7C48-4920-9B10-7E1786FA51EF](https://bmi.fitchsolutions.com/research/BMI_FB243CF9-7C48-4920-9B10-7E1786FA51EF), accessed July 27, 2024.
- Bohl, Ryan.** 2023. "The Limits of the U.S.-Saudi Relationship." *TIME*, August 4. At <https://time.com/6300927/limits-u-s-saudi-relationship/>, accessed January 8, 2024.
- Cang, Alfred and Matthew Martin.** 2023. "Saudi Aramco Deepens China Push With \$3.6 Billion Refinery Deal" 2023. *Bloomberg*, March 27. At <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-03-27/saudi-aramco-takes-3-6-billion-stake-in-china-oil-refinery>, accessed April 16, 2024.
- Casey, David.** 2024. "Air China Now Third Chinese Carrier to Schedule Saudi Arabia Entry." *Aviation Week Network*, April 10. At <https://aviationweek.com/air-transport/airports-networks/air-china-now-third-chinese-carrier-schedule-saudi-arabia-entry>, accessed April 11, 2024.
- Cengiz, Sinem.** 2020. "Saudi Foreign Policy towards China in the Post-Arab Uprisings Era: A Neo-Classical Realist Approach." *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 14, no. 1: 51–67. At <https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2020.1728971>, accessed January 11, 2024.
- China General Administration of Customs.** n.d. *Customs statistics*. At <http://stats.customs.gov.cn/>, accessed August 22, 2024.
- China Ministry of Foreign Affairs.** 2016. "Full Text of Chinese President's Signed Article on Saudi Newspaper." January 18. At [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/topics\\_665678/2016zt/xjpdstajyljxgfw/201601/t20160119\\_704455.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/2016zt/xjpdstajyljxgfw/201601/t20160119_704455.html), accessed January 28, 2024.
- . 2022. "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference." December 12. At [http://munich.china-consulate.gov.cn/gerfyrth/202212/t20221212\\_10989354.htm](http://munich.china-consulate.gov.cn/gerfyrth/202212/t20221212_10989354.htm), accessed August 22, 2024.
- . 2023a. "The Global Security Initiative Concept Paper." February 21. At [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbxw/202302/t20230221\\_11028348.html](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbxw/202302/t20230221_11028348.html), accessed January 4, 2024.
- . 2023b. "Joint Trilateral Statement by the People's Republic of China, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the Islamic Republic of Iran." *FMPRC*, March 10. At [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/gjhdq\\_665435/2675\\_665437/2878\\_663746/2879\\_663748/202303/t20230311\\_11039241.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/gjhdq_665435/2675_665437/2878_663746/2879_663748/202303/t20230311_11039241.html), accessed January 5, 2024.
- Cockayne, James.** 2024. "Russia Soars Ahead of Saudi as China's Top 2023 Supplier." *MEES*. At <https://www.mees.com/2024/1/26/opec/russia-soars-ahead-of-saudi-as-chinas-top-2023-supplier/a4c62530-bc52-11ee-a833-d11c2b41a6fd>, accessed January 26, 2024.
- Cohen, Zachary.** 2021. "CNN Exclusive: US intel and satellite images show Saudi Arabia is now building its own ballistic missiles with help of China." *CNN*, December 23. At <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/12/23/politics/saudi-ballistic-missiles-china/index.html>, accessed January 10, 2024.
- Conte, Niccolo.** 2023. "How China Became Saudi Arabia's Largest Trading Partner." *Visual Capitalist*, February 19. At <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/cp/how-china-became-saudi-arabias-largest-trading-partner/>, accessed March 30, 2024.
- Dagher, Sam and Mohammed Hatem.** 2024. "Saudi Arabia Urges Yemen to Help De-Escalate Tensions With Houthis." *Bloomberg*, July 26. At <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-07-26/saudi-arabia-strives-to-avoid-renewed-war-with-yemen-s-houthis>, accessed July 26, 2024.
- Demongeot, Maryelle and Amena Bakr.** 2023. "China's Role in Realizing Saudi Arabia's Vision." *Energy Intelligence*, April 13. At <https://www.energyintel.com/00000187-7583-dc67-a1c7-77bf110f0000#>, accessed January 5, 2024.
- Dempsey, Harry and Chloe Cornish.** 2024. "How Gulf States Are Putting Their Money into Mining." *Financial Times*, April 1. At <https://www.ft.com/content/59298650-540a-43cd-86f8-a6c6db0aa906>, accessed April 9, 2024.
- Dettoni, Jacopo.** 2024. "Global greenfield FDI continues nuanced recovery in 2023." *fDi Intelligence*, May 14. At <https://www.fdiintelligence.com/content/locations/global/global-greenfield-fdi-continues-nuanced-recovery-in-2023-83783>, accessed May 14, 2024.

