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SAUDI ARABIA'S MULTIVECTOR DIPLOMACY AFTER 2020: STRATEGIC HEDGING BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES, CHINA, AND IRAN

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Abstract

This article examines how Saudi Arabia has recalibrated its foreign policy since 2020 through a strategy of multivector diplomacy embedded within a broader logic of strategic hedging. It argues that Riyadh's simultaneous engagement with the United States, China, and Iran reflects a deliberate and coherent strategy shaped by both systemic pressures and domestic transformation imperatives. Drawing on a neoclassical realist framework, the study demonstrates how Vision 2030 and the centralisation of authority under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman function as intervening variables that filter external constraints and shape foreign policy outputs. Using qualitative process tracing based on official primary documents, policy statements, and academic literature, the article shows that Saudi Arabia's diplomatic diversification is not strategic drift but a structured effort to maximise autonomy, reduce vulnerability, and align foreign policy with long-term domestic development objectives.

Keywords

Saudi Arabia; Middle East politics; Multivector diplomacy; Hedging; Strategic autonomy; Neoclassical realism; Vision 2030; United States-China rivalry.

Resumo

Este artigo analisa a forma como a Arábia Saudita reajustou a sua política externa desde 2020, através de uma estratégia de diplomacia multivetorial enquadrada numa lógica mais ampla de diversificação estratégica. Defende que o envolvimento simultâneo de Riade com os Estados Unidos, a China e o Irão reflete uma estratégia deliberada e coerente, moldada tanto por pressões sistémicas como por imperativos de transformação interna. Com base num quadro realista neoclássico, o estudo demonstra como a «Visão 2030» e a centralização do poder nas mãos do príncipe herdeiro Mohammed bin Salman funcionam como variáveis intervenientes que filtram as restrições externas e moldam os resultados da política externa. Recorrendo a uma análise qualitativa de processos com base em documentos oficiais primários, declarações políticas e literatura académica, o artigo mostra que a diversificação diplomática da Arábia Saudita não constitui um desvio estratégico, mas sim um esforço estruturado para maximizar a autonomia, reduzir a vulnerabilidade e alinhar a política externa com os objetivos de desenvolvimento interno a longo prazo.

Palavras-chave

Arábia Saudita; Política do Médio Oriente; Diplomacia multivetorial; Proteção estratégica; Autonomia estratégica; Realismo neoclássico; Visão 2030; Rivalidade entre os Estados Unidos e a China.



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SAUDI ARABIA'S MULTIVECTOR DIPLOMACY AFTER 2020: STRATEGIC HEDGING BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES, CHINA, AND IRAN[1]

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Introduction

Saudi Arabia's foreign policy has undergone one of the most significant strategic adjustments in the contemporary Middle East. Traditionally perceived as a close and dependable partner of the United States, Riyadh has, since 2020, adopted a more flexible and diversified diplomatic posture (Saeed, 2025). This shift is visible in the Kingdom's simultaneous preservation of security cooperation with Washington, deepening economic and technological ties with Beijing, and cautious diplomatic de-escalation with Tehran (Chaziza & Lutmar, 2025; Hwang, 2024).

These developments challenge long-standing assumptions that Saudi foreign policy is either structurally pro-American or primarily driven by sectarian rivalry. Instead, they reveal the emergence of a more sophisticated multivector strategy adapted to the realities of an increasingly multipolar international order (Evers, 2023).

The central puzzle guiding this article is therefore the following: how has Saudi Arabia maintained close security ties with the United States while simultaneously strengthening its strategic partnership with China and reducing tensions with Iran?

This article asks: How do systemic pressures and domestic transformation imperatives interact to shape Saudi Arabia's multivector diplomacy and hedging behaviour after 2020?

I argue that Saudi Arabia's recent foreign policy recalibration is best understood through a neoclassical realist framework that places external structural pressures in dialogue with internal political and economic drivers (Rose, 1998; Guzzini, 2004). At the systemic level, the Kingdom confronts intensifying US--China rivalry, shifting regional alignments, and growing uncertainty about the durability of American strategic commitment to the Gulf

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(Evers, 2023; Hwang, 2024). In this context, exclusive alignment with a single great power no longer guarantees optimal strategic returns.

