



Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Emerging Middle Power in Global Dynamics

Dr. Abdulaziz Sager
Chairman, Gulf Research Center
February 2024





Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Emerging Middle Power in Global Dynamics

Strategic Priorities for Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy

Saudi Arabia is garnering attention for its increasingly robust foreign policy, which is characterized by the country's embrace of greater independence and alliance expansion. One way to understand many of Saudi Arabia's recent policy innovations is through the lens of Saudi Vision 2030. The Kingdom continues the ongoing efforts to foster a more conducive environment for innovation and invest in workforce skills that complement its diversification agenda. The Kingdom is driving its economy so that it can keep pace with the global energy transition and foreign policy that is more independent whilst transforming Riyadh into a significant middle power - one that pursues its interests by increasing its regional and global influence and broadening its external ties. It can be argued that Saudi Arabia therefore upholds a constructive and evolving view on the global order.

Priorities for the Kingdom's foreign policy include expanding its economic sphere of influence, broadening its relations, and projecting its power in the rapidly multipolar globe. As it strives to achieve these objectives, Riyadh is putting itself more at the forefront of crucial diplomatic and mediation initiatives. The Kingdom is pursuing a foreign policy that places emphasis on diplomatic initiatives, both to enhance relations with Saudi Arabia's neighbors and to resolve long-running conflicts within and beyond the Middle East. Riyadh is actively engaging in global diplomacy by forming comprehensive strategic partnerships that extend beyond traditional oil cooperation to encompass energy, infrastructure, finance, and technology. This marks a departure from past alignments, showcasing a more pragmatic and

adaptable stance in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy.

Amidst a landscape of shifting alliances and emerging challenges, Saudi Arabia's strategic approach is evident in its role as a mediator and a 'non-aligned' influencer on the global stage. This can be seen by the Kingdom in hosting peace talks and its commitment to fostering diplomatic solutions to conflicts in the region. In 2023, the Kingdom hosted a series of significant global summits as part of a year of strategic alignments and emergence as a pivotal diplomatic player on the global stage.

The Kingdom's Role on the Regional & International Stages

In an era characterized by globalization and interconnectivity, regional partnerships have emerged as pivotal drivers of economic growth, political stability, and cultural exchange. The Kingdom plays a crucial role in the region, balancing Egypt, Iran, Israel, and Turkey to protect its security and wield regional influence. Saudi Arabia's role in various rapprochement efforts throughout the region acts as the driving force in campaigning for strengthening relations for the Arab people.

In a region gripped by diverging interests and various armed conflicts, the Kingdom is further using its efforts to show renewed diplomatic skills and finesse in terms of laying out the path for a new course. Most recently, on February 9, 2024, the Kingdom hosted the **Ministerial Confab Summit** in Riyadh with the foreign ministers from Egypt, Jordan, UAE, and Qatar to advance the Arab stance regarding the Gaza crisis. For the Kingdom, the priority is to end the current crisis in Gaza, focusing on a ceasefire, Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, and



humanitarian access into Gaza. Riyadh is firmly convinced that the only pathway to security and stability for the region, including for Israel, is the establishment of a Palestinian state.

In addition to its efforts in Gaza, the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs led a **ministerial committee** on a tour of the P5 members of the Security Council to rally international positions in support of a ceasefire in Gaza in November 2023. The Kingdom also hosted the **Extraordinary Arab-Islamic Summit** in mobilizing Arab and Islamic partners to discuss the pathways forward in order to calm the situation and provide support for international humanitarian relief efforts. The Summit included the first meeting between Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi.

In many other regional files, the Kingdom has expanded its role as well. This includes evacuating foreign nationals and leading mediation efforts to broker a ceasefire in Sudan, as Saudi Arabia hosted several **Sudan Peace Talks** in Jeddah aimed at ending the conflict in Sudan by gathering representatives of the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces. In September 2023, Saudi Arabia also held ceasefire discussions with Houthi-led delegations in Riyadh, in which the Kingdom pushed its efforts to negotiate a permanent ceasefire to end the long-running war in Yemen. Most prominently, the Kingdom hosted the **32nd Arab League Summit** on May 19, 2023, where, for the first time in more than a decade, representatives of all 22 Arab nations took part. The summit was noteworthy on two fronts - the attendance of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad and the reintegration of Syria into the Arab fold, and the visit and attendance of Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky as the guest of honor.

On the international level, Saudi Arabia has hosted several summits and ministerial

meetings with various international blocs. This includes the **Saudi-African Summit** attended by 50 African leaders discussing the development and deepening of relations between the two regions. Overall, the Kingdom seeks to bolster relations with African countries, expanding them to broader horizons and establishing a fruitful partnership across various political, economic, and developmental domains. The Kingdom also hosted the first **Saudi-Caribbean (CARICOM) Summit** in the context of its endeavor to diversify its sources of income, in accordance with Vision 2030, where Saudi Arabia highlights its commitment to working with international partners like the countries in the Caribbean region to achieve sustainable development goals by 2030.

