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Strategic Hedging in a Multipolar World: Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy Transformation Under "Vision 2030"

Qin Qining[1], **Razali S. Z.**[2*]

[1]Universiti Sains Malaysia - Penang, Malaysia ✉ ning@student.usm.my
[2]Universiti Sains Malaysia - Penang, Malaysia ✉ siti_razali@usm.my

Abstract
This paper employs hedging theory to examine the significant transformation in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS). Drawing on triangulated sources, it analyzes Riyadh's deliberate effort to maintain strong security ties with Western partners while simultaneously cultivating broad new security relationships with key Eastern actors. The study highlights how this hedging strategy increasingly prioritizes economic and technological cooperation with non-traditional partners, particularly China. Notably, the paper argues that Saudi hedging is not a fixed or static policy but a dynamic, adaptive process shaped by pragmatic, incremental adjustments. These adjustments serve as a strategic bridge, enabling the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to respond effectively to shifting geopolitical conditions and expand its influence in an evolving international environment.

Keywords
Hedging; Saudi Arabia; Foreign Policy; Mohammed bin Salman; Security Relations; China; Geopolitical Strategy

INTRODUCTION

Recent years have witnessed turbulent global developments. The shockwaves triggered by COVID-19 and volatility in global energy markets are just two examples frequently cited by analysts to illustrate ongoing economic instability (World Bank 2022). Several authors have highlighted inconsistent commitment by US policymakers to multilateral frameworks, alongside a heightened focus on domestic politics in Washington, D.C., which they argue reflects a relative decline in American international leadership (Walt 2018; Haass 2020). During the same period, great-power politics have been reshaped by major economic shifts, most notably China's growing global influence and the rising activism of other states (Allison 2017). Within this broader politico-institutional context, long-standing international institutions, such as the UN Security Council and the World Trade Organization, have increasingly been viewed as ineffective or challenged compared to earlier periods (Ikenberry 2020).

Against this backdrop, Saudi Arabia began implementing substantial reforms in its foreign policy, with significant implications for great-power security dynamics. These shifts have been driven by both global and domestic factors, with their roots traceable to the launch of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's "Vision 2030" in 2016 (Kinninmont 2017). Although initially framed as a technological and societal reform agenda, "Vision 2030" carries important consequences for resource allocation and Saudi foreign policy priorities. Analysts have noted that Riyadh has taken notable steps to diversify its international partnerships, deepen

engagement with China and other Asian countries, and reduce what many describe as a historic "overreliance" on the United States (Ulrichsen 2017; Blanchard 2021).

Saudi Arabia is seeking to deepen its East-oriented trade relationships while simultaneously maintaining US-centered security ties under MBS's leadership. In addition, the Kingdom aims to strengthen its influence through a more active role in multilateral institutions and by addressing regional security issues more directly, anticipating the rise of a multipolar world in which power is distributed among many states (Vakil 2025).

Saudi Arabia's ambitious state-led reform program, "Vision 2030," is designed to transform the nation's economy, society, and international standing. In response to an evolving global order, the Kingdom seeks a prosperous and resilient future by diversifying its economic base, reducing dependence on oil revenues, improving public services, and promoting sustainable development. As "Vision 2030" aims to attract substantial foreign direct investment, a more globally engaged Saudi Arabia is taking shape, one that promotes stronger international partnerships, enhanced regional stability, and greater strategic autonomy (Alshehri 2019).

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In recent years, hedging theory has gained increasing attention in the field of international relations. Scholars have used it to explain how smaller states respond safely to significant shifts in the international system. To protect their interests, states must continually balance cooperation and competition in order to maximize their strategic options. Following the Cold War, the formerly US-dominated unipolar system has gradually evolved into a more decentralized, multi-layered order, requiring states to make difficult trade-offs between engaging and competing with major powers.

In an environment defined by uncertainty, the question of how states can maintain an effective balance between cooperation and caution remains central to contemporary international relations theory (Ciorciari and Haacke 2019). Against this backdrop, hedging offers a valuable lens for understanding how states manage multiple motivations and employ flexible strategies amid renewed great-power competition.