At the domestic level, Vision 2030---combined with the consolidation of authority around Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman---has generated strong incentives to diversify the economy, attract foreign investment, and stabilise the regional environment (Bogaert, 2013; Saeed, 2025). These domestic imperatives function as intervening variables that filter systemic pressures and shape how they are interpreted and translated into foreign policy.

While structural realism identifies how shifts in the distribution of power generate incentives for diversification, it remains under-specified regarding how systemic pressures translate into concrete foreign policy decisions. Neoclassical realism addresses this limitation by incorporating domestic intervening variables such as elite perceptions, leadership priorities, and state transformation agendas (Rose, 1998). Liberal and constructivist approaches illuminate important dimensions of domestic preference formation and identity narratives (Guzzini, 2004), yet they do not fully capture the strategic risk-management logic underpinning Saudi Arabia's diversification under great-power rivalry.

This article advances the literature in three original ways. First, it reconceptualises Saudi Arabia's post-2020 foreign policy not as tactical adjustment or gradual realignment, but as a coherent and domestically mediated strategy of hedging. Second, it integrates hedging theory and multivector diplomacy within a neoclassical realist causal framework, thereby linking observable diplomatic diversification to specific intervening domestic variables. Third, it demonstrates that Vision 2030 operates not merely as a domestic reform agenda but as a structural filter shaping external alignment choices. By foregrounding the interaction between systemic rivalry and internal transformation, the article contributes to broader debates on middle-power adaptation in an increasingly fragmented international system.

Theoretical Framework

Hedging

Hedging has emerged as a central concept for understanding how states manage geopolitical uncertainty under conditions of great-power rivalry. Rather than fully committing to balancing against or band wagoning with a dominant actor, hedging involves a calibrated strategy that combines cooperation, diversification, and selective counterbalancing (Kuik, 2008; Lim & Cooper, 2015). It allows states to mitigate risk while preserving strategic autonomy.

Kuik (2008) defines hedging as a strategy in which states simultaneously pursue reassurance and limited balancing to avoid the costs associated with rigid alignment. Lim and Cooper (2015) refine this understanding by emphasising the role of costly signalling and strategic ambiguity. By avoiding overt alignment, states preserve room for manoeuvre and reduce the likelihood of entrapment in great-power rivalry. Hedging therefore reflects neither indecision nor incoherence, but a deliberate effort to manage uncertainty in a fluid strategic environment.

In the context of Saudi Arabia, hedging captures the Kingdom's simultaneous maintenance of security cooperation with the United States, expansion of economic and technological ties with China, and cautious de-escalation with Iran. This pattern reflects a conscious effort to diversify external partnerships, reduce dependence on any single power, and avoid strategic lock-in under conditions of intensifying systemic competition.

Multivector Diplomacy

Multivector diplomacy refers to a foreign policy approach in which states cultivate multiple, and often ideologically diverse, partnerships in order to maximise strategic flexibility (Chaziza & Lutmar, 2025). Unlike traditional alignment strategies dependent on a single patron, multivector diplomacy emphasises functional diversification across political, economic, and security domains.

Originally associated with post-Soviet and non-aligned states, the concept has increasingly been applied to emerging middle powers navigating competitive geopolitical environments. Its underlying logic is pragmatic rather than ideological. By spreading external partnerships across multiple actors, states can extract differentiated benefits, hedge against overdependence, and enhance strategic autonomy.

In Saudi Arabia's case, multivector diplomacy aligns closely with its evolving profile as a middle power that leverages energy resources, financial capacity, and diplomatic influence to position itself as a regional broker (Chaziza & Lutmar, 2025; Sazak, 2020). It allows Riyadh to preserve security ties with Washington, deepen economic engagement with Beijing, and pursue de-escalation with Tehran without fully committing to any single geopolitical camp. Multivector diplomacy thus provides the structural expression of Saudi hedging behaviour.

Neoclassical Realism

Neoclassical realism provides the analytical bridge linking systemic incentives to domestic political dynamics (Rose, 1998). While it accepts the realist premise that the distribution of power shapes the external environment, it rejects the assumption that systemic pressures translate directly into policy outcomes. Instead, these pressures are filtered through domestic intervening variables, including leadership perceptions, regime priorities, institutional capacity, and socio-economic conditions (Guzzini, 2004; Foulon & Meibauer, 2020).