The **Saudi-Russian Joint Committee** held its 8th session, which took place in Moscow in October 2023. During the meeting, the committee agreed on ways to enhance cooperation between the two nations in several vital fields, including energy, trade, economy, and investment. Riyadh hosted the **GCC-ASEAN Summit** in October 2023, highlighting a shared objective to connect the two dynamic regions and expand on their bloc-to-bloc connection. Notably, the Kingdom pressed on with the meeting despite it coming on the heels of the attacks of October 7th in Gaza, once again underscoring the region's volatile security environment. Saudi Arabia also hosted the **Jeddah Meeting on the Ukraine Crisis** in August 2023, attended by national security advisors from about 30 countries. In a continuation of strategic and political dialogues, Jeddah hosted the **GCC-Central Asia (C5) Summit** in July 2023, as the Gulf countries have collectively and individually been forging new diplomatic and economic ties in Central Asia, in which both regions have placed energy, particularly renewables, at the center of their growing relationships.



Ministerial Confab Summit
(Photo Source: [SPA](#), 2024)



Saudi-African Summit
(Photo Source: [SPA](#), 2023)



Extraordinary Arab-Islamic Summit
(Photo Source: [Al Arabiya](#), 2023)



Arab League Summit
(Photo Source: [Business Recorder](#), 2023)



Saudi-Caribbean (CARICOM)
(Photo Source: [The Caribbean Council](#), 2023)



GCC-ASEAN Summit
(Photo Source: [ASEAN](#), 2023)



Jeddah Meeting on the Ukraine Crisis
(Photo Source: [VOA](#), 2023)



Saudi-Russian Joint Committee
(Photo Source: [Arab News](#), 2023)



GCC-Central Asia (C5) Summit
(Photo Source: [Arab News](#), 2023)



Ministerial Committee
(Photo Source: [Reuters](#), 2023)



Saudi-Iran Rapprochement

Nothing underlines Saudi Arabia's commitment to de-escalation in the region as clearly as its rapprochement with Iran. Lingering tensions and regional competition necessitate careful oversight in the advancement of relations and as such, the Kingdom has proceeded with caution. There is a historical concern about Iran failing to live up to its commitments and engaging in violent behavior and activities in the region. This concern has been heightened, particularly in light of recent events such as those on October 7th and Iran's stance on the Gaza War, given the escalation of attacks and tension in the Red Sea by the Iran-backed Houthi group. The crisis in Gaza has further underlined the fact that Iran is intent on maintaining its 'axis of resistance' through Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and pro-Iranian Shia militias in Iraq, to the detriment of regional stability and security.

At the same time, the Kingdom has been adamant about keeping the dialogue channel with Tehran open and to maintain communication that can lead to a lessening of tensions. Over time, Saudi Arabia will require Iran to showcase its determination to move away from destabilizing efforts that ensure and do not contradict Saudi Arabia's security interests in the region. To see the process moving from de-escalation to normalization, a fundamental change in the strategic thinking coming from Tehran is needed.

Riyadh's Alliances between Beijing and Washington

The Kingdom understands that there is no US replacement in terms of a security partner. In addition, Riyadh understands the limitations of aligning with other powers. The determination by Saudi Arabia to place their national and regional interests at the forefront of their policy outreach and not be identified with any particular camp at the international level has

become more apparent in recent years. The Kingdom knows the cost of replacing the US as a security partner is high, but they also know the opportunities, as well as the risk of not engaging with, building ties with, or strengthening strategic relations with other partners is higher.

The Kingdom also does not want to become a point of contention between the United States and China, and they have made it clear that this is not an either-or choice for them. Pursuing ties with either Beijing or Washington should be seen as a win-lose situation. The priority will be on doing what is best to assure regional security from the Kingdom's own perspective. This became clear in the choice of China as the facilitator for the Iran-Saudi rapprochement. Knowing that the US would not be able to render results on the de-escalation front as far as Iran was concerned, Riyadh turned to Beijing to deliver an agreement that was considered central to Saudi national interests.

Saudi Arabia's outreach to other powers is further tied to growing and persistent concerns within the Gulf about the commitment of the US to the Gulf, which has led to a decline in trust for America's security role and a growing gap in the strength of overall US-GCC ties. In this context, Saudi Arabia has taken steps towards developing a greater understanding with Russia and China, for example.