Conceptual Foundations of Hedging Theory

Kuik (2020) describes hedging as an act of seeking "insurance," in which a state reduces external risks while avoiding the political and strategic costs of fully aligning with any side. Unlike balancing or bandwagoning, hedging is an intermediate strategy that maintains strategic autonomy in an uncertain international system through a combination of policies. Its core principle is risk diversification: a state engages simultaneously with several great powers to gain economic and security benefits without becoming overly dependent on or entangled with any single actor. Although Kuik draws on neorealist logic (Waltz 1979), his framework emphasizes national sovereignty and strategic choice, particularly for small and medium-sized states.

Goh (2005), in his analysis of Australia and Southeast Asian diplomacy, argued that hedging provides medium-sized states, which cannot ensure security through military power alone, a practical and realistic way to safeguard their interests. Such states employ selective engagement, appeasement, and measured opposition to maintain strategic flexibility and allow

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rapid adjustment to global changes. Similarly, Haacke (2003) observed that even before "hedging" became a common term in international relations, ASEAN countries had already achieved regional autonomy through consensual decision-making, economic cooperation, and diversified diplomatic linkages.

This theoretical perspective was further developed by Ciorciari and Haacke (2019), who describe hedging as a "two-legged" approach: actively reducing reliance on any single power while simultaneously maintaining cooperative ties with major states. They emphasize that hedging is an act of engagement rather than avoidance and should not be confused with neutrality or non-alignment. In this sense, hedging represents a proactive and flexible strategic mindset rather than a passive or negative stance. Studies of rising powers confirm this view; for example, Medeiros (2005) notes that China's foreign policy in the early 2000s exhibited precise hedging toward the US, Japan, and Southeast Asia.

Evolution and Expansion of Hedging in Global Politics

Ciorciari and Haacke (2019) elaborated on this concept, describing hedging as a "two-track" strategy that involves actively protecting against vulnerability to any single power while maintaining cooperative relationships with major states. They emphasize that hedging is not a strategy of avoidance but one of engagement, and it should not be confused with non-alignment or a lack of interest. In this sense, hedging is not merely reactive; it can also be flexible and proactive.

This perspective also applies to the study of emerging powers. Medeiros (2005) observes that, in the early 2000s, China's foreign policy exhibited clear features of hedging toward multiple states, including the US, Japan, and Southeast Asian nations. China sought to enhance its strategic resilience while simultaneously engaging with and accommodating other powers.

Hedging and Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy Transformation

On one hand, Saudi Arabia's strategic diversification policy is evident in the foreign policy turnaround spearheaded by MBS. Ulrichsen (2017) and Gause (2024) argue that "Vision 2030," championed by MBS, is more than an economic reform blueprint; it represents a process of geostrategic transformation. Its central goal is to reduce dependence on the West while expanding ties with Asian countries and other global partners. Hertog (2024) highlights that "Vision 2030's" diversification objectives are concretely reflected in Saudi Arabia's diplomatic practices, particularly in cooperative initiatives with China in science and technology, infrastructure, and renewable energy. Lippman (2017) notes that Saudi Arabia's engagement with non-Western partners reflects a pragmatic diplomatic recalibration that closely aligns with MBS's vision of establishing Saudi Arabia as a regionally autonomous power.

Research on the transformation of Saudi diplomacy has largely overlooked the insights of hedging theory. Most studies remain within traditional realist frameworks, emphasizing either balancing or bandwagoning strategies (Waltz 1979; Walt 1987). These approaches struggle to explain how Saudi Arabia can simultaneously deepen relations with China and Russia while maintaining security cooperation with the United States. From a conventional balance-of-power perspective, such multi-directional diplomacy may appear contradictory or opportunistic.

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However, from the hedging perspective, it represents a rational strategy: Saudi Arabia seeks to preserve strategic autonomy through flexible engagement in an uncertain international environment.

Bridging Theoretical and Empirical Gaps

This paper seeks to address this theoretical gap by applying the perspective of hedging to the analysis of MBS's diplomatic reforms in Saudi Arabia. As discussed, Saudi Arabia's diplomatic practices, aimed at economic diversification, maintaining security flexibility, and pursuing multilateral balance, exhibit clear hedging behavior. While strengthening ties with China, Russia, and other Asian nations, Saudi Arabia continues to uphold its traditional security partnership with the United States. This approach is not paradoxical; rather, it represents a multifaceted strategy designed to exert influence and navigate a competition-polarized international environment (Bakir and Al-Shamari 2025).