- Dezan Shira & Associates.** 2023. "BRICS & MENA: China's Growing Influence in the Middle East." *Asia Briefing*, September 2023. At <https://www.asiabriefing.com/store/book/brics-mena-china-s-growing-influence-in-the-middle-east-9774.html>, accessed October 22, 2023.
- El Dahan, Maha.** 2024. "Saudi Arabia has not yet joined BRICS - Saudi official source." *Reuters*, February 1. At <https://www.reuters.com/world/saudi-arabia-has-not-yet-joined-brics-saudi-official-source-2024-02-01/>, accessed July 30, 2024.
- European Commission.** n.d. "Types of investment." At: <https://trade.ec.europa.eu/access-to-markets/en/content/types-investment>, accessed June 18, 2024.
- Fantappie, Maria and Vali Nasr.** 2024. "The Dangerous Push for Israeli-Saudi Normalization: Without a Real Path to a Palestinian State, a Deal Will Destabilize the Middle East." *Foreign Affairs*, July 11. At <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/israel/dangerous-push-israeli-saudi-normalization>, accessed July 31, 2024.
- Farhat, Beatrice.** 2024. "Saudi Arabia' Very, Very Close' to US Security Pact Tied to Palestinian State." *Al-Monitor*, June 3. At <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/04/saudi-arabia-very-very-close-us-security-pact-tied-palestinian-state>, accessed July 27, 2024.
- fDi.** 2023. "Record Chinese Investment Aids Saudi Diversification." *FDI Intelligence*, December 4, 2023. At <https://www.fdiintelligence.com/content/news/record-chinese-investment-aids-saudi-diversification-83240>, accessed January 10, 2024.
- Fitch Solutions.** 2024. "MENA Solar Power Growth to Be Supported by Policy, Green Hydrogen and Low Solar Power Prices." March 6. At <https://www.fitchsolutions.com/bmi/renewables/mena-solar-power-growth-be-supported-policy-green-hydrogen-and-low-solar-power-prices-06-03-2024>, accessed March 20, 2024.
- Fusheng, Li.** 2023. "Middle East Investors Eye Chinese Startups." *China Daily*, October 30. At <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202310/30/WS-653f13f8a31090682a5eb6b1.html>, accessed January 4, 2024.
- Gause, F. Gregory, III.** 2024. "The Limits of a U.S.-Saudi Security Deal: Don't Expect Riyadh to Take Washington's Side against China and Russia." *Foreign Affairs*, August 6. At <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/saudi-arabia/limits-us-saudi-security-deal-china-russia>, accessed August 6, 2024.
- Gnana, Jennifer.** 2022. "S&P Global Commodity Insights." *S&P Global*, January 12. At <https://www.spglobal.com/commodityinsights/en/market-insights/latest-news/electric-power/011222-saudi-arabia-to-develop-huge-uranium-resources-in-energy-diversity-push-minister>, accessed January 12, 2024.
- Guzansky, Yoel and Udi Dekel.** 2024. "The Worst of All Worlds: Israel Could Miss Out on Normalization With Saudi Arabia." *INSS*, April 14. At <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/normalization-with-saudi-arabia/>, accessed April 14, 2024.
- Hamm, Ana Estrada, Rebecca Redlich and Frances McDonough.** 2024. "With Attention on Gaza, Russia and China Continue Economic and Military Inroads in Arab States." *The Washington Institute*. At <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/attention-gaza-russia-and-china-continue-economic-and-military-inroads-arab-states>, accessed January 5, 2024.
- Han, Zhang.** 2024. "China Abstains UNSC Resolution over Red Sea Crisis, Concerned over 'Fueling Tensions.'" *Global Times*. January 11, 2024. At <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202401/1305210.shtml>, accessed January 11, 2024.
- Hong, Yu.** 2024. "China's Efforts to Deepen Its Ties with the Middle Eastern Countries: The Case of Saudi Arabia and Iran." *Asia in Transition (Online)*. At [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-9633-9\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-9633-9_7), accessed April 9, 2024.
- International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).** 2009. Agreement between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the International Atomic Energy Agency for the Application of Safeguards in Connection with the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. February 9. At <https://www.iaea.org/publications/documents/infcircs/agreement-between-kingdom-saudi-arabia-and-international-atomic-energy-agency-application-safeguards-connection-treaty-non-proliferation-nuclear-weapons>, accessed January 14, 2024.
- IEA.** 2024. "Oil Market Report - January 2024 - Analysis - IEA." At <https://www.iea.org/reports/oil-market-report-january-2024>, accessed January 28, 2024.
