

E-ISSN : 3023-4417

Makale Türü: Araştırma Makalesi
Article Type : Research Article

Yıl: 2025 Sayı: 5



Yayın Tarihi: 15.10.2025

Geliş Tarihi : 28.08.2025

Kabul Tarihi: 05.10.2025

Year: 2025 Issue: 5

Strategic Positioning of Middle Powers in the Emerging Multipolar World Order: The Case of Saudi Arabia

Çok Kutuplu Dünya Düzeninde Orta Güçlerin Stratejik Konumlanması: Suudi Arabistan Örneği

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Atıf/Citation

Üçağaç, Ahmet. "Strategic Positioning of Middle Powers in the Emerging Multipolar World Order: The Case of Saudi Arabia". Nouns Academy Journal 5 (15 Ekim 2025), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17347368>

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Abstract

This study analyzes Saudi Arabia's foreign policy through the theoretical framework of strategic hedging. By examining hedging strategies adopted by middle powers during periods of systemic transformation, the research provides a novel perspective on Riyadh's evolving external alignments. Specifically, it investigates the dynamics shaping Saudi Arabia's strategic engagements with both its long-standing partner, United States of America (the US), and emerging global powers such as China and Russia. The analysis highlights how Riyadh has pursued a strategy of diversification to mitigate the risks associated with potential retrenchment by its traditional security guarantor, the US, while simultaneously positioning itself with key actors of the emerging multipolar order. Accordingly, the study addresses the central question: "In what ways has the transition to a multipolar international order, combined with domestic economic imperatives, driven Saudi Arabia to adopt a hedging strategy and reposition itself as a middle power?" It argues that the gradual erosion of American unipolar dominance, together with Riyadh's domestic push for economic diversification under the Vision 2030 agenda, has compelled Saudi Arabia to hedge by cultivating stronger partnerships with China and Russia. This strategy, consistent with the broader hedging literature that conceptualizes hedging as a blend of engagement and soft-balancing aimed at reducing dependency while avoiding overt confrontation, enables Saudi Arabia to maximize its strategic autonomy, safeguard regime security, and enhance its regional influence in a shifting global order.

Keywords: Multipolarity, Middle powers, Strategic hedging, Saudi Arabia, Foreign policy

Öz

Bu çalışma, Suudi Arabistan'ın dış politikasını stratejik hedging kuramsal çerçevesi üzerinden sistematik bir şekilde incelemektedir. Stratejik hedging, uluslararası ilişkiler literatüründe, orta ölçekli güçlerin büyük güç rekabetlerinin yoğunlaştığı ve uluslararası sistemin dönüşüm geçirdiği dönemlerde belirsizlikleri yönetmek, riskleri asgariye indirmek ve stratejik özerkliklerini azami düzeye çıkarmak amacıyla başvurdukları çok katmanlı bir dış politika yaklaşımı olarak kavramsallaştırılmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, Suudi dış politikasını yalnızca ikili ilişkiler bağlamında değil, aynı zamanda çok kutupluluğa yönelen uluslararası düzenin genel dinamikleri ışığında konumlandırmak, Riyad'ın son dönemde geliştirdiği yönelimlerin anlaşılabilmesi açısından elzemdir. Araştırma, özellikle Suudi Arabistan'ın hem tarihsel ve kurumsal bağlarla şekillenmiş geleneksel güvenlik ortağı olan Amerika Birleşik Devletleri (ABD) ile ilişkilerini hem de yükselen küresel aktörler konumundaki Çin ve Rusya ile geliştirdiği stratejik angajmanları analiz etmektedir. Bu bağlamda çalışmanın temel argümanı, ABD'nin küresel güvenlik mimarisindeki görece geri çekilme eğilimleri ve Amerikan tek kutupluluğunun aşamalı erozyonu, Suudi Arabistan açısından geleneksel güvenlik garantilerinin sürdürülebilirliğini sorgulanır hale getirdiği ve bu durumun Riyad'ı hem güvenlik hem de ekonomik alanlarda tek taraflı bağımlılığın risklerini azaltmak üzere yeni stratejik ortaklıklar geliştirmeye yönelttiğidir.