In short, the central objective of this thesis is to examine Saudi Arabia's diplomatic transformation under MBS through the lens of hedging. From a theoretical perspective, this demonstrates that hedging is not confined to Asian states; medium-sized nations such as Saudi Arabia adjust their diplomacy in response to global developments, adapting rather than completely overhauling their approach.

Overall, Saudi Arabia's actions in the multipolar era are better understood as hedging rather than traditional balancing. As Bakir and Al-Shamari (2025) note, hedging represents a sophisticated strategic approach that manages uncertainty by engaging with multiple major powers simultaneously while maintaining flexibility. Using this framework, MBS's diplomacy can be interpreted as a deliberate, logical strategy employed by a medium-sized state to survive and gain influence within the complex dynamics of the twenty-first century, rather than as a series of ad hoc decisions. Given the Middle East's high interdependence, asymmetric alliances, and regional instability, conditions comparable to those that initially prompted hedging behavior in Southeast Asia, the logic of hedging readily applies to the Saudi context.

METHODS

This paper employs a qualitative case study approach to examine changes in Saudi foreign policy under the "Vision 2030" framework through the lens of hedging theory. The research draws on multiple sources, including official documents, MBS's public speeches, policy statements, and analytical reports from think tanks and academic literature. To trace the trajectory of Saudi policy within the broader global context, such as the relative decline of US influence and the rise of China, this study uses process tracing to identify the logic and sequence of key policy decisions.

To enhance the reliability and transparency of the research, source triangulation is applied. This involves cross-checking information from official records, academic studies, and mainstream media reports to ensure the robustness and credibility of the analysis and its conclusions.

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CASE STUDY: STRATEGIC CHOICES FOR MBS

Within the framework of "Vision 2030," Saudi Arabia is realigning its diplomatic orientation, reducing its reliance on oil revenues, and seeking greater space for independent action in international affairs. MBS has repeatedly emphasized that these changes respond to shifts in the global landscape, particularly the intensifying competition between China and the United States and the uncertainty of the regional environment (Alterman 2020). His diplomatic approach reflects a hedging strategy: while maintaining a long-term and stable security partnership with the United States, he simultaneously deepens political and economic ties with China, Russia, and the increasingly important India (Gause 2024).

Since MBS assumed power, cooperation between Saudi Arabia and China in the energy sector has accelerated significantly. The two countries have not only signed additional long-term crude oil supply agreements but have also invested in refining and chemical projects in China (Blanchard 2023). Building on this foundation, MBS has promoted new collaboration in science, technology, and security, such as working with Huawei to develop a 5G network and exploring potential defense cooperation (Fulton 2019).

At the same time, Saudi Arabia has maintained its relationship with the United States. Riyadh remains one of the US's largest arms purchasers, signing multibillion-dollar contracts annually and sustaining close cooperation in intelligence sharing and counter-terrorism operations (Bruno and Karmon 2016). This simultaneous deepening of relations with both China and the United States exemplifies Saudi Arabia's hedging strategy: in an environment of rising great-power competition and uncertainty, Riyadh diversifies risks through multifaceted diplomacy while seeking greater strategic maneuverability (Kuik 2008; Luft 2023).

However, this approach carries potential risks. Ambiguity in foreign policy can unsettle allies, particularly the United States, which has expressed concern over Saudi Arabia's growing engagement with China (Al-Saud and Kéchichian 2020). As competition between China and the United States escalates, it may become increasingly complex for Saudi Arabia to maintain this balance, potentially forcing the Kingdom to choose between the two. This tension encapsulates the essence of Saudi Arabia's hedging strategy: it provides flexibility and autonomy, but it also tests the trust and patience of its partners.

This hedging strategy, despite its challenges, is having a wide-ranging impact. As a result of MBS's diplomatic approach, Saudi Arabia now exerts greater influence within the Gulf Cooperation Council. Beyond playing a key role in mediating disputes in countries such as Sudan and Yemen, the Kingdom has made significant strides in easing tensions with Iran.