- IISS.** 2021. "Relations between China and the Arab Gulf States." *Strategic Comments* 27 no. 10: iv-vi. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13567888.2021.2021685>.
- International Monetary Fund (IMF).** 2023a. "Saudi Arabia's Economy Grows as It Diversifies." September 28. At <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2023/09/28/cf-saudi-arabias-economy-grows-as-it-diversifies>, accessed January 28, 2024.
- International Monetary Fund (IMF).** 2023b. "Gulf Cooperation Council: Economic Prospects and Policy Challenges for the GCC Countries." *IMF Staff Country Reports*. December 14. At <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/CR/Issues/2023/12/14/Gulf-Cooperation-Council-Economic-Prospects-and-Policy-Challenges-for-the-GCC-Countries-542513>, accessed January 15, 2024.
- International Crisis Group.** 2024. "Great Expectations: The Future of Iranian-Saudi Détente." Briefing No. 92, June 13. At <https://www.crisis-group.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran-saudi-arabia/b92-great-expectations-future>, accessed August 13, 2024.
- International Trade Centre (ITC).** n.d. *Trade Map*. At <https://www.trademap.org/Index.aspx>, accessed August 22, 2024.
- Jan, Yumul.** 2024. "Saudi Arabia Sets Ambitious Tourism Goal." *China Daily*, March 16. At <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202403/16/WS-65f4d6fea31082fc043bcf39.html>, accessed March 18, 2024.
- Jiayao, Li.** 2023. "China-Saudi Arabia 'Blue Sword-2023' Launches Maritime Training". *China Military*, October 25. At [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/ARMEDFORCES/Navy/News\\_209162/16261760.html](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/ARMEDFORCES/Navy/News_209162/16261760.html), accessed January 5.
- Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.** n.d. *Saudi Vision 2030*. At <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/en/>, accessed April 10, 2024.
- Leber, Andrew and Kevin Huggard.** 2024. "Making Sense of a Proposed US-Saudi Deal." *Brookings*, July 10. At <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/making-sense-of-a-proposed-us-saudi-deal/>, accessed July 28, 2024.
- Liu, Zhongmin.** 2016. "Historical Evolution of Relationship between China and the Gulf Region." *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies in Asia* 10, no. 1: 1-25. At <https://doi.org/10.1080/19370679.2016.12023276>, accessed January 6, 2024.
- Loft, Philip, Matthew Ward and John Curtis.** 2022. "China and the US in the Middle East: Iran and the Arab Gulf." *The House of Commons Library (UK)*, August 26. At <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9612/>, accessed October 22, 2023.
- Masterson, Julia.** 2022. Saudi Arabia Said to Produce Ballistic Missiles. *Arms Control Association*. At <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2022-01/news/saudi-arabia-said-produce-ballistic-missiles>, accessed January 17, 2024.
- Ministry of Tourism of Saudi Arabia.** 2024. *Annual Statistical Report - Tourism Statistics 2023*. At <https://mt.gov.sa/tic/publications>, accessed August 5, 2024.
- Mostafa, Golam.** 2019. "China's Relations with Arab Gulf States." *Advances in Science, Technology & Innovation*. At [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-01659-3\\_9](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-01659-3_9), accessed January 8, 2024.
- Niblock, Tim.** 2020. "China and the Middle East: A Global Strategy Where the Middle East Has a Significant but Limited Place." *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 14 (4): 481-504. At <https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2020.1847855>, accessed October 26, 2023.
- Niu, Song and Danyu Wang.** 2023. "'Three Summits' and the New Development of China-Arab States Relations in the New Era." *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 17, no. 1: 15-30. At <https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2023.2190610>, accessed July 26, 2024.
- Niu, Xinchun.** 2024. "Does China Benefit from Gaza Conflict?" *China-US Focus*. January 2. At <https://www.chinausfocus.com/peace-security/does-china-benefit-from-gaza-conflict>, accessed January 8, 2024.
- Olcott, Eleanor.** 2024. "'Strings Attached': Saudi Arabia Steps up Demands in Tech Deals with China." *Financial Times*. February 19. At <https://www.ft.com/content/21f9ca35-7170-4eab-bf0b-2f3d0df9bad1>, accessed March 8, 2024.
- Pamuk, Humeyra.** 2023. "US State Dept nominee says Saudi-Israel normalization players eager to resume process." *Reuters*. December 7. At <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-state-dept-nominee-says-saudi-israel-normalization-players-eager-resume-2023-12-07/>, accessed March 6, 2024.