Foreign policy outcomes therefore emerge from the interaction between structural constraints and internal political dynamics. This framework is particularly suitable for analysing states undergoing significant domestic transformation, where leadership-driven reform agendas and regime consolidation play a decisive role in shaping external behaviour (Bogaert, 2013).

In the Saudi context, Vision 2030 and the centralisation of authority under Mohammed bin Salman function as key intervening variables. They shape how systemic pressures---such as US--China rivalry and shifting regional alignments---are interpreted and translated into strategic choices.

Research Design and Method

This article adopts an independent qualitative case-study design focused on Saudi Arabia's foreign policy from 2020 through the early 2020s. The purpose is not to provide an exhaustive historical account of Saudi diplomacy, but rather to explain how systemic pressures and domestic transformation imperatives interact to shape patterns of external alignment and diversification. The case is analytically significant because Saudi Arabia occupies a pivotal position in regional security architecture while simultaneously undergoing profound domestic transformation under Vision 2030. This combination makes it particularly suitable for examining how structural incentives are filtered through internal political and economic priorities.

Methodologically, the study employs process tracing informed by a neoclassical realist framework (Rose, 1998; Guzzini, 2004). Neoclassical realism posits that systemic pressures do not translate mechanically into foreign policy outcomes. Instead, they are mediated by intervening domestic variables, including leadership perceptions, state capacity, and regime priorities. In this article, systemic pressures include intensifying US--China rivalry, perceptions of declining American strategic commitment to the Middle East, and renewed regional competition. These external constraints are examined in conjunction with domestic variables such as Vision 2030, fiscal transformation priorities, and the consolidation of authority under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The analysis traces how these domestic filters shape Saudi interpretations of threat, opportunity, and strategic risk, and how they translate into concrete policy outputs vis-à-vis the United States, China, and Iran.

The empirical material draws on peer-reviewed academic literature on hedging, neoclassical realism, Gulf security, and Saudi domestic transformation (Kuik, 2008; Lim & Cooper, 2015; Rose, 1998; Guzzini, 2004; Foulon & Meibauer, 2020; Chaziza & Lutmar, 2025; Saeed, 2025; Hwang, 2024; Evers, 2023). This secondary literature is complemented by primary sources, including official Saudi government publications and diplomatic communiqués. Among these are the Vision 2030 Annual Report 2023, the Ministry of Finance Pre-Budget Statement for Fiscal Year 2025, the Joint Statement Following the GCC--US Summit held in Jeddah on 16 July 2022, and the Joint Trilateral Statement between Saudi Arabia, Iran and China released on 10 March 2023. These primary documents provide institutional evidence of domestic reform priorities and formal diplomatic commitments, thereby strengthening the transparency and evidentiary grounding of the analysis.

While the single-case design limits the scope for broad generalisation, it allows for detailed examination of causal mechanisms within a strategically consequential case. The Saudi example thus offers analytical leverage for understanding how middle powers undergoing internal transformation navigate structural uncertainty in an increasingly fragmented international system.

In addition to process tracing within a neoclassical realist framework, this study relies on qualitative documentary analysis and interpretative assessment of primary and secondary sources. Official government reports, fiscal policy documents, and diplomatic communiqués are examined not merely as descriptive materials, but as institutional expressions of state priorities and strategic intent. Through interpretative analysis, these

documents are treated as evidence of how Saudi policymakers publicly articulate transformation objectives and external positioning. This methodological approach enables a systematic reconstruction of the interaction between systemic pressures and domestically embedded strategic narratives, enhancing analytical transparency and coherence.

Integrating Hedging, Multivector Diplomacy and Neoclassical Realism

Taken together, hedging, multivector diplomacy, and neoclassical realism provide a coherent explanatory framework for understanding Saudi Arabia's foreign policy since 2020. Hedging captures the observable behavioural pattern of diversification and strategic ambiguity (Kuik, 2008; Lim & Cooper, 2015). Multivector diplomacy clarifies the structural logic of cultivating differentiated partnerships (Chaziza & Lutmar, 2025). Neoclassical realism identifies the causal mechanism linking systemic pressures to domestic political filters (Rose, 1998; Guzzini, 2004).

This integrated framework demonstrates that Saudi Arabia's foreign policy diversification is not an ad hoc response to short-term pressures, but rather the product of systemic uncertainty filtered through domestic transformation priorities. Vision 2030 and leadership centralisation shapes how external risks are assessed and how strategic flexibility is operationalised.

