



## Arabia Saudita entre el Rimland y la confluencia de las grandes potencias

### Resumen:

Arabia Saudita es un importante actor en el nuevo orden mundial, por encontrarse estratégicamente situada en el sur de la franja costera del gran continente euroasiático, que en su día Spykman definiera como el Rimland. Además, sus riquezas petrolíferas le dan la capacidad de influir globalmente. La reciente visita a este Estado del líder chino, Xi Jinping y su cálido recibimiento por el rey Salmán contrastan con la discreta visita del pasado verano del presidente estadounidense, Joe Biden, quien se reunió con el príncipe heredero Mohammed bin Salman (MbS). Entre ambas recepciones destaca la decisión saudita, en connivencia con Rusia, de rebajar la producción de petróleo para disgusto de los aliados occidentales, quienes se debaten en una crisis energética con el trasfondo del conflicto de Ucrania.

### Palabras clave:

Arabia Saudita, Rimland, grandes potencias, Ucrania, OPEP+

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## Introduction: Saudi Arabia and Great Power Geopolitics

In the book *The Geography of the Peace*, Nicholas Spykman focused on the importance of controlling the great mass of the Eurasian continent along its coastal rim, which he called Rimland. Spykman concluded that the US would find it very difficult to exert its influence in the interior of this strip if a multitude of interconnected air-land bases were located there to counterbalance US naval air power<sup>1</sup>. Saudi Arabia's position in this area leaves no doubt as to its importance, strengths and weaknesses, which are succinctly discussed in this introduction.

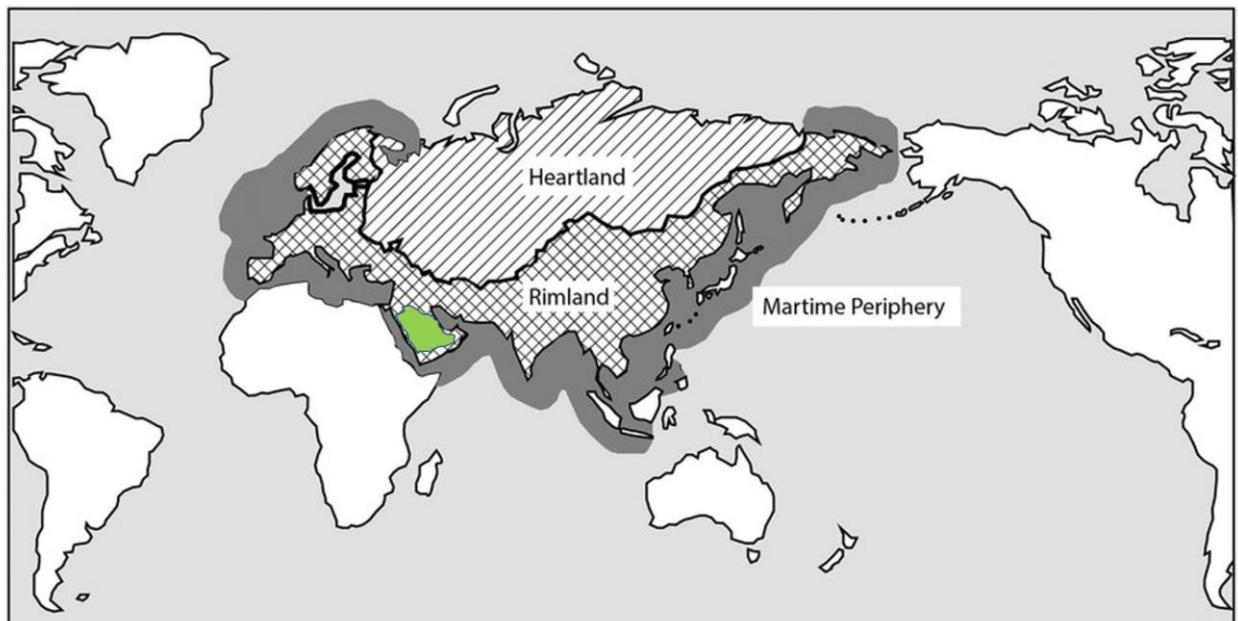


Figure 1: Saudi Arabia's status in the Rimland. Source: Prepared internally from: Mitchell, Martin D. 'Using the principles of Halford J. Mackinder and Nicholas John Spykman to re-evaluate a twenty-first-century geopolitical framework for the United States'. *Comparative Strategy*, 2020, vol. 39, issue. 5, p. 412.

Saudi Arabia's situation, centred on the world's most important oil and gas basin, makes it a transcendental situation until a hypothetical leap in the energy model is made. Hydrocarbons are the reason why the entire Persian Gulf region is a focus of interest, with the added problem of the difficulty of extracting them via maritime routes, since the

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<sup>1</sup> Spykman, Nicholas John. *The Geography of the Peace*. Harcourt, Brace, 1944. pp. 53-55. In his work, Spykman emphasised that geography was a determining factor, as it was a constant. Within this geographical factor, he divided the outer strip of the Eurasian continent or Rimland into three sections consisting of the European coastal zone, the Arab and Middle Eastern desert lands and the monsoon territories of Asia. For this author, whoever controlled the Rimland would control Eurasia, and whoever controlled Eurasia would control the world, and alliances were essential to this end.

bottleneck of the Strait of Hormuz obliges ships heading to or leaving the Gulf to pass through this narrow area<sup>2</sup>.