Bu çerçevede, çalışma "Uluslararası sistemin tek kutupluluktan çok kutupluluğa doğru evrimi ile birlikte iç ekonomik zorunlulukların etkisi, Suudi Arabistan'ı nasıl bir riskten korunma politikasına yönelttiği ve ülkeyi bir orta ölçekli güç olarak yeniden konumlandırmaya sevk etti?" temel araştırma sorusunu cevaplamaya çalışmaktadır. Çalışmanın bulguları, ekonomik çeşitlendirme ve yapısal dönüşüm hedefleri ile küresel güç dağılımındaki kaymaların birbirini tamamlayıcı biçimde Riyad'ı hem Çin hem de Rusya ile daha kurumsallaşmış ve çok boyutlu ilişkiler geliştirmeye zorladığını ortaya koymaktadır. Dolayısıyla Suudi Arabistan'ın dış

politikasında gözlemlenen stratejik hedging yaklaşımı, literatürde angajman ile yumuşak dengeleme (soft-balancing) unsurlarının bileşimi olarak tanımlanan ve bir yandan bağımlılık ilişkilerini azaltırken diğer yandan doğrudan çatışmadan kaçınmayı amaçlayan yaklaşımıyla örtüşmektedir. Bu strateji sayesinde Riyad, hem rejim güvenliğini teminat altına almakta, hem stratejik özerklik kapasitesini artırmakta, hem de bölgesel düzeyde nüfuzunu pekiştirerek değişen küresel düzen içerisinde daha esnek ve manevra kabiliyeti yüksek bir konum elde etmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Çok kutupluluk, Orta güçler, Stratejik hedging, Suudi Arabistan, Dış politika

Introduction

The global political landscape is undergoing a profound transformation, shifting from the post-Cold War era of American unipolar predominance toward an increasingly complex multipolar order. This systemic reconfiguration is marked by the ascent of new great powers, intensifying strategic competition, and the recalibration of traditional alliance structures (Acharya, 2017; Ikenberry, 2018; Tüfekçi - Dağ, 2023). Within this fluid context, states that historically depended on a single patron face a strategic imperative to redefine their foreign policies in order to safeguard national interests and maximize autonomy. Saudi Arabia, long regarded as a pivotal yet dependent ally of the US (Mabon, 2013), is actively adapting to this altered international environment.

The Kingdom's evolving trajectory is discernible across three interrelated policy domains. First, Riyadh has sought to diversify its external alignments by cultivating closer partnerships with alternative great powers, particularly through enhanced economic and security cooperation with China and Russia. Second, this external diversification is intrinsically connected to domestic imperatives, most notably the Vision 2030 program, which aims to reduce the Kingdom's overreliance on hydrocarbon revenues and foster long-term economic resilience (Hertog, 2017). Third, Saudi Arabia has assumed an increasingly assertive role in regional diplomacy, as evidenced by initiatives to de-escalate tensions with Iran and to mediate regional conflicts, thereby projecting itself as an autonomous diplomatic actor (Sager, 2025).

Taken together, these pillars illustrate that Saudi Arabia's foreign policy constitutes a form of strategic hedging. Consistent with the hedging literature, this strategy reflects a calibrated blend of engagement, diversification, and limited balancing, designed to mitigate risks without committing to full alignment or confrontation with any single great power (Kuik, 2008; Tessman, 2012; Medeiros, 2005). Saudi Arabia's case thus provides a compelling model of how middle powers can leverage their geopolitical and economic significance to enhance strategic autonomy and exercise regional leadership within the evolving multipolar order.

Accordingly, the study employs the theoretical framework of strategic hedging to analyze Saudi Arabia's evolving foreign policy orientation. It conceptualizes Saudi Arabia as a rising middle power, a state that, while lacking the full-spectrum capabilities of a great power, possesses sufficient economic resources, diplomatic influence, and regional leverage to shape outcomes in the international system (Ping, 2005). This analytical perspective transcends dichotomous understandings of global power configurations as either unipolar or bipolar, and instead underscores the growing complexity of a multipolar international order. In such a system, multiple centers of power, ranging from established great powers to influential regional actors are able to shape outcomes in global governance, security, and economics (Acharya, 2017; Stuenkel, 2016). Multipolarity does not imply equal power distribution but rather highlights a

diffusion of influence, where states can mobilize distinctive assets such as financial resources, energy reserves, technological innovation, or diplomatic networks to craft more autonomous and strategically significant roles (Kupchan, 2020).