At the global level, this strategy allows Saudi Arabia to gradually shed the image of an oil-dependent state and emerge as a medium-power actor capable of navigating a multipolar world more flexibly. By proactively engaging in the energy market, international investment, and emerging technology governance, Saudi Arabia can participate more independently in global competition and cooperation and diversify its economy (Barzegar 2023).

Recalibrating the US Alliance: Stability Without Dependence

Within the framework of "Vision 2030," Saudi Arabia is actively adjusting its diplomatic approach, not only to reduce dependence on oil revenues but also to achieve greater autonomy

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in international affairs. MBS has repeatedly emphasized that, amid an increasingly complex global environment, Saudi Arabia must prioritize its national interests. Alterman (2024) notes that this policy shift is closely linked to intensifying competition between China and the United States and to growing uncertainty in the regional security environment.

At the same time, Saudi Arabia's strategic position between China and the United States exemplifies classic hedging behavior: it maintains a long-term security partnership with the United States while simultaneously deepening economic and political ties with China, Russia, India, and other countries. Taking China as an example, Duan and Aldamer (2022) argue that, in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative, Saudi–China relations reflect a combination of economic pragmatism and hedging: they are neither detached from the United States nor confined to a single cooperative framework. This represents a comprehensive strategy integrated into Saudi Arabia's overall strategic vision, rather than being limited to emergency or opportunistic responses.

Saudi Arabia's foreign policy is no longer constrained to binary choices of partnership; instead, it operates in a "gray zone," exploring opportunities with new partners while maintaining protection and cooperation with established allies. As Bakir and Al-Shamari (2025) observe, Saudi Arabia is institutionalizing hedging as a deliberate strategy to navigate great-power competition and shifts in the global balance of power.

Diversifying Strategic Partnerships: Engagement with China, Russia, and India

Having adjusted its partnership with the United States, Saudi Arabia is now actively diversifying its strategic alliances, moving beyond traditional Western partnerships. In recent years, the transformation of Saudi Arabia's diplomatic strategy under MBS has revealed its more profound strategic significance. The relationship between Saudi Arabia and China provides a prominent example. Following Xi Jinping's visit to Riyadh, the two countries signed a strategic partnership agreement on the digital economy and accelerated cooperation in areas such as 5G, cloud computing, artificial intelligence, and smart cities (Chen and Han 2019). Scholars note that this collaboration has moved beyond simple oil-and-gas transactions, evolving into a "1 + 2 + 3" structural model in which energy, infrastructure, and new technology jointly drive the development of bilateral relations (Fulton 2020).

At the same time, Saudi Arabia has maintained its defense alliance with the United States, continuing to purchase significant quantities of American air defense and missile systems. Simultaneously, it is quietly expanding its defense partnerships and exploring strategic cooperation with Russia, India, and other countries (Ahmed 2018). This approach of sustaining traditional alliances while actively cultivating new partners reflects the core principles of hedging: preserving autonomy, diversifying risks, and optimizing benefits in a structurally uncertain international system (Duan and Aldamer 2022).

For instance, research shows that Saudi–China relations are evolving at a strategic crossroads: while continuing to rely on US security guarantees, Saudi Arabia is strengthening economic and technological ties with China, demonstrating a dual-track structure consistent with hedging logic (Duan and Aldamer 2022). Moreover, the alignment of China's Belt and Road Initiative with "Vision 2030" has further reinforced cooperation in investment, energy, and technological development (Chen 2021). Overall, Saudi Arabia seeks to expand its strategic

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space and autonomy while preserving traditional advantages through multifaceted diplomacy and diversified partnerships amid intensifying great-power competition.

Building Multilateral Leverage: Regional and Global Engagement

Based on these bilateral interactions, the Saudi government is seeking greater autonomy by engaging with regional and international organizations. Through the diplomatic transformation spearheaded by MBS, Saudi Arabia has primarily implemented the core principles of a hedging strategy: maintaining established security relationships while simultaneously advancing ties with new powers. Multi-directional cooperation allows the Kingdom to expand its strategic space in a multipolar world. Scholars note that Saudi Arabia's "diplomatic triangle" model, engaging with the United States, China, Russia, and even India, is a key strategy for navigating great-power competition and structural uncertainty (Rasanani 2024).