The physical geography of Saudi Arabia has tended to create two distinct centres of power. One of these is located in the Nadj plateau mountains, in the vicinity of which the capital Riyadh was established<sup>3</sup>. The second is centred on the Hijaz mountain range, which protects the cities of Medina and Mecca, traditionally open to trade and culture<sup>4</sup>. The rest of the territory is largely desert with little elevation, making it vulnerable to armed incursions<sup>5</sup>. This desert area is characterised by almost no rainfall and few fossil water points, which are difficult to replenish<sup>6</sup>. This is why there is such a need for water treatment plants to supply the country's needs, with discharges into the almost enclosed waters of the gulf posing a major environmental problem<sup>7</sup>.

Saudi Arabia, given its climate, does not have a large population relative to the larger states in the region. Although it has grown over time to more than 35 million inhabitants, it is relatively small compared to Iran, with almost 84 million, or Türkiye, with the same figure. In addition, Yemen is located on the Arabian Peninsula itself, and with almost 30 million inhabitants it is a headache for the Saudis, as the Houthis population of this country is in conflict with Saudi Arabia<sup>8</sup>. Many Houthis are supported by Iran, both because they profess the same branch of Shia Islam and because the Yemeni conflict means that the

<sup>2</sup> عبدالمعز زالمزيد/د. saM zizaludbA. "أهمية مضيق هرمز الاق تصادبية لدول الخليج/ت/ehT cimonoc fo ecnatropmi the Strait of Hormuz for the Gulf States" Al Arabiya, 21 June 2021

[لاق تصادبية لدول الخليج \(ten.ayibarala\) أهمية مضيق هرمز ا](#) (accessed 03/01/2023)

<sup>3</sup> Kaplan, Robert D. *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us About Coming Conflicts and the Battle against Fate*. New York: *Random House*, 2012. p. 262.

<sup>4</sup> Dahlan, Malik. Quraysh, 6 Jul 2018. *The Hijaz: The First Islamic State*. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=1354&v=A7oGTufu3fg&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1354&v=A7oGTufu3fg&feature=emb_logo) (accessed 04/01/2023)

<sup>5</sup> Guzansky, Yoel; Barak, Tomer. "Saudi Security: Increasing Challenges alongside Strategic Limitations." INSS, 24 August 2021. <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/saudi-arabia-security/> (accessed 04/01/2023)

<sup>6</sup> Novo, Cristina. "Saudi Arabia's groundwater to run dry." *Smart Water Magazine*, 30/05/2019. <https://smartwatermagazine.com/blogs/cristina-novo/saudi-arabias-groundwater-run-dry> (accessed 04/01/2023)

<sup>7</sup> Wyre Tidal Energy. "The Environmental Problems Created by Saudi Arabia's Energy-Intensive Desalination Plants." <https://www.wyretidalenergy.com/the-environmental-problems-created-by-saudi-arabias-energy-intensive-desalination-plants> (accessed 04/01/2023)

<sup>8</sup> Worldometer "Countries in the world by population (2023)." <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/population-by-country/> (accessed 03/01/2023)

Saudis have a serious security problem in their own backyard, thus leaving more leeway for Iran's aims in the Middle East<sup>9</sup>.

Saudi Arabia is also important as the cradle of the Islamic religion, where its holy sites are guarded and are a point of reference for all believers. However, there is a large Shiite minority in the east of the country under Iranian control, which has led to many internal conflicts<sup>10</sup>.

Regional interests spill over into the global arena, with the Saudis coming under pressure from the great powers of the US, China and Russia. A broad outline of these actors shows that, for the Americans, the region was a focus of attraction because of its resources and its position to contain their geopolitical rivals. Saudi Arabia reinforced this role after the Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979 showed complete anti-American sentiment.

Since President Carter's tenure, developments in the Gulf region have been seen as important to US interests, as evidenced by the two Gulf wars. In 2011, however, President Obama shifted this perception towards what he called a pivot to the Asia-Pacific region. The situation gradually left a power vacuum, as well as a loss of confidence on the part of the countries that had previously relied on the US, leading to significant tension between the Saudis and the Americans after President Biden's arrival in the White House<sup>11,12</sup>.

