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Chapter 13

The Rise of Strategic Partnerships in the 21st century: The Case of Sino-Saudi Relations

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Abstract

The number of strategic partnerships has proliferated in the post-Cold war period and the term has become an established feature of diplomacy. Although the emphasis on multilateralism gained prominence in terms of discourse in the post-Cold War period, it is seen that bilateral partnerships are on the rise within the flux of a current international conjuncture. Among the most noteworthy cases, Saudi Arabia-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) exhibits the increasing focus on pragmatic and shared interests - rather than common values - as the key constitutive elements of their relations and hence, reflects a kind of transition in international system. As a rising global power, China seems to be keen on deepening its relations with Saudi Arabia, which occupies an invaluable geopolitical position in energy security, within the framework of the Belt and Road Iniative (BRI). On the other hand, Saudi Arabia's desire to diversify its relations as a regional power, which has a historically deep-rooted relations with the US, and a determination to attract investments during the newly launched reform process, are effective in improving its relations with China. Still, the questions especially rise on the points of why these two countries, with their distinct social structures, ideologies and foreign policy preferences engage in strategic partnership and in which direction they will mature this relationship in the future. This chapter is designed to address the rise of strategic partnerships with a special emphasis on the policy priorities and ambitious projects of Saudi Arabia-China relations. In this context, the reasons for preferring bilateral form of alignment, the characteristics of strategic partnerships as a popular diplomatic toolkit in transitioning international system, the case of Sino-Saudi relations under the framework of this alignment model, and lastly, the possible effects of this relationship in a wider region constitute the subject of this study.

Keywords Saudi Arabia · China · Strategic Partnerships · Partnership Diplomacy · Alignment

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Introduction

In response to the transforming dynamics of the post-Cold War era, states increasingly search for new models of alignments to facilitate cooperation and to further their interests. Since conventional system of multilateral cooperation proves insufficient for states to realize their agendas, then states increasingly prefer bilateral solutions such as strategic partnerships to promote their own terms. In this respect the Sino-Saudi relations, which have transformed from having a marginal significance to a comprehensive strategic partnership, represents a prominent case to discuss the degree states utilize the partnership diplomacy.

The Sino-Saudi relations have seen tremendous growth since the establishment of the official diplomatic ties. The relations have not simply progressed but more importantly, upgraded into a level of comprehensive strategic partnership to denote one of the highest position in their hierarchy of international relations. The flexible and pragmatic structure of the CSP seems well-suited for the partners to realize their visions and to fulfill their foreign policy goals. Especially, the synergy between the Vision 2030 and the BRI offers variety of prospects for a deepening CSP. Furthermore, it carries the potential to produce geopolitical consequences by reinforcing China's global influence and expanding Saudi Arabia's regional role.

This study begins with assessing the context of the strategic partnerships with an effort to understand the underlying reasons for states to prefer bilateral arrangements. In the second part, the rapid development of the Sino-Saudi relations is discussed within the context of the dynamics of the international structure, key drivers and expectations of the parties. In the last section, a strategic outlook on the possible implications of the Sino-Saudi CSP is provided from the perspective of Türkiye, the Middle East and the Central Asia. Given the insufficiency of conventional forms of alignments, the case of Sino-Saudi CSP vividly illustrates the salience of strategic partnerships as a pragmatic diplomatic instrument for states to realize their visions, utilize their interests, and expand their roles in world politics.

A Popular Diplomatic Toolkit: Strategic Partnerships

As of 2024, more than 100 strategic partnerships (SP) have been signed across Asia-Pacific region whereas China has forged over 23 global SPs with countries ranging from Djibouti to Iran and 41 Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships (CSP) with countries ranging from Mongolia to Saudi Arabia (Bhole, 2023). These numbers indicate a change both in the conduct of diplomacy and among the conventional instruments of international relations. In fact, in parallel to the fluid atmosphere of international relations, new inter-state alignments with fewer partners evolve and constitute the reality of the 21st century diplomacy. States utilize these channels to facilitate cooperation, and in this respect the newer forms of alignment such as strategic partnerships have become one of the core practices to manage complex problems. As an umbrella concept alignment encompasses broad range of subjects and in practice, these arrangements can shift from issue to issue. States can align with different sets of partners on variety of subjects without giving strict commitments. Since states increasingly prefer these bilateral arrangements, then it becomes highly necessary to understand both the underlying factors and the context of these structures.