- Pierson, David.** 2023. "China's role in Iran-Saudi Arabia deal shows Xi's global goals." *The New York Times*, March 11. At <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/11/world/asia/china-saudi-arabia-iran-us.html#:~:text=Xi%20has%20laid%20out%20is,iran%20agreement%20reflects%20this%20vision>, accessed July 31, 2024.
- Pollock, David.** 2020. "Correction: New Saudi Poll Shows Sharp Rise in Support for Israel Ties, Despite Caveats." *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, December 8. At <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/correction-new-saudi-poll-shows-sharp-rise-support-israel-ties-despite-caveats>, accessed July 27, 2024.
- . 2021. "New Saudi Poll: United States, China, and Russia all Tie as Important Partners." *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, December 9. At <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-saudi-poll-united-states-china-and-russia-all-tie-important-partners>, accessed July 27, 2024.
- . 2022. "New Saudi Poll: Some Surprises on the U.S., Iran, Israel, Oil, and More." *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, December 16. At <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-saudi-poll-some-surprises-us-iran-israel-oil-and-more>, accessed July 27, 2024.
- Raffoul, Alexandre and Kai Keller.** 2024. "Here Are 3 Key Sectors for Growth with Deepening China-Gulf Relations." 2024. *World Economic Forum*, April 10. At <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2024/04/3-key-sectors-poised-for-explosive-growth-as-china-gcc-cooperation-deepens/>, accessed April 11, 2024.
- RANE Network Inc.** 2024. "Assessing Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy during the Israel-Hamas War and Beyond." Stratfor Analysis, May 3. At <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/assessing-saudi-arabias-foreign-policy-during-israel-hamas-war-and-beyond>, accessed July 30, 2024.
- Reuters.** 2024. "Saudi's SABIC gives the go-ahead for a \$6.4 billion China petrochemical plant." January 22. At <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/saudis-sabic-gives-go-ahead-64-bln-china-petrochemical-plant-2024-01-22/>, accessed August 22, 2024.
- Said, Summer, Sha Hua and Dion Nissenbaum.** 2023. "Saudi Arabia Eyes Chinese Bid for Nuclear Plant." *WSJ*. August 25. At <https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-eyes-chinese-bid-for-nuclear-plant-e4a56f>, accessed July 22, 2024.
- Saudi Aramco.** 2023a. "Aramco and Eastern Shenghong Sign Cooperation Framework Agreement." 2023. September 27. At <https://china.aramco.com/en/news-media/china-news/2023/aramco-and-eastern-shenghong-sign-cooperation-framework-agreement>, accessed July 7, 2024.
- . 2023b. "China Is a Land of Opportunities." October 31. At <https://china.aramco.com/en/news-media/china-news/2023/exclusive-interview-of-aramco-asia-president-mutib-a-al-harbi>, accessed July 7, 2024.
- Saudi Press Agency.** 2022. "Saudi Arabia and China... Long History, Bright Future Prospects." December 6. At <https://spa.gov.sa/en/36c-26cde68g>, accessed January 12, 2024.
- Schechter, Anna.** 2024. "Inside the Effort to Create a Far-Reaching U.S.-Saudi-Israeli Pact to End the War." *NBC News*. January 18. At <https://www.nbcnews.com/investigations/effort-create-far-reaching-us-saudi-israeli-pact-end-war-rcna134396>, accessed March 6, 2024.
- Shen, Shiwei.** 2024. "China, Saudi Arabia Launch More Direct Flights." *CGTN*, April 17. At <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2024-04-17/China-Saudi-Arabia-launch-more-direct-flights-1SRK4ofxuM0/p.html>, accessed April 17, 2024.
- Shichor, Yitzhak.** 1982. "In Search of Alternatives: China's Middle East Policy after Sadat." *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 8: 101–10. At <https://doi.org/10.2307/2158929>, accessed January 10, 2024.
- Singh, Michael.** 2024. "President Biden's Middle East Squeeze Play." *The Washington Institute*. At <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/president-bidens-middle-east-squeeze-play>, accessed March 6, 2024.
- Sun, Degang.** 2021. "China's Partnership Diplomacy in the Middle East." In Jonathan Fulton ed., *Routledge Handbook on China-Middle East Relations*, 299–311. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003034520-24>.
- Tass.** 2024. "Riyadh Taking Part in BRICS, Still Undecided on Full Membership — Senior Diplomat." *TASS*, June 19. At <https://tass.com/politics/1805457>, accessed July 29, 2024.