China's rise required new communication routes, markets and energy sources. With the US in decline, the Chinese saw an opportunity to fill the gap left by the US, meaning that relations with the Saudis were consolidated as the Americans dealt with emergencies around the world as they arose. In 2013 Xi Jinping announced his *One Belt One Road* strategy, in which Saudi Arabia was a key part of his economy, demonstrating this when in 2017 they overtook the US in importing barrels of oil. China's intentions were not only

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<sup>9</sup> Jones, Seth G. "The Iranian and Houthi War against Saudi Arabia." CSIS Briefs, 21 December 2021. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/iranian-and-houthi-war-against-saudi-arabia> (accessed 04/01/2023)

<sup>10</sup> Middle east Eye. "Iran suspends talks with Saudi Arabia, slams Riyadh's executions." 13 Mar 2022. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/fr/node/245551> (accessed 04/01/2023)

<sup>11</sup> Hannah, Jhon. "Biden Should Revive the Carter Doctrine for the Middle East" Foreign Policy, 12 July 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/12/biden-middle-east-carter-doctrine-israel-saudi-arabia-uae-gulf-iran/> (accessed 04/01/2022)

<sup>12</sup> Birgbauer, Peter. "The US Pivot to Asia Was Dead on Arrival." The Diplomat, 31 March 2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/the-us-pivot-to-asia-was-dead-on-arrival/> (accessed 04/01/2022)

limited to the energy sector, but with a win-win policy they offered all countries in the region a series of partnerships that resulted in a strong increase in Chinese investment. To this they added a practice known as “Ali Baba’s business”, using Muslim identity to increase trade<sup>13</sup>.

Russia’s options over Saudi Arabia are more modest than those of the previous two giants. For Moscow, the presence in Syria and the alliance of convenience with Iran give it the possibility to remain active in the Middle East<sup>14</sup>. Nevertheless, the Russians are not dismissive of the opportunities for gain that power adjustments in the region or convergence of interests, such as the tension between the current US administration and the Saudis, can bring. Although their affinities have been traditional, they became closer in 2021 when Saudi Arabia’s energy minister, Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman, said at the St Petersburg Economic Forum that relations with Russia were as warm as the weather in Riyadh<sup>15</sup>.

Saudi Arabia has its own agenda, which is currently in line with Russian energy interests, albeit tempered by the conflict in Ukraine. Thus, in early October last year, the Saudis forced an agreement within OPEC+ to reduce oil production. According to the Americans, such a cut would increase oil prices and Russia’s military budget, as well as undermine global efforts to isolate the Russians. Despite this, Saudi Arabia, which condemned the invasion of Ukraine at the UN General Assembly, provided \$400 million in humanitarian aid to Ukraine to alleviate the suffering of the civilian population<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Bourgeois, Victorien. “La Chine, Puissance incontournable au Moyen-Orient.” *Geostrategia*, 06 May 2019. <https://www.geostrategia.fr/la-chine-puissance-incontournable-au-moyen-orient/> (accessed 04/01/2023)

<sup>14</sup> Кортунов Пётр/Kortunov. “Piotr Россия и Иран на Ближнем Востоке: крепкий брак «по расчёту»/ Russia and Iran in the Middle East: a powerful marriage of convenience. Council for Russian Affairs, 4 July 2019. <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/rossiya-i-iran-na-blizhnem-vostoke-krepkiy-brak-po-raschyetu/> (accessed 04/01/2023)

<sup>15</sup> Салем Алкетби /Salem Alketby. “Важнейшие изменения в отношениях между Россией и Саудовской Аравией/Los cambios más importantes en las relaciones entre Rusia y Arabia Saudita.” *inosmi.ru* 23 August 2022. <https://inosmi.ru/20220823/neft-255631671.html> (accessed 04/01/2023)

<sup>16</sup> Долломанжи Антонина /Dolomanzhi Antonina. “После поддержки РФ в нефтяной сделке: Саудовская Аравия выделит гумпомощь Украине /Following Russia’s support in the oil deal: Saudi Arabia to provide humanitarian aid to Ukraine.” 15/10/2022. <https://www.unian.net/politics/posle-podderzhki-rf-v-neftyanyoy-sdelke-saudovskaya-araviya-vydelit-gumpomoshch-ukraine-12012678.html> (accessed 04/01/2022)

## Like sand between your fingers: The loss of US influence

During Joe Biden's candidacy for the US presidency, he proposed a continuation of President Obama's approach, pledging to withdraw from the Middle East and pivot to the Asia-Pacific region. Biden's agenda also included ending the war in Yemen, returning to the Iran nuclear deal and treating Saudi Arabia as a "pariah" state<sup>17</sup>.

Following President Biden's arrival in the White House in 2021, idealistic approaches to US foreign policy prevailed over the pragmatic postulates that had governed relations with the Saudis during the Trump administration. Thus the Biden-Harris pairing found that, from their perspective, the resolution of the Yemeni conflict and various human rights issues were in collision with Saudi interests. Prominent among these was the death in unexplained circumstances of journalist Jamal Khashoggi<sup>18</sup>.