From this vantage point, Saudi Arabia's recent diplomatic activism and ambitious domestic reforms under Vision 2030 can be viewed not merely as reactive adjustments to shifting global dynamics, but as deliberate strategies aimed at consolidating its status as a pivotal actor. Riyadh has sought to balance relationships with the US, China, and Russia, while simultaneously positioning itself as an indispensable energy supplier and regional leader (Ulrichsen, 2015; Fakhro, 2016). This dual approach of external diplomatic diversification and internal economic transformation reflects Saudi Arabia's broader ambition to navigate the emerging multipolar order not as a peripheral player but as a state capable of exercising agency at both the regional and global levels.

Strategic hedging, as articulated in the literature, entails cultivating cooperative ties with multiple great powers in order to mitigate the risks associated with overdependence on a single ally and to preserve maximum strategic flexibility (Kuik, 2008; Tessman, 2012; Gonzalez Pujol, 2024). This approach rests on the assumption that states, particularly those with significant geostrategic importance, seek to diversify alignments to enhance bargaining leverage, reduce vulnerabilities, and maintain autonomy. Located within the broader framework of neoclassical realism, hedging can be understood as a response by middle powers to structural uncertainty, especially in the context of a waning hegemon (Rose, 1998; Ripsman et al., 2016).

Against this backdrop, the gradual erosion of American dominance in world politics and the perceived retrenchment of US commitments to the Middle East have provided the impetus for Riyadh to adopt a hedging strategy (Ikenberry, 2018; Kupchan, 2020). Rather than abandoning its long-standing partnership with Washington, Saudi Arabia has pursued a dual-track approach, maintaining close security ties with the US while simultaneously strengthening relations with alternative great powers. This policy of diversification not only creates a buffer against external pressure but also expands the Kingdom's strategic options in the realms of security, energy, and investment. Accordingly, the Saudi case exemplifies hedging as a sophisticated middle power strategy, one that secures national interests in an era where traditional alliances no longer provide comprehensive guarantees.

Method of the Study

The study adopts a qualitative case study methodology to analyze Saudi Arabia's foreign policy trajectory, employing process tracing as its principal method of inquiry. A case study approach is particularly well-suited for investigating complex, contemporary political phenomena within their real-world contexts, enabling a holistic and context-sensitive examination of the motivations and outcomes behind Riyadh's strategic choices (Yin, 2018; George - Bennett, 2005). Within this framework, process tracing is used to uncover and evaluate the causal mechanisms linking systemic changes in the international order, domestic economic imperatives, and Saudi Arabia's adoption of a hedging strategy. Process tracing allows for the systematic examination of sequences of events and decision-making junctures, thereby identifying how structural pressures and domestic drivers interact to produce foreign policy outcomes (Beach - Pedersen, 2019; Bennett - Checkel, 2014). This method is especially valuable in foreign policy analysis, as it enables the researcher to move beyond correlation and to establish plausible causal inferences regarding why and how Saudi Arabia has reoriented its foreign relations while maintaining its traditional alliance with the US.

Rather than seeking to generate broad generalizations across cases, the study emphasizes the intrinsic value of the Saudi Arabian case as a paradigmatic example of middle power behavior in a multipolar world. By systematically tracing the processes that underpin Riyadh's foreign policy shifts such as the interplay between US retrenchment, the rise of China and Russia, and the domestic imperatives of Vision 2030, the analysis constructs a robust, evidence-based argument about the causal pathways shaping Saudi Arabia's strategic repositioning. In doing so, the study not only sheds light on the Kingdom's evolving foreign policy but also contributes to theoretical debates on middle powers' hedging strategies.