In terms of institutional participation, Saudi Arabia has increased its global presence. It served as the G20's rotating presidency in 2020, applied to join BRICS, and was approved as an observer of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). These moves reflect Saudi Arabia's transition from a symbolic international member to an active participant in global rulemaking and strategic platform-building (Alsubaie et al. 2024). For example, some studies have elevated the Saudi–China partnership to a comprehensive strategic level, highlighting cooperation beyond crude oil and infrastructure to include investment, technology, and institutional alignment (Chen and Han 2019; Quamar 2025).

Regionally, Saudi Arabia has become more proactive in Middle Eastern politics rather than maintaining a passive role. With potential shifts in the global order, these efforts form a significant part of MBS's strategy to maximize regional autonomy and redefine Saudi Arabia's role in the region (Gause 2022). Riyadh has evolved from a regional supporting actor to a core mediator, as demonstrated by initiatives such as Syria's readmission to the Arab League and efforts to ease Egyptian–Turkish tensions. This positions Saudi Arabia as a middle-power intermediary in regional transitions, helping to establish new balances (Gause 2023).

Moreover, these changes extend beyond isolated events, influencing Saudi Arabia's economic and trade structures and regional security architectures, including Iran (Gause 2024; Chaziza and Lutmar 2025). By enhancing event engagement, regional influence, and alliance building, Saudi Arabia's hedging strategy demonstrates its ability to secure a more resilient and autonomous identity (Seyedi Asl and Alamdari 2025). In an era of intensifying global competition, this approach provides strategic flexibility and establishes a new standard for Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in a multipolar world.

Managing Risks and Enhancing Flexibility: A Pragmatic Hedging Posture

Beyond partnerships and institutional engagement, Saudi Arabia has enhanced its risk management and strategic flexibility by acting prudently during periods of conflict. Under MBS's leadership, the Kingdom's foreign policy has undergone a significant shift, adopting a post-Atlantic model that was evident during the 2023 conflict with Hamas. Despite criticism from the United States, a long-standing ally, Riyadh openly condemned Israeli actions (Lima 2023). Saudi

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Arabia has clearly signaled its willingness to move beyond traditional constraints and pursue a foreign policy guided by its own strategic perceptions.

The launch of "Vision 2030" further exemplifies this strategic acumen, serving as a blueprint for diversification across both economic and political domains. Through "Vision 2030," Saudi Arabia has crafted a complex governance model in which strategic partnerships, risk management, and economic innovation converge to collectively shape the distinctiveness of the Kingdom's current international strategy.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Saudi Arabia has been pursuing a hedging strategy since emerging as a global actor. Recognizing the growing influence of China, Russia, India, Europe, and other global powers, the Kingdom has strengthened its economic, political, and military ties with these actors while continuing to rely on American security. By employing this hedging strategy, Saudi Arabia has maintained positive relations with multiple major powers simultaneously. Consequently, hedging has evolved from a short-term tactical approach into a long-term feature of Saudi foreign policy.

These case studies align with the theoretical foundations of hedging. The literature indicates that hedging involves cultivating relationships with competing great powers to diversify interests and manage uncertainty (Marston 2024; Kuik 2021). This approach typically emerges in contexts of systemic uncertainty, especially when regional instability and great-power competition are high (Medeiros 2005; Gause 2024). Saudi Arabia's recent foreign policy exemplifies this pattern, as it strengthens ties with China, Russia, and India while retaining security arrangements with the United States. Observers note that the Kingdom's hedging strategy aims to safeguard its independence and maximize strategic flexibility (Fulton 2018; Ulrichsen 2017).

Firstly, Saudi Arabia has adopted a prudent and diversified foreign policy by maintaining strong ties with both traditional allies, such as the United States and Western European nations, and rising global powers, including China, Russia, and India, in response to intensifying global pressures. This approach, widely recognized in international relations as hedging (Ciorciari and Haacke 2019; Kuik 2008), provides Saudi Arabia with maximum strategic flexibility without committing to a single global bloc.