In fact, during the first year of Joe Biden's presidency, the sale of precision-guided missiles for Saudi operations in Yemen was cancelled, although the Saudis suffered several drone and missile attacks from Yemeni territory by the Houthis<sup>19</sup>. The most high-profile recent event was the March 2022 attack on an oil refinery in the Saudi city of Jeddah while the Formula 1 world championship was being held<sup>20</sup>. This followed statements by Chinese Defence Minister General Wei Fenghe, who said that Beijing and Riyadh should "strengthen coordination and jointly oppose hegemonic and bullying practices."<sup>21</sup>

The Saudis saw how the cutback in US arms sales had degraded their air defence capabilities and how their population and interests were increasingly vulnerable. They

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<sup>17</sup> Hannah, John; Koduvayur, Varsha. "Note to Mohammed bin Salman: Stop Digging Yourself Deeper" Foreign Policy, 30 November 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/11/30/salman-saudi-arabia-biden-israel/> (accessed 27/12/2022)

<sup>18</sup> Brennan, David. "Saudi Arabia, MBS Brace for Biden Action on Yemen, Khashoggi Murder." Newsweek, 01/21/21. <https://www.newsweek.com/saudi-arabia-mbs-biden-yemen-khashoggi-murder-1563345> (accessed 27/12/2022)

<sup>19</sup> Gould, Joe; Mehta, Aaron. "Boeing, Raytheon missile sales to Saudi Arabia paused by Biden administration." Defense News, 5 Feb 2021. <https://www.defensenews.com/global/mideast-africa/2021/02/05/boeing-raytheon-missile-sales-to-saudi-arabia-canceled-by-biden-administration/> (accessed 27/12/2022)

<sup>20</sup> Robertson, Nic; Kourdi, Eyad; Salem, Mostafa. Smoke plume seen after Houthi attack on Saudi oil facility ahead of Formula 1 race weekend. CNN. 25 March 2022. <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/03/25/middleeast/saudi-jeddah-aramco-attack-intl/index.html> (accessed 30/12/2022)

<sup>21</sup> Zhou, Laura. "China, Saudi Arabia set for closer military ties as sun sets for US in Middle East." South China Morning Post, 27 Jan 2022. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3164943/china-saudi-arabia-set-closer-military-ties-sun-sets-us-middle> (accessed 02/01/2023)

therefore sought arms cooperation with other partners such as China and Russia, the latter until the intensification of the Ukrainian conflict. However, in view of the gravity of the situation, the US has decided to re-supply the Saudis with *Patriot* anti-aircraft missiles, which still have vulnerabilities to low-altitude attacks that cannot be neutralised by such a system<sup>22</sup>. It seems that one solution to Saudi shortcomings could be the Israeli-made *Iron Dome* system, which Israel could export if there is a convergence of interests with the Americans<sup>23</sup>. The Saudi fear could be that, in the face of insecurity, the necessary foreign investment to implement its 2030 vision, of which one of its flagship projects is the decarbonised city of Neom, will not be forthcoming.

The unfolding Ukrainian conflict led the Western bloc to punish Russia with a series of sanctions affecting its oil products, leading to higher prices and galloping inflation in the US and the EU<sup>24</sup>. The situation could have been solved by Iran's increased production of hydrocarbons and the lifting of sanctions that have hung over Iran since former US President Donald Trump abandoned the Joint Comprehensive Plan Of Action (JCPOA) on nuclear issues<sup>25</sup>. However, the Iranians saw an excellent opportunity to take revenge against the Americans who, deployed in Iraq and in some positions inside Syria, disrupt the Iranian communications corridor to the Levant<sup>26</sup>.

Moreover, the Iranians have excellent relations with China and do not seem to want to abandon their Russian ally of convenience, which is now dependent on arms imports from Iran<sup>27</sup>. In this context of confrontation between great powers, Iran has been able to position itself adequately and come out stronger after joining the Shanghai Cooperation

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<sup>22</sup> Knipp, Kersten. "Houthi drones make Saudi Arabia an easy target" Deutsche Welle, 03/30/2022. <https://www.dw.com/en/houthi-attacks-expose-saudi-arabias-defense-weakness/a-61294825> (accessed 27/12/2022)

<sup>23</sup> Egozi, Arie. "Israel backing off Saudi arms sale hopes, turning eyes to Europe." Breaking Defense, 17 October 2022. <https://breakingdefense.com/2022/10/israel-backing-off-saudi-arm-sale-hopes-turning-eyes-to-europe/> (accessed 05/01/2023)

<sup>24</sup> Biçer, Aysu "US annual inflation hits 8.6% in May, highest since 1981." Anadolu Agency 10.06.2022. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/us-annual-inflation-hits-86-in-may-highest-since-1981/2610633> (accessed 27/12/2022)

<sup>25</sup> IRNA. "Iran says could contribute to solve Europe's energy crisis: Spox." 5 Sep 2022. <https://en.irna.ir/news/84878590/Iran-says-could-contribute-to-solve-Europe-s-energy-crisis-Spox> (accessed 02/01/2023)

<sup>26</sup> For a more detailed understanding of Iranian efforts to secure communications to the Lenate, we suggest reading: Castro Torres, José Ignacio. The importance of land corridors (II): Iran's race to the Mediterranean Sea IEEE Analysis Paper 26/2021. [http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_analisis/2021/DIEEEA26\\_2021\\_JOSCAS\\_Iran.pdf](http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2021/DIEEEA26_2021_JOSCAS_Iran.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> Akage, Anna. "Why Iran Has Decided To Arm Russia, And The Price To Pay." Worldcrunch, 24 October 2022. <https://worldcrunch.com/focus/iran-russia-ukraine> (accessed 02/01/2023)

Organisation, which is why it does not seem to be willing to sit down with the Americans at the nuclear negotiating table<sup>28</sup>. These circumstances have led President Biden to reach out to Venezuela with relative success, as well as to the Emirates and Saudi Arabia, who saw an opportunity to repay the Americans for past affronts<sup>29</sup>.