Middle Powers Politics amid Global Transition from Unipolarity to Multipolarity

The trajectory of American global hegemony has attracted growing scrutiny since the early 2010s, with scholars increasingly debating whether the post-Cold War unipolar order is giving way to a more contested and multipolar configuration. While the US continues to occupy the position of the system's preeminent power, evidence suggests that its unipolar dominance is gradually eroding (Ikenberry, 2018; Kupchan, 2020). Economically, the US still maintains the world's largest economy; however, its share of global GDP has steadily declined relative to China and other emerging economies (World Bank, 2023). In parallel, efforts toward de-dollarization, spearheaded by BRICS states and particularly by China's promotion of alternatives to the US dollar in international trade, have begun to undermine the financial underpinnings of American primacy (Tüfekçi - Dağ, 2022; Roberts et al., 2017).

Militarily, although the US continues to possess unmatched capabilities, its capacity to sustain hegemonic dominance faces mounting challenges. China's sustained military modernization most notably in naval and space domains has narrowed the quantitative and qualitative gap with US forces (Cordesman - Hess - Yaross, 2013; Eaglen, 2025). Simultaneously, Washington's inability to deter Russia's annexation of Crimea (2014), its full-scale invasion of Ukraine (2022), and Beijing's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea illustrates a decline in the credibility of US military deterrence within an increasingly multipolar environment (Friedberg, 2022).

China's rapid economic expansion, combined with advances in military technology, trade capacity, and regional geopolitical influence, has positioned it as the foremost challenger to US hegemony (Shambaugh, 2020; Allison, 2017). Russia, by contrast, lacks the structural foundations to function as a genuine peer competitor. Nevertheless, its revisionist foreign policy manifested through military adventurism and the instrumentalization of energy exports has effectively eroded US influence, particularly in Europe (Charap - Colton, 2017; Stent, 2019). In this regard, Russia plays the role of a disruptive secondary actor. While Moscow is not a rising hegemon in its own right, it exploits the permissive conditions generated by US relative decline and Sino-American competition to contest aspects of the existing order. Taken together, these developments suggest that the US-led unipolar moment is entering a phase of systemic transition.

In such an environment, the US military withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 was widely perceived as emblematic of the decline in its global interventionist posture (Chollet, 2016). More broadly, American influence in the Middle East has been waning since the 2011 withdrawal from Iraq, prompting regional partners such as Saudi Arabia to diversify their strategic alignments by strengthening ties with China and Russia (Ulrichsen, 2014). Likewise, traditional US allies in Europe have demonstrated greater autonomy in foreign policy, reflected in debates on "strategic autonomy" within the European Union and diversification of energy sources away from US-aligned suppliers (Ossa, 2025).

The gradual transition from a US-dominated unipolar order to a more complex multipolar system has created a shifting environment in which China, Russia, and various regional actors assume increasingly significant roles (Acharya, 2014; Stuenkel, 2016). Hence, the erosion of US hegemony has had a profound impact on the strategic behavior of middle powers (e.g. Türkiye, India, Brazil, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia) encouraging them to pursue more autonomous, flexible, and multi-aligned foreign policy strategies (Hurrell, 2006; Cooper - Flesmes, 2013). Whereas many of these states were firmly embedded in the US-led order since the Second World War, their contemporary policies increasingly reflect a logic of hedging and risk diversification rather than strict alignment with Washington (Kuik, 2008; Gonzalez Pujol, 2024).

The weakening of US interventionism has further incentivized middle powers to assert themselves more actively within their regional spheres. In this context, Saudi Arabia exemplifies the recalibration of middle power strategies. Once a cornerstone of US regional influence, Riyadh has sought to reduce its overdependence on Washington by cultivating deeper partnerships with both Russia and China (Ulrichsen, 2014). Saudi Arabia's decision to reconcile with Iran in 2023 through Chinese mediation represents a striking example of this strategic repositioning, whereby a traditional US ally embraced a rival power's diplomatic initiative (Zhang, 2024). The relative decline of US dominance thus provides middle powers with greater strategic latitude. Their foreign policies increasingly prioritize flexibility, multi-alignment, and regional leadership, reflecting a structural shift away from reliance on a single hegemon toward the pursuit of diversified great-power partnerships and enhanced regional autonomy (Patrick, 2017; Efstathiopoulos, 2015).