As for the Kingdom's relationship with the US both countries have long-standing security relations rooted in over seven decades of close cooperation. However, the US-Saudi relationship has at times appeared strained as the US continues to refuse to listen to the concerns of the Kingdom and the Gulf states. Given the rising tensions in the Gulf region and the entire Middle East, this all undermines the effort by the Kingdom over the past years to de-escalate regional tensions and put relationships on a more cooperative footing. What is



therefore urgently needed is a clear alignment between the US and Riyadh when it comes to preventing further escalation. The US remains the most consequential actor when it comes to the medium to long-term security landscape in the wider Middle East. However, during the previous few decades, its policies have been inconsistent, disorganized, and uncommitted, endangering the region's long-term stability. Furthermore, at this time, the US has once again disregarded the advice of its Gulf allies. This needs to be altered, or the dissent between the two parties will continue to widen. Saudi Arabia and the majority of Arab nations believe that the US's present regional strategy is shortsighted and cannot sustain its long term stability.

As far as China is concerned, while acknowledging the positive strides made in economic cooperation and strategic partnerships, there's a shared belief among the GCC states, specifically Saudi Arabia, that China could play an even more influential role in regional stability. In the bigger picture, China seeks to reframe its traditional policy, moving from merely balancing stability and security in its own region to ensuring consistent energy flows and expanding areas of convergence with the GCC. The Kingdom sees China as a significant global player with the potential to contribute significantly to conflict resolution and regional peace.

During the first meeting of the China-Saudi Arabia-Iran trilateral joint committee, which took place in December 2023, China put forward three suggestions for continuing to advance the process of improving relations between Riyadh and Tehran. The first proposal emphasized the importance of upholding the Saudi-Iranian reconciliation strategy decision and developing mutual trust through communication and cooperation. Secondly, Beijing proposed further advancement in actively exploring people-to-people exchanges.

Thirdly, China pushed for the call for the rejection of external interference in the Middle East. The GCC states are keeping a close eye on China's diplomatic role in the region.

There is an expectation that China, with its diplomatic influence, could play a constructive role in encouraging positive dialogue and fostering stability. However, the Kingdom should not over exaggerate China's diplomatic role in the region. At this stage, whether China is really ready to act as a 'regional stabilizer' and take on a broader diplomatic role in the region and the broader Middle East still remains to be seen.

Membership in BRICS

The move towards BRICS inclusion also highlights Saudi Arabia's position in making diplomatic efforts to develop and build strong economic partnerships to support the region's global development and economic cooperation. While there has been no official confirmation from the Kingdom in terms of the status of its membership in the group, the expansion signifies a growing alignment of geopolitical and economic agendas within the BRICS. This includes cementing Saudi Arabia as a reliable energy partner to maintain stable energy markets. The BRICS expansion also seeks to enhance South-South cooperation to strengthen world governance. For the Kingdom, membership in the BRICS will bring new cooperation mechanisms, further strengthen its role for development purposes, and provide an additional platform from which to expand political and economic cooperation with the countries of the Global South.

While for Saudi Arabia, BRICS membership would provide other alliance options, it would not indicate that they are necessarily moving their alignment further eastward. The expansion of the BRICS to a BRICS+ format has potentially made it a more attractive institution



for consensus-building and dialogue in the developing world. With the inclusion of countries such as Saudi Arabia, it is possible that the global order is headed for something beyond traditionally 'acceptable' partners in the eyes of the West. Seizing its geopolitical opportunity, Saudi Arabia, like the BRICS+ nations, has used this momentum to explore the potential of creating mechanisms that can better represent the needs and necessities of emerging and developing nations.

The expansion of the BRICS should, therefore, be seen as more symbolic rather than a deliberate attempt to overturn the multilateral system of the pre-existing global order that has existed for the past 70 years. For the Kingdom, in particular, maintaining a strong alliance with the US remains its fundamental foreign policy agenda item. In addition, the Kingdom is well aware of its vital position in groups such as the G20 and will prevent anything from impacting this. There are indications that the Global South is demanding a new kind of transparent and inclusive multilateral collaboration. BRICS is a mechanism where such collaboration can be tested out.

Conclusion

The geopolitical landscape of the 21st century is witnessing a potential transformative shift, with emerging powers challenging the dominance of traditional global powers. In this context, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has emerged as an increasingly significant player that is providing its input into shaping the contours of a new world order. The primacy of economic statecraft at the core of the Kingdom's wider regional and international engagement is something that cannot be ignored. Instead of rehashing the same geopolitical strategies of the past, Saudi Arabia is fashioning new geo-economic strategies that build on connectivity and access to broader markets and networks. Overall, Saudi Arabia

sees itself as an influential player with a flexible and pragmatic approach to global relations. The Kingdom has a desire to have a voice in important diplomatic networks and be consequential in the evolving global order.

Gulf Research Center
Knowledge for All



مركز الخليج للأبحاث
المعرفة للجميع