For President Biden, the energy market was out of control, so he decided to bring his old allies in the Arabian Peninsula closer together and last summer he undertook a trip to Saudi Arabia, as part of the opening of relations with Israel, but with the aim of converging with the Arab countries on hydrocarbons. On his arrival in Jeddah in mid-July he was met at the airport only by the governor of Mecca, and subsequently met with MbS<sup>30</sup>.

During the visit, the prince reproached the Americans for a policy of double standards, recalling the death in Israel of Palestinian journalist Shireen Abu Akleh and the treatment of prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. On the energy front, he did not promise to increase oil production, and on the international front he refrained from taking a stand against Russia and China, without moving towards recognition of Israel<sup>31</sup>.

In early October the situation worsened further for the Americans when Saudi Arabia and Russia, within the framework of the OPEC+ group, agreed to cut oil production. The drastic reduction encouraged by the Saudis resulted in increased Russian revenues and the easing of sanctions against Russia, triggered by the conflict in Ukraine. It is therefore believed that the Saudi action was a blow aimed at the US Democratic Party in order to punish it during the mid-term elections in November 2022<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> Nadeen, Ebrahim. "Iran inches one step closer to Russia and China as nuclear talks falter." CNN, 16 September 2022. <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/09/16/middleeast/iran-joins-shanghai-coop-mime-intl/index.html> (accessed 02/01/2022)

<sup>29</sup> Nissenbaum, Dion; Kalin, Stephen; Cloud, David S. "Saudi, Emirati Leaders Decline Calls With Biden During Ukraine Crisis" The Wall Street Journal, 8 March 2022. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-emirati-leaders-decline-calls-with-biden-during-ukraine-crisis-11646779430> (accessed 27/12/2022)

<sup>30</sup> Middle East Eye. "Biden receives muted reception in Saudi Arabia. This is how previous US presidents were greeted." 15 July 2022. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/biden-received-saudi-arabia-governor-mecca-sign-strained-ties> (accessed 30/12/2022)

<sup>31</sup> Alghannam, Hesham; Yaghi, Mohammad. "Biden's Trip to Saudi Arabia: Successes and Failures." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. 11 August 2022. <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/87662> (accessed 30/12/2022)

<sup>32</sup> Klippenstein, Ken. "Saudis sought oil production cut so deep it surprised even Russia." The Intercept, 20 October 2022. <https://theintercept.com/2022/10/20/saudi-oil-production-cut/> (accessed 30/12/2022)

## Sino-Saudi convergence on the One Belt One Road

The perception of time is very different when viewed from an Eastern perspective. In 1989 the then head of Saudi oil giant Aramco, Ali al-Naimi, visited China and was impressed by its future industrial potential. Although China's resurgence was yet to come, it continued on its path of progression, witnessed by five visits by Chinese presidents beginning with Jiang Zemin in 1999<sup>33</sup>.

Saudi Arabia is very important for China in energy terms, given that imports of Saudi crude oil reached 18 percent of China's needs for this product in 2022 and are likely to increase this year<sup>34</sup>. However, its evolution will have to be observed in the event of a drop in production due to the confinements and the evolution of the conflict in Ukraine, which has caused Russian imports to surpass Saudi imports at the end of the year<sup>35</sup>. Moreover, it should be borne in mind that Saudi-Chinese trade relations exceeded \$80 billion last year, and that since 2005 Chinese companies have invested more than \$36 billion in Saudi projects<sup>36</sup>.

Chinese interests go beyond trade agreements. Saudi Arabia is for them a gateway to relations with the Islamic world. Considering the problems posed by the Uighur minority in China's western province of Xingjiang, Saudi assistance could be crucial within China's borders<sup>37</sup>. Beyond China's borders lies Pakistan, with whom the Saudis have traditionally good relations. The need to establish the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CECP) is significant because this communication route opens up the possibility of Chinese access to the free waters of the Indian Ocean, where the port of Gwadar is an important Chinese trading base leased from the Pakistani government. Another instance of potential Saudi

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<sup>33</sup> Fulton, Jonathan. "What Xi Jinping's Saudi Arabia visit means for the Middle East" Atlantic Council, 9 December 2022. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/what-xi-jinpings-saudi-arabia-visit-means-for-the-middle-east/> (accessed 27/12/2022)

<sup>34</sup> Reuters. "Factbox: Saudi-China energy, trade and investment ties." 6/12/2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/saudi-china-energy-trade-investment-ties-2022-12-06/> (accessed 27/12/2022)

<sup>35</sup> Muyu Xu. "Russia overtakes Saudi Arabia as China's top crude supplier in November." Reuters, 20 December 2022 <https://www.nasdaq.com/articles/russia-overtakes-saudi-arabia-as-chinas-top-crude-supplier-in-november-0> (accessed 27/12/2022)

<sup>36</sup> Fulton, Jonathan. "What Xi Jinping's Saudi Arabia visit means for the Middle East." Op. Cit.