For example, Saudi Arabia has strengthened economic and technological links with China through collaborations such as Huawei's involvement in NEOM, the planned smart city in Tabuk Province, and Saudi Aramco's ambitious petrochemical investments in China. Simultaneously, the Kingdom continues extensive military cooperation with the United States, including large-scale weapons agreements. Notably, Saudi Arabia and the US agreed to a $110 billion arms deal in 2017 (Fulton 2019).

These dual-track policies support Saudi Arabia's position in Middle Eastern politics while securing the external environment necessary to achieve "Vision 2030," particularly in infrastructure development and economic advancement (Ulrichsen 2017). Reports about additional joint US–Saudi defense deals circulating in 2025 cannot be treated as verified information, as this study relies solely on government documents, academic publications, and reputable think tank sources through December 2024. Any such deal would require official US

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verification due to its potential impact on Saudi Arabia's strategic flexibility and defense diversification strategies.

Saudi Arabia has also expressed interest in acquiring advanced US defense hardware, such as the F-35 fighter jet. However, US policy considerations, including long-standing security concerns related to Israel's security infrastructure and export regulations, have historically prevented such acquisitions without explicit US authorization.

Secondly, in terms of risk management and preparedness, hedging enables Saudi Arabia to respond effectively and flexibly to fluctuations in the international system. By maintaining multiple diplomatic channels, the Kingdom is better prepared to handle shocks, including changes in global oil demand, regional conflicts in the Middle East, and policy shifts by major powers. For example, the 2019 Abqaiq-Khurais missile attack, claimed by Iran-backed proxies, exposed Saudi Arabia's vulnerability when relying on a single security guarantor. Following this event, the Kingdom increased security integration and technological cooperation with China and Russia (Blanchard 2023).

Domestically, Saudi Arabia has also institutionalized hedging by creating interagency security coordination platforms through initiatives such as the Delivery Program for "Vision 2030" and by leveraging the Public Investment Fund (PIF) to support its foreign policy objectives (Gause 2024; Hertog 2024).

This strategic transformation has implications not only for Saudi Arabia but also for the broader Middle East and global diplomacy. Countries such as the UAE, Qatar, and Egypt may adopt similar hedging strategies without immediately choosing sides in US–China or US–Iran rivalries (Barzegar 2023). Hedging encourages engagement and fosters shifts toward non-traditional power balances, as illustrated by Saudi Arabia's 2023 normalization with Iran, facilitated by China following proxy conflicts (Figueroa 2023). By securing membership or observer status in BRICS+, the G20, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Saudi Arabia has helped create a multipolar diplomatic space where medium powers can collectively influence international rules. This approach contrasts with traditional models dominated by a single superpower and enables the emergence of new frameworks for regional security and collective decision-making in the Middle East.

From a global perspective, Saudi Arabia's hedging strategy reflects the growing unpredictability and deepening multipolarity of the emerging international landscape. Nations in this environment, especially those that are not great powers, face pressures arising from simultaneous strategic competition and conflicting interests (Csenger 2021). Saudi Arabia under MBS exemplifies how a second-tier nation can assert strategic independence through multi-track diplomacy, avoiding fixed alignments. For instance, the Kingdom has pursued deeper Saudi–China collaborations in energy, technology, and finance while maintaining its security partnership with the United States (Fulton 2019). Notable examples include Aramco's joint refinery projects in Liaoning and Huawei's involvement in NEOM, a planned smart city in northwest Saudi Arabia (Truby 2025).

Simultaneously, Saudi Arabia has strengthened its institutional engagement with both Western-led and non-Western multilateral platforms by joining BRICS in 2024, actively participating in the G20 and OPEC+, and serving as an observer in the SCO (Chen 2021). This balanced approach enhances its negotiating power in global governance debates on digital infrastructure, international trade, and energy transition (Rasanani 2024).