The ongoing shift from a unipolar system to a more multipolar order is significantly reshaping the strategic opportunities and constraints facing middle powers states that wield notable influence but lack the economic or military capabilities of great powers (Moeini et al., 2022). This evolving multilateral environment expands the diplomatic space available to these actors, providing greater strategic maneuverability as they are no longer compelled to align exclusively with a single power bloc. Instead, middle powers can cultivate diversified relationships to advance their national interests, leveraging competition among major powers to secure favorable economic agreements, security guarantees, and diplomatic support (Tagliapietra - Casaroes, 2025). At the same time, the growing complexity of international politics creates a demand for neutral intermediaries, enabling middle powers with strong diplomatic networks to position themselves as mediators and consensus-builders in regional and global governance, thereby enhancing their international standing (Chaziza - Lutmar, 2025).

However, this new order also presents constraints for middle powers. A primary challenge is the heightened risk of entanglement in great power rivalries, which can generate pressure to align with one bloc, expose states to economic coercion, or even place them at risk of military confrontation on their territory (Moeini et al., 2022; Chaziza - Lutmar, 2025). Moreover, the erosion of unipolarity often coincides with the weakening of global governance structures such as the United Nations (the UN) and the World Trade Organization (the IMF) institutions that historically enabled middle powers to exert disproportionate influence and defend international norms (Tagliapietra - Casaroes, 2025). The increasing competition among major powers also contributes to systemic instability, characterized by economic nationalism, trade disputes, and security tensions, all of which complicate the ability of middle powers to maintain strategic autonomy and pursue consistent long-term policies (Chaziza - Lutmar, 2025).

Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy amid Global Transition

Saudi Arabia's foreign policy over the last decade has undergone a significant transformation, shifting from a predominantly reactive, oil-dependent orientation toward a more proactive and multifaceted diplomatic strategy. The evolution of Saudi foreign policy in this period is fundamentally shaped by global and domestic level dynamics. During this period, Saudi Arabia has increasingly adopted a doctrine of "positive neutrality", positioning itself as a diplomatic broker and mediator rather than being exclusively aligned with one geopolitical bloc. This approach reflects a broader hedging logic in which Riyadh increases its strategic flexibility by seeking to balance its relations with other great powers, including Russia and China, while maintaining close ties with the US (Gonzalez Pujol, 2024).

Evidence of this recalibrated posture can be observed in Riyadh's recent high-profile diplomatic initiatives, such as mediating in international conflicts, such as hosting U.S.–Russia talks in Riyadh over the Ukraine war in February 2025 (Teslova, 2025). Saudi Arabia has also positioned itself as a neutral setting for dialogue, reinforcing its image as a constructive diplomatic actor (Alhamawi, 2025). Beyond global conflicts, Riyadh has supported regional post-conflict reconstruction efforts, particularly in Syria. The Kingdom has welcomed agreements to integrate civil and military institutions in northeastern Syria into state structures (Al Arabiya English, 2025) and pledged to aid Syria's revival, emphasizing unity and territorial integrity (Anadolu Agency, 2025a). Moreover, Saudi Arabia, in partnership with Qatar, committed joint financial support to sustain public sector employees in Syria (Anadolu Agency, 2025b). These steps align with Riyadh's backing of Syria's reintegration into the Arab diplomatic sphere and international community (Al Arabiya English, 2025).

These developments illustrate a fundamental departure from a foreign policy rooted in passive reliance on Washington toward one of active engagement, diversified partnerships, and autonomous influence. In doing so, Saudi Arabia exemplifies the behavior of a middle power seeking to transcend traditional geopolitical alignments by leveraging its diplomatic, economic, and strategic resources to assert a more independent role in the evolving multipolar order (Chaziza - Lutmar, 2025).