<sup>37</sup> OpIndia. "Saudi Arabia seeks to strengthen ties with China even as persecution of Uyghur Muslims continues in the communist country." 12 December 2022. <https://www.opindia.com/2022/12/saudi-arabia-seeks-to-strengthen-ties-with-china-usa-uyghurs/> (accessed 27/12/2022)

influence in global Islam could be reflected in the securing of a second communications corridor for the Chinese through Afghanistan<sup>38</sup>.

If we were to change our point of view, for the Saudis China is their main global trading partner, being their most distinguished energy customer on an annual basis and with very good long-term prospects. It has also become a major supplier of technology, which is one of the key components of Prince MbS's *Vision 2030* project. In international relations, China's position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council can be very important for Saudi interests.

It is in this context that the recent trip of Chinese leader Xi Jinping took place, after securing a third term in office and in the midst of protests over the confinement of several Chinese cities due to COVID. This trip can be seen as an opportunity to strengthen relations in the region, which is why, on the sidelines of the Saudi-China Summit, an important strategic partnership document was signed that will align China's plans with the Saudis' Vision 2030. In addition, the Riyadh-Gulf-China summits for cooperation and development with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and the Arab-China summit took place, with the participation of more than 30 Arab countries and international organisations<sup>39</sup>.

A special feature of the Sino-Saudi summit was the establishment of a joint high-level committee, co-chaired by Prince MbS and Vice Premier Han Zheng. The committee will address issues related to trade, investment and energy, culture and technology, including space exploration. Coordination on political and security matters was also revealed<sup>40</sup>.

Unlike President Biden, this time the Chinese leader was received by King Salman himself. The framework of the visit was based on "mutual respect" and the consolidation of a strategic partnership that will open a new era in relations between the two countries,

<sup>38</sup> Azhar, Azam. "Where does Pakistan stand in Mideast realignment?" The Express Tribune, 25 December 2022. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2392689/where-does-pakistan-stand-in-mideast-realignment> (accessed 27/12/2022)

<sup>39</sup> قنائة العربيه / ayibarA IA/ "ب حضور 03 فائد دولة ومنظمة دولية.. ت فا صيل ان عقاد 3 قمم صينيه في الرياض / nl the presence of 30 leaders of countries and international organisations... Details of the 3 Chinese summits held in Riyadh." 7/12/2022. [ت فا صيل ان عقاد 3 قمم صينيه في الرياض \(ten.ayibarala\) ولية..ب حضور 03 فائد دولة ومنظمة د](#) (accessed 26/012/2022)

<sup>40</sup> Arabian Business. "Saudi Arabia and China... a rich history and bright prospects for the future". 07 December 2022

[ت اربخ حافل وآفاق مستتق بلديه مشرقه \(ea.nayabla\) ال سعوديه وال صين ..](#) (accessed 26/12/2022)

bringing “qualitative changes” in the ties they maintain. In this sense it seems that, although the backbone of the relationship is oil, there will be important developments in other energy, industry, communications, information technology, biotechnology, tourism, engineering and construction. However, there is an important aspect to this new framework, as cooperation on political and security issues has also been included, which is seen as beneficial to regional stability and security<sup>41</sup>.

Moving the focus away from international relations, it seems pertinent to analyse the three-way game that China wants to play with the Saudis and Russians, noting that Xi Jinping’s recent visit to Saudi Arabia has closed an energy triangle. In this way, the Chinese hope to obtain very cheap oil from Russia immediately, depending on the evolution of the conflict in Ukraine, while seeking a stable long-term relationship with the Saudis<sup>42</sup>. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia and Russia have moved closer together in a win-win environment for China.

### Thawing relations between Russia and Saudi Arabia

The rapprochement between Saudis and Russians can be traced back to 2014, when Russia’s invasion of Crimea and the Dombash took place. Western sanctions against Russia made it profitable to frack US oil production, which hurt both the Russians and the Saudis<sup>43</sup>.