Why do states prefer Bilateral Arrangements?

It is possible to discuss on several factors to explain why states increasingly prefer bilateral arrangements rather than broad-based, highly institutionalized multilateral structures. In this vein, increasing number of SPs can be argued among one of the states' responses to the shifts in the configuration of international system. More closely, the characteristics of this notable shift can be discussed under; from

unipolarity to contested power distribution[1] and from alliances to alignments and from multilateralism to bilateral or minilateral frameworks (Cooper, 2023, p.2). Under the factors of dynamic rise of China with a global leverage, and the erosion of the US credibility and reliability in terms of global governance, the international system seems to shift from a unipolar order, still with controversies in labeling the newly emerging system. In this grey period, states appear to search for greater autonomy by diversifying their links with different partners.

In traditional sense, the Cold War period has been dominated by the political-security concerns of the two poles which have been narrowly reflected in the structure of the alliances. By definition alliance entails a formal or informal collaboration of states for the (threat of) use of military force, against actors external to the alliance (Rynning and Schmitt, 2018, p.654). Alliances primarily include military dimension and require high degree of commitment and trust. Therefore, under current circumstances, instead of accepting the rigid structure of alliances states highly welcome the flexible and pragmatic models of alignments which offer them chances to deepen their collaboration with different countries on variety of topics. In this vein, it is not surprising to see Saudi Arabia as a rising regional power and one of the US historical allies to turn for new partners to materialize its vision and projects without the restrictions of the US orders.

In this new international environment, conventional system of multilateral cooperation which is mostly dominated by the Western powers is in retreat. In the face of complex global problems such as rising inequalities, it has become more difficult for states with variety of interests to utilize these multilateral structures in achieving their goals. Besides, since multilateral institutions proved to be functional in the service of Western liberal world order, the rise of "other" powers which are enthusiastic to promote their own terms encouraged the demand for bilateral solutions. In this regard, with their stress on sovereignty and identity, states become more receptive to bilateral solutions which can rely on pragmatic and flexible channels in tackling a particular problem. Nevertheless, it is still possible to question whether partnerships with rising powers such as China can result in imposition of another type of yoke on partner states. In this respect, one of the primary examples constitute the Chinese-Sri Lankan SP. The conditions created under the framework of the SP, such as the context of the Chinese investments and Sri Lanka's increasing debts to that country have transformed their relations into a fashion of asymmetric dependency. Many argued that China has utilized the SP as an instrument of influence while undermining Sri Lanka's sovereignty and security. In fact, the questions of associated costs and actual benefits of the SP remained controversial on the Sri Lankan side. Therefore, to be able to grasp the dynamics of the transforming international system it is necessary to understand the structures states choose to build on their collaborations. In this regard, before embarking upon analyzing the core of the Saudi-Chinese CSP, next part examines the conceptual discussions on the strategic partnerships.

Strategic Partnerships

In the post CW period, strategic partnerships have gained wide currency and constituted one of the newest and prominent form of alignment in international politics (Wilkins, 2012). As states have

[1]The fierce discussions on the nature of the system structure continues as of today. On the one hand, proponents of the unipolarity stress on the material capabilities of the US as a leading global power with its military preponderence, economic influence and technological prowess. For instance, Brooks and Wohlforth (2023) claim that despite shocks and crises and a change in the nature of the US unipolarity (since they characterize the current period as "partial unipolarity"), it still comprises the unipole. They stress that the US continues to dominate the world order with its extraordinary power elements compared to other states. On the other hand, those critics of unipolarity argue on the decline of the American power amid rising China and especially BRICS countries. The proponents of multipolarity underline the notion of diffusion of power from a superpower to rising powers with a special emphasis on economic, social and political conditions rather than military power. Ashford and Cooper (2023) have characterized this emerging distribution of power as a system of "unbalanced multipolarity".