- The Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf.** 2024. "Gulf Cooperation Council Vision for Regional Security." GCC Secretariat - General, March 29. At <https://www.gcc-sg.org/ar-sa/CognitiveSources/DigitalLibrary/Lists/DigitalLibrary/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%A4%D9%88%D9%86%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A9%20%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%88%D8%B6%D8%A7%D8%AA/GCCPOL%20EE.pdf>, accessed July 27, 2024.
- The Economist.** 2022. "The Gulf Looks to China." December 7. At <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2022/12/07/the-gulf-looks-to-china>, accessed January 20, 2024.
- The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica.** 2024. "Chiang Kai-Shek | Biography & Facts." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. At <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Chiang-Kai-shek>, accessed January 26, 2024.
- Thompson, Neil.** 2023. "Mideast AI: Saudi, UAE Chip Imports from US Imperiled by Their Close China Ties." *Informed Comment*, September 14. At <https://www.juancole.com/2023/09/mideast-imports-imperiled.html>, accessed January 16, 2024.
- Turak, Natasha.** 2023. "Saudi Arabia and China Are Part of a Multipolar World Order, and Their Mutual Interests Are 'strong and Rising,' Minister Says." *CNBC*, June 14. At <https://www.cnbc.com/2023/06/14/china-and-saudi-arabia-are-part-of-a-multipolar-world-order-minister.html>, accessed February 22, 2024.
- United States Department of State.** 2023. "U.S. Relations with Saudi Arabia." November 1. At <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-saudi-arabia/>, accessed January 8, 2024.
- United States Energy Information Administration.** n.d. *Petroleum & Other Liquids*. At [https://www.eia.gov/dnav/pet/pet\\_move\\_impccus\\_a2\\_nus\\_epc0\\_im0\\_mbbldp\\_a.htm](https://www.eia.gov/dnav/pet/pet_move_impccus_a2_nus_epc0_im0_mbbldp_a.htm), accessed August 22, 2024.
- United States National Nuclear Security Administration.** 2024. "123 Agreements for Peaceful Cooperation." July 9. At <https://www.energy.gov/nnsa/123-agreements-peaceful-cooperation>, last accessed August 22, 2024.
- Wezeman, Pieter D., Justine Gadon and Siemon T. Wezeman.** 2023. "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2022." *SIPRI*. At <https://doi.org/10.55163/CPNS8443>, accessed January 13, 2024.
- Wiggins, Kaye, Anjli Raval and Simeon Kerr.** 2023. "China Deepens Ties with Saudi Arabia at Hong Kong Gathering." *Financial Times*. December 7. At <https://www.ft.com/content/33e1e11d-b44e-4d51-9e35-65620bb2571f>, accessed January 19, 2024.
- World Nuclear Association.** 2024. "Nuclear Power in Saudi Arabia." March 2024. At <https://world-nuclear.org/information-library/country-profiles/countries-o-s/saudi-arabia.aspx>, access July 27, 2024.
- Wu, Bingbing.** 2021. "China and New Middle East." *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 23 (3): 443–57. At <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2021.1888248>, accessed October 22, 2023.
- Wu, Rui and Jun Zhao.** 2020. "The Continuous Weakening of Ideology in the Construction of China-Saudi Arabia Relations: A Historical Review." *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, November 10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2020.1841994>, accessed January 8, 2024.
- Xie, Kawala.** 2022. "Why Is Saudi Arabia Looking to China to Buy Weapons after Years of Arms Deals with the US?" *South China Morning Post*, December 8. At <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3202245/why-saudi-arabia-looking-china-buy-weapons-after-years-arms-deals-us>, accessed January 7, 2024.
- Xinhua.** 2022. "Xi Meets with King Salman Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia." December 9. At <https://english.news.cn/20221209/7207f73bba6d45c8a0600c7d0695b7f9/c.html>, accessed January 18, 2024.
- . 2023a. "Top Chinese Diplomat Meets Delegations of Saudi Arabia, Iran." December 16. At <https://english.news.cn/20231216/50a3aaa4cbe449549829771221a58fbc/c.html>, accessed January 4, 2024.
- . 2023b. "Yearender: 2023 Brings a Tapestry of Challenges and Progress to the Middle East." December 28. At <https://english.news.cn/20231228/5d2acdde6478415a9e03cd0426f156a5/c.html>, accessed January 6, 2024.
- Yamada, Makio.** 2015. "Islam, Energy, and Development: Taiwan and China in Saudi Arabia, 1949–2013", *American Journal of Chinese Stud-*