In 2015 Prince MbS travelled to Moscow to sign a series of oil and nuclear agreements. As a result of the visit, in 2016 Saudi Arabia invited Russia to join the OPEC+ group and agree to a reduction in oil production to raise prices and heal both economies<sup>44</sup>. This relationship was strengthened following the support shown by President Putin during the

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<sup>41</sup> 责编：崔译戈、杨牧/Cui, Yige; Yang, Mu. “沙特媒体：习近平主席此访将给两国关系带来“质的改变” /Saudi media: President Xi Jinping’s visit will bring a “qualitative change” to bilateral relations.” 人民网/ People’s Daily Online. 9/12/2022. <http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2022/1209/c1002-32584231.html> (accessed 26/12/2022)

<sup>42</sup> McDonnell, Tim. “Xi Jinping’s visit to Saudi Arabia is bad news for the Kremlin.” Quartz, 9 December 2022. <https://qz.com/xi-jinpings-visit-to-saudi-arabia-is-bad-news-for-the-k-1849873733> (accessed 02/01/2023)

<sup>43</sup> Elliott, Larry. “Stakes are high as US plays the oil card against Iran and Russia” The Guardian, 9 Nov 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/economics-blog/2014/nov/09/us-iran-russia-oil-prices-shale> (accessed 02/01/2023)

<sup>44</sup> Lian, Ruby; Mason, Josephine; El Gamal, Rania. “Saudi Arabia, Russia sign oil pact, may limit output in future.” Reuters, 5 September 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-g20-china-saudi-russia-oil-idUSKCN11B0UF> (accessed 02/01/2023)

2018 G20 summit, in the midst of an international crisis against Saudi Arabia over the death of journalist Jamal Khashoggi<sup>45</sup>.

This friendship would briefly wane during the “2020 oil price war”, as Russia did not want to reduce its production, but finally capitulated to the Saudis when it saw that the price was falling because of insufficient demand due to the lack of global production caused by the pandemic<sup>46</sup>.

The revival of the Russia-Ukraine conflict after 2022 was an important link for both countries, although the Saudis have shrewdly exploited Russia’s isolation by the Western bloc. Thus Saudi Arabia is buying Russian fuel oil at very low prices, while Saudi quality oil is being used for export at much higher prices<sup>47</sup>. In addition, the Saudis have bought \$500 million worth of shares in Russian energy companies Lukoil, Rosneft and Gazprom, giving them greater leverage over the Russian<sup>48</sup>.

In October 2022 both the Saudis and Russians agreed to reduce oil production. On this occasion the US was dealt a low blow, as this measure hurt them, given their galloping inflation. An added fact is that the sharp reduction of Saudi oil production by two million barrels per day would ease the Russian economy, which could increase its profits in a higher price environment<sup>49</sup>. Meanwhile, the G7, the European Union and Australia agreed in early December not to buy Russian oil above \$60 a barrel, which President Putin

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<sup>45</sup> Ma, Alexandra. “Putin enthusiastically high-fived the Saudi crown prince at the G20 summit” Business insider, 30 Nov 2018. <https://www.businessinsider.com/putin-mohammed-bin-salman-high-five-at-g20-summit-2018-11> (accessed 02/01/2023)

<sup>46</sup> MA, Richie Ruchuan; XIONG, Tao; BAO, Yukun. The Russia-Saudi Arabia oil price war during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Energy economics*, 2021, vol. 102, p. 105517.

<sup>47</sup> Reuters. “Exclusive: Saudi Arabia doubles second-quarter Russian fuel oil imports for power generation.” 15 July 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/exclusive-saudi-arabia-doubles-q2-russian-fuel-oil-imports-power-generation-2022-07-14/> (accessed 02/01/2022)

<sup>48</sup> Артем Ильин. “Вложились в конкурентов. Холдинг из Саудовской Аравии инвестировал полмиллиарда долларов в акции российских Газпрома, Роснефти и ЛУКОЙЛа/Invest in competitors. A Saudi Arabian holding company has invested USD 500 million in shares of Russia’s Gazprom, Rosneft and Lukoil.” NV, 15 August 2022. <https://biz.nv.ua/economics/skolko-deneg-princ-iz-saudovskoy-aravii-investiroval-v-rossiyskie-kompanii-novosti-50263295.html#:~:text=Холдинг%20из%20Саудовской%20Аравии%20инвестировал,российских%20Газпрома%2С%20Роснефти%20и%20ЛУКОЙЛа&text=Саудовский%20принц%20инвестировал%20более%20%24500,уже%20после%20введения%20западных%20санкций> (accessed 02/01/2023)

<sup>49</sup> Knipp, Kersten. “Oil, US or Russia: Whose side is Saudi Arabia really on?” DW, 12 October 2022. <https://www.dw.com/en/oil-us-russia-whose-side-saudi-arabia-really-on/a-63416006> (accessed 02/01/2023)

described as stupidity that will lead to the collapse of the oil industry and catastrophic price rises<sup>50</sup>.

But Russian-Saudi rapprochement has not only been in the energy sphere. The relationship between Putin and MbS, the US Democratic reluctance to provide weaponry to the Saudi regime, and the Houthi attacks from Yemen led Saudi Arabia to consider purchasing the Russian S-400 anti-aircraft system in 2021. However, this possibility was not pursued because of its inadequacy and because a radical change in the interoperability of weapons systems across the region would have been disastrous<sup>51</sup>. Nevertheless, it was an important wake-up call for Americans to balance the balance between their values and the stark reality of the situation.