Vision 2030 as a Domestic Transformation Agenda

Vision 2030 stands as the central domestic driver of Saudi Arabia's post-2020 foreign policy (Saeed, 2025). Launched in 2016 and accelerated under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the program seeks to reduce oil dependency, diversify the economy, attract foreign investment, and modernise state institutions. Official documentation, including the Vision 2030 Annual Report 2023, highlights measurable progress in diversification, tourism growth, and non-oil revenue expansion. These objectives require sustained access to global markets, technological partnerships, and regional stability.

The Ministry of Finance's Pre-Budget Statement for Fiscal Year 2025 further links fiscal planning to transformational investment and long-term diversification goals. Such institutional commitments generate strong incentives for diplomatic flexibility and risk reduction. Vision 2030 thus functions not merely as a domestic reform blueprint but as an intervening variable shaping Saudi Arabia's external engagement.

The evidentiary value of these primary sources lies not only in their descriptive content but in their institutional character. The Vision 2030 Annual Report 2023 explicitly frames economic diversification, foreign investment attraction, and technological upgrading as strategic national imperatives. Similarly, the Ministry of Finance's Pre-Budget Statement for Fiscal Year 2025 emphasises fiscal sustainability, transformational spending, and long-term economic restructuring. These documents collectively reveal a state apparatus that publicly codifies transformation as a national priority. Such institutional articulation strengthens the argument that Saudi foreign policy recalibration is embedded in formally articulated domestic objectives rather than ad hoc diplomatic manoeuvring. The

consistency between declared reform benchmarks and observable diplomatic diversification provides documentary evidence supporting the neoclassical realist claim that domestic imperatives function as intervening variables shaping external behaviour.

Beyond economic diversification, Vision 2030 also functions as a vehicle for the projection of soft power, most visibly through Saudi Arabia's sustained investment in globally salient sports properties (Formula 1, football, golf), tourism infrastructure, cultural production, and the hosting of major international events. This pattern, documented in the literature as "sportswashing," operates simultaneously across reputational, economic, and normative registers, functioning as an instrument of authoritarian legitimacy management that seeks to reframe the Kingdom's global image while advancing the tourism and services-sector diversification targets embedded in Vision 2030 (Maestro Junior et al., 2026). This soft-power dimension does not eliminate the persistence of concerns regarding human rights protections, freedom of expression, and the concentration of political authority under Mohammed bin Salman; rather, it operates in parallel with, and partly in response to, these unresolved tensions, illustrating how domestic transformation imperatives and external image management reinforce one another within Riyadh's broader hedging strategy.

Elite Perceptions and Leadership Centralisation

Elite perceptions and the consolidation of authority under Mohammed bin Salman constitute a second critical domestic filter. Neoclassical realism emphasises that systemic pressures are mediated by leadership interpretations (Rose, 1998; Guzzini, 2004). Since 2017, political, economic, and security decision-making in Saudi Arabia has become highly centralised (Saeed, 2025).

This centralisation amplifies leadership-driven priorities, including economic modernisation, regime consolidation, and enhanced strategic autonomy. Events such as the Abqaiq--Khurais attacks and fluctuating US engagement have reinforced perceptions of strategic vulnerability (Evers, 2023; Hwang, 2024). Simultaneously, China is viewed as indispensable for technological modernisation, while de-escalation with Iran is seen as necessary to reduce regional instability.

These perceptions shape how systemic pressures are interpreted and translated into policy, reinforcing a preference for diversification instead of exclusive alignment.

Domestic Imperatives as Intervening Variables

Vision 2030 and the centralisation of authority under Mohammed bin Salman function as key intervening variables shaping how Saudi Arabia interprets and responds to external pressures (Saeed, 2025). Neoclassical realism holds that systemic incentives do not generate uniform or automatic policy outcomes; rather, they are mediated by domestic priorities, state capacity, and leadership perceptions (Rose, 1998; Guzzini, 2004). In Saudi Arabia's case, the imperatives of economic diversification, technological modernisation, political consolidation, and regime legitimacy collectively shape which external strategies are seen as viable or desirable (Bogaert, 2013; Saeed, 2025).