In this context, hedging has become a central pillar of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in the last decade. Accordingly, while maintaining its long-standing security partnership with the US, Riyadh has deliberately sought to cultivate deeper ties with other great powers. This strategy reflects a pragmatic response to the perceived decline of American commitment to the Middle East and a broader effort to enhance the Kingdom's strategic autonomy (Mabon, 2013). Although the US remains an indispensable security guarantor and continues to provide substantial investment, particularly in high-value sectors such as technology and artificial intelligence, the relationship has been recalibrated. Riyadh has grown increasingly unwilling to unconditionally align itself with the US foreign policy objectives, instead exercising greater independence in its strategic calculations. The return of the Trump administration in 2025 has introduced new dynamics into the bilateral relationship, but the core principle of partnership diversification remains firmly in place.

In the new era, Saudi Arabia's economic relations with China have expanded at a rapid pace, underpinned by the Kingdom's role as Beijing's largest oil supplier and its participation in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The Sino-Saudi relationship is anchored in a principle of non-interference in domestic affairs, a feature highly attractive to Saudi leaders wary of American conditionality on internal reforms and human rights (Fulton, 2018). This dynamic demonstrates

the economic dimension of Saudi Arabia's hedging, as Beijing provides both a lucrative export market and an alternative source of investment and technological cooperation.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia's engagement with Russia has been most visible in the fields of energy and defense. Within the OPEC+ framework, Riyadh and Moscow cooperate closely to regulate oil production levels and stabilize global energy markets, thereby enhancing Saudi Arabia's leverage in shaping international energy dynamics (Ulrichsen et al., 2022). Furthermore, the Kingdom's interest in Russian military hardware, such as the S-400 missile system, signals an intention to diversify its defense procurement and avoid exclusive reliance on the US security guarantees (Reuters, 2017). Taken together, these strategies illustrate a multidimensional hedging approach, through which Saudi Arabia seeks to preserve its relationship with Washington while simultaneously deepening ties with China and Russia. This policy allows Riyadh to mitigate uncertainty, reduce vulnerability to external pressure, and maximize its strategic options in an emerging multipolar order.

Saudi Arabia's dual-track approach enables it to mitigate the risks of overreliance on any single great power while simultaneously enhancing its diplomatic leverage. By diversifying partnerships, the Kingdom positions itself more resiliently within an increasingly complex and uncertain international system. Importantly, this strategy does not entail abandoning its longstanding security partnership with the US, rather it reflects an effort to recalibrate and balance that relationship through parallel engagements with other major powers (Rakipoğlu, 2023).

This recalibration coincides with Saudi Arabia's gradual transition toward a middle power role, underpinned by the ambitious economic and social reforms of the Vision 2030 agenda (Hertog, 2017). Riyadh's proactive diplomacy and adept application of hedging strategies illustrate not only a pragmatic response to the emerging multipolar order but also a sophisticated understanding of the dynamics of contemporary international relations. By broadening its external alignments and positioning itself as a diplomatic broker, the Kingdom is actively shaping both its domestic transformation and its strategic role within the evolving global system. In this sense, Saudi Arabia exemplifies how middle powers can leverage hedging to expand their strategic autonomy, safeguard regime security, and project influence beyond their immediate regional context (Seitkozha - Raev, 2025; Saade, 2025).

A Proactive Middle Power: Saudi Arabia's Quest for Strategic Autonomy

Strategic autonomy refers to the capacity of a state to formulate and implement foreign policy independent of external coercion or structural dependence (Aydın-Düzgüt et al., 2025). For a middle power such as Saudi Arabia, achieving strategic autonomy in a multipolar order constitutes a central objective, which can be understood through a three-pillar framework. First, Riyadh increasingly pursues a policy of multi-alignment, cultivating relations with competing powers such as the US, China, and Russia, thereby reducing reliance on any single partner and enhancing foreign policy flexibility (Sager, 2025). Second, economic diversification forms a core component of Saudi Arabia's strategy, embodied in Vision 2030, which is not merely a domestic economic reform agenda but also a foreign policy instrument aimed at reducing structural dependence on hydrocarbon revenues. By developing non-oil sectors, including tourism, technology, and entertainment, Saudi Arabia enhances its economic resilience while mitigating vulnerability to global oil price fluctuations, thereby strengthening its bargaining power with great powers whose influence has historically been tied to energy markets. Third, through the Public Investment Fund (PIF), one of the world's largest sovereign wealth funds, the Kingdom has

transitioned from being a recipient of foreign capital to becoming a significant global investor. With major stakes in sectors such as artificial intelligence, technology, and infrastructure, the PIF allows Saudi Arabia to exercise a form of soft balancing, leveraging financial interdependence to embed itself within global markets and enhance its strategic autonomy (Blackwill - Harris, 2016; Blanchard, 2023).