Other areas of Russian-Saudi relations, with a clear advantage in favour of the latter, can be seen in MbS's rapprochement with President Putin's first circle of power, which includes Kirill Dmitriev, CEO of the Russian Direct Investment Fund<sup>52</sup>. Saudi influence in the religious sphere is also important, as there is a cordial bond between MbS and Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, which has led to the signing of a protocol of cooperation between the two countries in this area<sup>53</sup>. This will see the Saudis provide religious training to Russian preachers, imams, speakers and muezzins, promoting Islamic values and opposition to extremism<sup>54</sup>.

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<sup>50</sup> Soldatkin, Vladimir; Faulconbridge, Guy. "Putin says Russia could cut oil production over 'stupid' price cap" Reuters, 9 December 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/putin-russia-will-not-lose-out-oil-price-cap-2022-12-09/> (accessed 02/12/2022)

<sup>51</sup> Schmidt, Patrick. "The Saudi Air Defense Problem Is a U.S. Opportunity" The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 17 Mar 2021. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/saudi-air-defense-problem-us-opportunity> (accessed 02/01/2023)

<sup>52</sup> Hokayem, Emile. "Fraught Relations: Saudi Ambitions and American Anger" IISS, 6 December 2022. <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/survival-blog/2022/12/fraught-relations-saudi-ambitions-and-american-anger> (accessed 02/01/2023)

<sup>53</sup> Hoffman, Jon. "The Evolving Relationship Between Religion and Politics in Saudi Arabia." Arab Center Washington DC., 20 Apr 2022. <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-evolving-relationship-between-religion-and-politics-in-saudi-arabia/> (accessed 02/01/2023)

<sup>54</sup> Arab News. "Saudi minister receives head of Russian Muslim organization" 16 December 2022. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2216906/saudi-arabia> (accessed 02/01/2023)

## Conclusions

Saudi Arabia's geographical position and abundance of oil make it a key piece in the jigsaw puzzle of the territories that make up the strip of land bordering the mass of the great Eurasian continent. The Saudi state is itself a regional power, endowed with partially defensible territory and significant wealth that can be considered a latent power, transformable into military power. However, the Saudis do not have a large population, meaning that their capacity for territorial extension beyond their borders is relatively difficult. In contrast, their main rival, the Shiite Iranian regime, possesses sufficient territorial, resource and population capabilities that the Saudis lack.

The advantages that Saudi Arabia can offer are a source of attraction for the major powers. The US has traditionally been a strategic ally in the region, especially since the triumph of the Islamic revolution in Iran. However, the idealistic approaches of the Obama and mainly Biden administrations have driven relations between the two actors to historic lows. The main sources of disagreement have been US attempts to resurrect the Iran nuclear deal, accusations against the Saudi regime for its actions in Yemen and human rights abuses, and President Biden's stated intentions to ostracise the Saudis internationally.

In recent times, Prince MbS has seen the Russians as more reliable partners than the fickle Americans. Russian and Saudi energy interests have followed converging paths, using OPEC+ to stabilise oil production and prices. Moreover, President Putin has handled the relationship with MbS excellently, maintaining a cordial relationship with MbS when Western leaders turned their backs on him in the aftermath of the Khashoggi affair.

Despite cordial relations with Russia, the Saudis have kept a cautious distance in the Ukrainian conflict, possibly because they see it as a regional problem from which they are distanced. They may have initially expected a quick Russian victory, given the West's collapse after the fall of Kabul, but Ukrainian resistance and Western determination changed Saudi perceptions, redirecting the relationship with Russia towards their own interests. In this way, the Saudis have gained a foothold in Russia by investing in its businesses. At the same time, by altering oil production, they have harmed US interests and benefited Russian ones, demonstrating that they can exert significant influence over the major powers.

Good relations with China are not new, but have intensified following Chinese demonstrations of being good partners, eager to buy oil and invest in projects. At the same time, the Chinese seem to show interest in respecting Islamic culture and in relying on the Saudis to foster good relations with the people of that religion. For its part, following disagreements with the US, Saudi Arabia is looking for a new, more reliable partner to advance its *Vision 2030*.

In view of all the above considerations, it seems that global hegemony is being increasingly challenged, with scenarios of confrontation emerging across the entire Rimland that Spykman once defined. The US project of pivoting towards the Asia-Pacific has led it to concentrate its efforts, but also to neglect scenarios in which it has to react to pressure from other actors. It is therefore understandable that they are leading a scenario of open conflict in Ukraine or a highly tense one off the coast of China.

In the meantime, the US's easing of pressure in the Middle East has been seized upon by the rest of the global and regional powers. It remains to be seen how security forces in this fragile region will be rebalanced, but it is quite possible that stability in the region will be based on the Chinese and US pursuing a diplomatic rapprochement in a timely manner. Within this approach, multilateral consultation of the interests of regional actors is necessary. Foremost among these would be Saudi Arabia, as the largest member of the GCC, while Iran seems likely to maintain a clear anti-US and pro-China line.

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