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The strategic application of hedging has elevated Saudi Arabia's international standing and influence. Other nations, from Indonesia in Southeast Asia to the UAE in the Middle East, are adopting similar strategies in response to a fragmented international system (Rahmanillah, Bastian and Ihsan 2023). Once considered a tactical tool, hedging has become essential for maintaining national autonomy (Korolev 2024; Ciorciari and Haacke 2019). In pursuit of domestic economic, political, and technological development, MBS has leveraged hedging to navigate potential institutional fragmentation and uncertain alliance formations (Kuik 2020). The overarching aim is to enhance Saudi Arabia's independence and global strength, safeguard the interests of non-Western international actors, maintain strong relations with major powers, and reduce geopolitical risks. By doing so, Saudi Arabia has reshaped the strategic landscape of the Middle East and offered a diplomatic model for other nations to emulate (Al-Saud and Kéchichian 2020).

Policy Implications

This research provides practical guidance for major international actors engaging with Riyadh's evolving foreign policy, particularly through the lens of Saudi Arabia's strategic hedging.

Firstly, the United States must recognize and accommodate Saudi Arabia's multi-alignment strategy. American policy should move beyond positioning itself as the Kingdom's sole security guarantor and instead focus on areas such as alternative energy, technological collaboration, and investment. Strengthening the economic and non-security aspects of the US–Saudi partnership is essential to ensure that Riyadh's hedging does not fully pivot toward Eastern powers.

For China, long-term engagement with Saudi Arabia requires institutionalized partnerships and sustainable economic and strategic cooperation. This includes fostering deeper collaboration between China and Saudi Arabia, and between China and Saudi allies, and integrating Saudi Arabia into initiatives such as the Belt and Road Economic Strategy (Silk Road Economic Belt). Anchoring Saudi Arabia's political and economic alignment with China through multilateral frameworks such as SCO and BRICS+ membership can strengthen Saudi Arabia's hedging position while positioning it centrally within China's long-term economic vision.

Finally, risk management is critical for Saudi Arabia's sustained success. MBS must actively engage with both traditional and emerging partners to reduce the trust deficits that hedging inevitably creates. This requires clear messaging about Saudi Arabia's non-exclusive engagement across multiple domains, including economic development, technological innovation, non-traditional security challenges, soft security initiatives, and societal cooperation. Such an approach reinforces the Kingdom's sovereign right to balance relationships with all global actors while maintaining strategic autonomy.

CONCLUSION

The significance of this research lies in demonstrating that Saudi Arabia adopts a hedging policy to navigate a multipolar world, as outlined in MBS's strategy. The Kingdom balances its traditional ties with the United States while simultaneously engaging China, Russia,

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and India through "Vision 2030's" economic, technological, and political initiatives, underscoring Saudi Arabia's strategic autonomy.

From a hedging theory perspective, this paper argues that the strategic cultivation of independence in a multipolar global environment is the primary driver behind this shift in Saudi foreign policy. Notably, this study fills a substantial gap in the literature on Middle Eastern middle-power assertive statecraft by establishing that hedging is applicable beyond the Asia-Pacific region. It demonstrates that hedging is not limited to a specific regional context but represents a comprehensive strategy that integrates domestic transformation with global engagement.

From a policy standpoint, the Saudi case offers lessons at both global and regional levels. The United States must adapt to Saudi Arabia's multi-alignment strategy to remain a respected partner. China should continue developing robust economic and technological partnerships while respecting Saudi sovereignty and freedom of action. In conclusion, this case illustrates how a middle-power nation like Saudi Arabia can assert significant independence through a carefully applied hedging strategy. The key takeaway for policymakers is that Riyadh is not a passive actor but an assertive and autonomous ally, moving beyond merely reacting to great-power politics to actively pursuing its own agenda.

Future research could explore this strategy's responsiveness to emerging challenges, such as competition in AI and 5G, as well as the reactions of other Gulf nations to Saudi Arabia's evolving role. While this study relies on interviews and policy documents, it makes an important contribution to understanding how middle-power nations respond to competition in a rapidly changing world, even if it cannot capture every aspect of the process.

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CRediT AUTHOR STATEMENT

Qin Qining: conceptualization, methodology, investigation, data curation, writing – original draft. **Siti Zuliha Binti Razali:** project administration, methodology, data curation, writing – review and editing.

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