The third pillar of Saudi Arabia's pursuit of strategic autonomy lies in strengthening its internal resilience and asserting regional leadership. Genuine autonomy requires the capacity to safeguard national interests without excessive reliance on external security providers. To this end, Riyadh has invested heavily in developing its domestic defense industry, most notably through the establishment of Saudi Arabian Military Industries (SAMI), which aims to localize half of the Kingdom's defense procurement by 2030 and reduce dependence on foreign military hardware (Vidal, 2023).

Concurrently, Saudi Arabia has sought to enhance its role as a regional mediator and stabilizer, demonstrated by initiatives such as its recent rapprochement with Iran, which not only bolstered its diplomatic credibility but also signaled Riyadh's ambition to exert greater control over the Middle Eastern security environment. Taken together, these three pillars multi-alignment in foreign relations, economic diversification through Vision 2030 and the Public Investment Fund, and regional leadership underpinned by security self-reliance illustrate a deliberate and proactive strategy of adaptation. In pursuing this multidimensional approach, Saudi Arabia is not merely responding to systemic multipolarity but actively shaping its position within it, consolidating its role as a key middle power with growing global influence (Blackwill - Harris, 2016; Blanchard, 2023).

Beginning in the 2010s, Saudi Arabia adopted an increasingly active hedging strategy between the waning unipolar hegemon, the US, and the rising powers of the East, most notably China and Russia, in order to maximize its geopolitical and economic leverage (Fulton, 2019). This approach reflects Riyadh's attempt to diversify the risks associated with overdependence on Washington while simultaneously preserving and even strengthening its military cooperation with the US, particularly in arms procurement and defense coordination. By calibrating its relations across competing poles of power, Saudi Arabia seeks to maintain strategic autonomy and extract benefits from multiple global power centers.

Historically, the Kingdom has relied heavily on the US security umbrella, exemplified by decades of extensive arms purchases, hosting of US troops, and close defense cooperation (Bronson, 2006). Yet, in the context of the relative decline of US global influence, Riyadh has incrementally expanded its security and economic engagements with alternative partners. Saudi-Russian defense discussions including interest in the S-400 missile system illustrate diversification efforts (Trevithick, 2019), while joint Saudi-Chinese military exercises underscore growing defense ties with Beijing (Fulton, 2018). The Saudi-Russian partnership within OPEC+ has further solidified Riyadh's ability to manage global oil markets and resist Western pressure.

Economically, China's role as the largest importer of Saudi oil provides Riyadh with both leverage and incentive to institutionalize energy ties. The negotiation of long-term oil contracts denominated in yuan signals not only a move to accommodate China's preferences but also a symbolic step toward reducing reliance on the US dollar in energy trade (Roberts et al., 2017). Discussions regarding the potential settlement of oil transactions in yuan further underscore an interest in reducing reliance on the US dollar without severing financial links to Western markets. In this sense, Saudi Arabia's evolving foreign policy posture demonstrates a pragmatic hedging

strategy, reaffirming the US security partnership while broadening engagements with Eastern powers to secure greater autonomy in a fluid multipolar order.

Moreover, Saudi Arabia's sophisticated hedging strategy, characterized by diversification across security, economic, and diplomatic domains. Riyadh has signed multiple agreements with China involving infrastructure development, technology transfer, and the establishment of industrial zones, thereby aligning aspects of its Vision 2030 agenda with Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (Fulton, 2018). At the same time, the Kingdom has sought to attract Western investment in emerging sectors such as technology, renewable energy, and entertainment, ensuring continued integration into transatlantic economic networks. In the technological domain, Riyadh has deliberately balanced by engaging both Chinese firms, such as Huawei, and American companies, including Google and Microsoft, particularly in the development of artificial intelligence and smart city projects (Al Kinani, 2025; Xinhua, 2024). Riyadh has also deepened its involvement with BRICS while simultaneously maintaining ties to Western-dominated institutions such as the IMF and World Bank, thereby hedging between alternative global economic orders (Roberts et al., 2017).