These domestic constraints and ambitions generate strong incentives for risk minimisation, strategic flexibility, and external diversification---hallmarks of hedging behaviour. They also help explain why Riyadh has resisted pressures to choose between Washington and Beijing, and why it has pursued de-escalation with Iran despite decades of rivalry (Hwang, 2024). By shaping how systemic shifts---such as intensifying US--China competition, evolving regional alignments, and the declining utility of exclusive alliances---are perceived, domestic imperatives translate structural uncertainty into the specific form of multivector diplomacy that has come to define Saudi foreign policy since 2020 (Chaziza & Lutmar, 2025).

The United States: Security Dependence and Strategic Recalibration

Despite Saudi Arabia's growing diversification of external partnerships, the United States remains its most important security provider, and the bilateral relationship continues to underpin Riyadh's defence posture (Evers, 2023). Since 2020, however, Saudi leaders have begun to recalibrate this long-standing partnership in response to rising doubts about Washington's long-term commitment to the Middle East and the reputational strains following the Khashoggi affair. Events such as the muted U.S. response to the 2019 Abqaiq--Khurais attacks, the withdrawal from Afghanistan, and Washington's growing strategic focus on Asia have reinforced perceptions among Saudi elites that exclusive reliance on the United States entails significant risks (Evers, 2023; Hwang, 2024). This reassessment has encouraged Riyadh to adopt a more assertive and transactional approach, seeking clearer security guarantees while pushing back against U.S. pressure on issues such as oil production, the war in Yemen, and relations with China. Yet the Kingdom has not abandoned the partnership. Extensive military cooperation, intelligence sharing, arms sales, and the continued presence of U.S. forces in the Gulf ensure that the relationship remains foundational. What has shifted is the strategic logic underpinning it: rather than unquestioned dependence, Saudi Arabia now pursues a form of hedging that preserves the benefits of the U.S. security umbrella while gradually reducing overreliance and expanding the autonomy needed to support domestic transformation and broader diplomatic diversification (Saeed, 2025).

China: Economic Transformation and Technological Partnership

China has become an increasingly central pillar of Saudi Arabia's external diversification strategy, offering economic and technological opportunities that align closely with the Kingdom's domestic transformation agenda under Vision 2030 (Chaziza & Lutmar, 2025). While security ties with the United States remain indispensable, Beijing provides the scale of investment, technological capacity, and industrial expertise that Saudi Arabia requires to advance its ambitious development goals. Sino--Saudi cooperation has deepened across a broad range of domains, including energy, infrastructure, digital technology, artificial intelligence, and defence industrial collaboration. China is now the largest purchaser of Saudi oil, a major investor in megaprojects such as NEOM, and a key partner in sectors ranging from renewable energy to telecommunications, including sensitive areas such as 5G and surveillance technologies (Saeed, 2025).

For Saudi Arabia leaders, China offers more than capital and technology. It provides a partnership largely free of governance- or human rights--related conditionalities, making it an attractive complement---though not an alternative---to the United States. Riyadh has been careful to avoid formal alignment with Beijing; the relationship remains primarily economic and developmental, reflecting a hedging strategy through which the Kingdom leverages Chinese capabilities to advance domestic reforms while managing the geopolitical risks associated with U.S.--China rivalry (Evers, 2023). In this respect, the Saudi--China relationship illustrates how multivector diplomacy allows middle powers to extract functional benefits from competing great powers without fully committing to any single strategic camp (Chaziza & Lutmar, 2025).

Iran: Regional De-escalation and Strategic Stabilisation

Saudi Arabia's rapprochement with Iran constitutes the third key vector of its post-2020 foreign policy recalibration and is central to understanding the domestic logic underpinning Riyadh's hedging strategy. After years of competition, diplomatic rupture, and direct attacks on Saudi territory, most notably the 2019 Abqaiq--Khurais strikes, Saudi leaders increasingly came to view prolonged confrontation with Iran as imposing unsustainable economic and security costs, threatening the stability required for Vision 2030 (Hwang, 2024). The China-brokered agreement of March 2023 marked a clear turning point: rather than relying solely on U.S.-centred containment, Riyadh opted for a carefully managed de-escalation aimed at lowering regional tensions, reducing escalation risks, and creating the space needed to prioritise domestic development (Adhikari et al., 2025; Hwang, 2024).