ies 22, no.1: 79-80. At <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44289075>, accessed January 12, 2024.

**Zhang, Chuchu, and Chaowei Xiao.** 2020. "Bridging the Gap between Overseas and Chinese Perceptions on Sino-Middle Eastern Relations: A Chinese Perspective." *Globalizations* 18, no. 2: 273–84. At <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2020.1777626>, accessed January 12, 2024.

**Zhang, Yukun and Heqian Xu.** 2024. "China Partnership Driven by Business Not Politics, Saudi Minister Says." *Caixin Global*, January 24. At <https://www.caixinglobal.com/2024-01-24/china-partnership-driven-by-business-not-politics-saudi-minister-says-102160036.html>, accessed January 29, 2024.

**Ziwen, Zhao.** 2023. "China Urges Iran and Saudi Arabia to Work Together to 'Avoid Miscalculation' as Diplomats Meet on Restoration of Ties." *South China Morning Post*, December 17. At <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3245358/china-urges-iran-and-saudi-arabia-work-together-avoid-miscalculation-diplomats-meet-restoration-ties>, accessed January 8, 2024.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Dr. Naser al-Tamimi** is a political economist based in the UK. He holds positions as a Senior Associate Research Fellow at the Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI) in Milan, Italy, and as a Senior Associate Fellow at the Global Institute for Strategic Research (GISR) in Doha, Qatar. His research primarily focuses on the Middle East, especially the Gulf region, with a particular interest in the interplay between energy dynamics and the diplomatic relationships between GCC countries and Asia, particularly China. Al-Tamimi earned his Ph.D. in IR from the University of Durham (UK), where his thesis examined the bilateral ties between China and Saudi Arabia.

## IMPRINT

**Published by:**

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Project  
Competence Center MENA Peace & Security  
20 Stasandrou, Apt. 401  
1060 Nicosia  
Email: [peace.mena@fes.de](mailto:peace.mena@fes.de)

Responsible for content and editing:  
Marcus Schneider | Director | Project on Peace and Security  
in the MENA Region

**Contact/Order:** [peace.mena@fes.de](mailto:peace.mena@fes.de)

**LAYOUT:** Erifili Arapoglou - enArte

Commercial use of media published by the FES is not permitted without the consent of the FES. Publications by the FES may not be used for electioneering purposes.  
©2024



# THE RELATIONS BETWEEN CHINA AND SAUDI ARABIA

## Continuity Amid New Challenges



The economic and diplomatic ties between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) have strengthened considerably in recent years in various fields, such as energy, trade, and investments, elevating their bilateral relationship to that of a comprehensive strategic partnership.



However, Chinese-Saudi ties face substantial obstacles, chief among them the United States' approach to the Middle East. The decisions made by the U.S., whether involving diplomatic engagement, sanctions, or military actions, play a significant role in determining the success of China's endeavors in the Middle East and in Saudi Arabia's geopolitical orientation.



While Saudi Arabia has traditionally upheld a close association with the United States, particularly in matters of security, economic relations, and diplomatic collaboration, its foreign policy is also intricately woven by the complex geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East and the U.S. commitments in the region. The Kingdom may navigate its engagements with China and the United States based on regional developments and alignments. Yet, this intricate balancing act is anticipated to encounter challenges in the upcoming months and years, presenting a fascinating puzzle for analysts and policymakers.

Further information on the topic can be found here:

<https://mena.fes.de/index.html>