Diplomatically, in line with its hedging strategy, Saudi Arabia has demonstrated similar multi-vector engagement. The restoration of relations with Iran in 2023, mediated by China, reflects Riyadh's willingness to pursue conflict de-escalation through non-Western channels (Zhang, 2024). Simultaneously, the Kingdom has cautiously engaged with Israel under the auspices of US mediation (Rakipoğlu - Kurt, 2019), demonstrating a continued sensitivity to Washington's regional priorities. Collectively, these strategies illustrate the hedging strategy of the Kingdom as a middle power (Donduran, 2025). Riyadh relies on the US as its principal security guarantor, while cultivating economic interdependence with China and energy coordination with Russia through OPEC+. In parallel, the Kingdom seeks to assert leadership within the Arab and Islamic worlds, thereby reinforcing its regional legitimacy. Saudi Arabia's hedging strategy is therefore not about choosing sides but about maximizing leverage, preserving strategic autonomy, and enhancing its capacity to navigate an increasingly multipolar international system (Gonzalez Pujol, 2024; Cooper - Flandes, 2013).

Conclusion

The global transition from a unipolar world, dominated by the US, to a multipolar one where power is more complex among several great powers (e.g., the US, China, and Russia). This shift fundamentally redefines the opportunities and constraints for middle powers, which are states that are influential but lack the military or economic heft of a great power. In this regard as an opportunity the new complex multilateral order expands diplomatic space of middle powers. With more great powers competing for influence, middle powers gain greater strategic maneuverability. These actors are no longer forced to align exclusively with a single bloc and can pursue relationships that best serve their national interests. This gives countries more leverage to secure favorable economic deals, security guarantees, and diplomatic support.

Against this backdrop, this study examined the evolving foreign policy of Saudi Arabia within the context of the emerging multipolar world order. The study argued that Riyadh is moving beyond its traditional role as a dependent ally of the US toward a more autonomous and multidimensional middle power strategy. Drawing on theories of middle power behavior, the study analyzed how Saudi Arabia leverages its energy resources, ambitious domestic transformation under Vision 2030, regional leadership aspirations, and diversified security and economic partnerships to navigate the shifting balance of power. Central to this approach is a pragmatic strategy of hedging

which refers to maintaining close ties with Western allies while deepening engagement with emerging powers such as China, India, and Russia, alongside a more assertive role in Arab and Islamic diplomacy. The findings suggest that Saudi Arabia's evolving foreign policy not only reflects adaptive responses to multipolarity but also illustrates how middle powers can exercise agency to maximize autonomy, enhance influence, and shape the broader architecture of international order.

The findings of the study also suggest that a multipolar global order creates a demand for neutral parties who can facilitate dialogue and build consensus. Middle powers with strong diplomatic networks can position themselves as crucial mediators in regional and international conflicts, enhancing their global stature. However this new order also present constraints for middle powers. The primary challenge for middle powers is the risk of being caught in the middle of great power rivalries. This can lead to pressure to choose sides, economic coercion, or even military conflicts on their territory. The decline of unipolarity often coincides with a weakening of global governance structures like the UN and the WTO, which traditionally provided a platform for middle powers to exert influence and defend international norms. Competition among poles can lead to greater global uncertainty, rising economic nationalism, and a higher risk of military and trade conflicts.

Overall, Saudi Arabia's trajectory underscores the dual nature of middle power positioning in a multipolar world. While multipolarity creates unprecedented opportunities for agency and leverage, it simultaneously generates structural vulnerabilities. Navigating this delicate balance will remain central not only to Riyadh's foreign policy but also to the broader strategic choices of middle powers seeking to redefine their role in the international order.

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