This diplomatic opening does not imply trust or ideological convergence. Rather, it reflects a pragmatic assessment that dialogue and crisis-management mechanisms are better suited to advancing Saudi Arabia's long-term interests than continued confrontation. Since 2023, this process has included the restoration of diplomatic relations, discussions on maritime security, and cautious efforts to manage conflicts in Yemen and across the wider Gulf.

By engaging Iran while maintaining security ties with the United States and expanding economic cooperation with China, Saudi Arabia demonstrates how hedging operates across multiple domains---mitigating threats through de-escalation, preserving strategic flexibility, and avoiding entrapment in regional rivalries. The Iran vector thus illustrates how Riyadh uses diplomacy to reshape its strategic environment in ways that support domestic transformation and maximise autonomy in an increasingly multipolar Middle East.

The resilience of this rapprochement was tested by the outbreak of the U.S.-Israel war with Iran in February 2026. Although Saudi Arabia has refrained from direct involvement and has publicly opposed the use of its territory for U.S. or Israeli operations against Iran, the conflict exposed the limits of the diplomatic restraint achieved in 2023 (Becker-Hicks, 2026). Iranian strikes across Gulf Cooperation Council states, including Saudi territory, demonstrated that bilateral de-escalation with Tehran does not, by itself, provide credible deterrence absent a codified U.S.-Saudi mutual defence framework. According to Becker-Hicks (2026), this experience has reinforced a dual recognition in

Riyadh: that dialogue with Iran is not a substitute for military deterrence, and that U.S. security backing---itself uncodified and politically contingent---does not eliminate the Kingdom's structural vulnerability. The likely trajectory is therefore a reinforced hedging posture that combines continued reliance on U.S. defence guarantees with accelerated diversification of security partnerships, notably with China, Pakistan, and Türkiye, alongside the preservation of a political channel with Tehran. This dynamic corroborates the article's central argument: rather than resolving Saudi Arabia's exposure to systemic uncertainty, the 2023 rapprochement functioned as one vector within a wider portfolio of hedging behaviours, whose limits become most visible precisely at moments of acute regional crisis.

Discussion

The empirical analysis of Saudi Arabia's relations with the United States, China, and Iran demonstrates that the Kingdom's post-2020 foreign policy cannot be reduced to episodic adjustment, opportunistic manoeuvring, or gradual realignment. Rather, it reflects a structured strategy of hedging embedded within a broader logic of multivector diplomacy and filtered through domestic transformation imperatives. The interaction between systemic uncertainty and internal reform priorities produces a coherent pattern of diversification that is intelligible only when examined through the integrated framework proposed in this article.

From a structural perspective, intensifying US--China rivalry and evolving regional dynamics generate incentives for secondary powers to avoid rigid alignment. Traditional realist models would predict either balancing behaviour or band wagoning under such conditions. Yet Saudi Arabia does neither. It has not moved to counterbalance the United States through alignment with China, nor has it abandoned its security dependence in favour of a new patron. At the same time, it has not fully aligned with Washington against Beijing or Tehran. This behaviour aligns more closely with the logic of hedging as articulated by Kuik (2008) and Lim and Cooper (2015), whereby states seek to preserve autonomy by diversifying partnerships while avoiding overt strategic commitments.

However, systemic explanations alone are insufficient. Many states face similar structural pressures but adopt different responses. The distinctive feature of the Saudi case lies in the mediating role of domestic transformation. Vision 2030 fundamentally reshapes the cost-benefit calculus of foreign policy. Economic diversification, foreign direct investment, technological modernisation, and reputational rebranding require regional stability and diversified economic engagement. These objectives generate powerful incentives to minimise geopolitical risk and avoid entrapment in great-power rivalry. Thus, hedging in the Saudi context is not merely a defensive reaction to uncertainty; it is proactively embedded within a long-term development strategy (Saeed, 2025).

The domestic filter also clarifies why Saudi diversification has a differentiated character across issue areas. Security cooperation with the United States remains foundational because no alternative actor can presently replicate the depth of military interoperability, intelligence integration, and deterrence capacity embedded in the US--Saudi relationship (Evers, 2023). At the same time, China's role is primarily economic and technological, aligning with domestic diversification priorities rather than replacing US security

guarantees (Chaziza & Lutmar, 2025). Engagement with Iran serves yet another functional purpose: regional de-escalation reduces the likelihood of conflict that could disrupt economic transformation (Hwang, 2024). Each vector therefore serves a distinct strategic function within a unified domestic logic.

This differentiated engagement challenges interpretations that portray Saudi Arabia as drifting away from the United States or pivoting decisively toward China.

Such accounts risk overstating the degree of strategic realignment and underestimating the domestic drivers shaping Riyadh's choices. The Saudi case instead suggests that middle powers can simultaneously deepen economic engagement with one major power, maintain security dependence on another, and pursue diplomatic normalisation with a regional rival without collapsing into contradiction. The coherence of this pattern becomes visible only when analysed through a neoclassical realist lens that integrates structural constraints and domestic priorities (Rose, 1998; Guzzini, 2004).

The analysis also contributes to broader debates on hedging theory. Much of the hedging literature has focused on East and Southeast Asia, particularly in the context of responses to China's rise (Kuik, 2008; Lim & Cooper, 2015). The Saudi case demonstrates that hedging is equally relevant in the Middle Eastern context, where regional fragmentation and great-power rivalry intersect. Moreover, it illustrates that hedging can be closely tied to domestic modernisation agendas rather than solely to security uncertainty. In this sense, hedging should not be understood only as reactive ambiguity but as a structured strategy aligned with internal regime consolidation and development objectives.

At a more general level, Saudi Arabia's multivector diplomacy underscores the agency of middle powers in a fragmented international system. Rather than being passive objects of great-power competition, states such as Saudi Arabia actively leverage systemic rivalry to extract differentiated benefits across domains. Multivector diplomacy thus becomes both a tool of risk management and a mechanism for expanding strategic autonomy. This interpretation aligns with arguments emphasising the growing role of niche diplomacy and brokerage among emerging middle powers (Chaziza & Lutmar, 2025; Sazak, 2020).

Importantly, the Saudi case also reveals the limits of diversification. While Riyadh has expanded its strategic space, it has not achieved full autonomy. Security dependence on the United States remains significant, and economic interdependence with China introduces new vulnerabilities. Hedging therefore reduces, but does not eliminate, structural constraints. The Kingdom's strategy reflects calculated risk distribution rather than complete strategic independence.

In sum, the interaction between systemic uncertainty and domestic transformation imperatives generates a distinctive form of hedging characterised by differentiated functional engagement across multiple vectors. Saudi Arabia's foreign policy since 2020 should therefore be understood not as oscillation between camps, but as a domestically filtered strategy of strategic adaptation within an increasingly multipolar order.

Conclusion

Saudi Arabia's post-2020 foreign policy reflects more than diplomatic recalibration; it signals a structural transformation in how the Kingdom positions itself within an increasingly competitive and fragmented international order. By maintaining security cooperation with the United States, expanding economic and technological ties with China, and pursuing cautious de-escalation with Iran, Riyadh has crafted a strategy that privileges flexibility over rigid alignment and autonomy over dependency.

The analysis demonstrates that this strategy cannot be explained by systemic pressures alone. While intensifying US--China rivalry and shifting regional dynamics create incentives for diversification, they do not determine its specific form. It is the interaction between these structural conditions and domestic transformation imperatives---particularly Vision 2030 and the consolidation of authority under Mohammed bin Salman---that gives Saudi hedging its distinctive character. Saudi Arabia does not merely react to multipolarity; it actively seeks to shape its strategic environment in ways that support regime consolidation, economic modernisation, and long-term development planning.

Conceptually, the Saudi case underscores the analytical value of integrating hedging theory with neoclassical realism. Hedging captures the observable pattern of diversification and calibrated ambiguity, while neoclassical realism explains how domestic priorities filter external pressures and translate them into policy. The case reinforces the argument that hedging should not be understood solely as a defensive response to uncertainty, but also as a proactive strategy rooted in internal political and economic objectives.

Saudi Arabia's trajectory suggests that middle powers in the Global South are not passive objects of great-power competition. Rather, they increasingly operate as strategic actors capable of leveraging rivalry, extracting differentiated benefits, and reshaping regional orders in pursuit of domestic transformation. In this sense, Saudi multivector diplomacy is not an anomaly but may represent an emerging model of statecraft in an era defined by multipolar competition and strategic fragmentation.

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