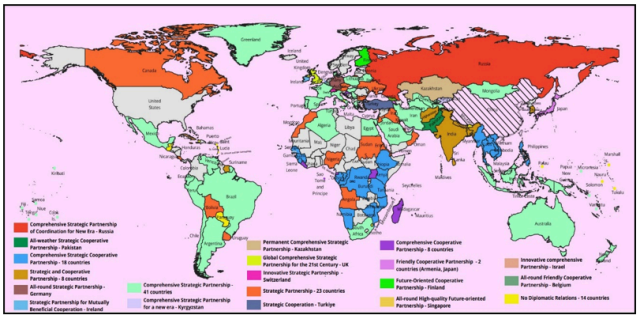
departed from the alliance paradigm, the SP's have been embraced by many actors of the international politics to denote close relationships which, in fact, have varied over different levels (Tyushka and Czechowska, 2019, p.11). Despite the surge in the usage of the term, the definition of the SP is still contested in the literature. Nevertheless, it is still possible to shed light on the common features of the SPs based on their structures and context.

Michalski and Pan (2017) define strategic partnership as a form of bilateral engagement between two actors with the aim of forging a privileged bilateral relationship. Compared to coalitions and alliances as different forms of alignment, SPs are different from both of them since coalitions are ad-hoc and temporary in nature whereas alliances mostly include military obligations (Wilkins, 2008, pp.359-360). Other distinctive features of SPs encompass; common interests as the basis of the relationship, goal-oriented nature and more flexible structure. SPs are primarily based on common interests rather than shared values. They are conceived as vehicles to attain specific material foreign policy goals rather than binding partners to broad ideological commitments. Since no "enemy" state is identified within the framework of SPs, they are not threat-driven and thus structured around certain goals. As the global power shift and diffusion of power necessitate a more flexible form of alignment, the flexible structure of SPs offers greater incentive for the states to attain higher degree of autonomy and opportunity to diversify their channels of collaborations (Wilkins, 2008, pp.360-361).

The patterns of SPs represent different aspects of collaboration for different actors. Mostly, the SPs present a significant alternative channel both for the small states and emerging powers to diversify their collaborations and to leverage their position. Even in some cases, SPs can be employed among the instruments of hedging to manage the risks and costs and to promote multiple policy options without antagonizing other states. In this regard the example of Sri Lankan-Chinese SP, which can be discussed under the motivations of Sri Lanka to maximize benefits from China without alienating but still offsetting the pressure of India, can be given. Some scholars also study Saudi-Chinese CSP on the basis of the hedging strategy both from Saudi Arabian and Chinese perspective. With a view to realize the Vision 2030 and modernization projects, Saudi Arabia capitalizes on partnership relations with China especially on the areas of investment, infrastructure and techno-scientific innovation while carefully engaging with the US on defense issues (Munassar, 2023). In this respect, Saudi Arabia's dual strategy to forge global partnerships without alienating its long-term ally US is discussed under the examples of hedging strategy. On the other side, some studies also discussed on China's partnership diplomacy under the framework of hedging strategy. China's enthusiasm to bolster its relations with Saudi Arabia by carefully scrutinizing and avoiding the risks of; alienating Iran, challenging the US as well as becoming entangled in the regions complex problems are argued under China's hedging strategy (Garlick and Havlova, 2020, p.83).

Map 1

China's Global Partnerships at All Levels



Source: Bhole, O. (2023)

Apart from the hedging strategy, China has in fact adopted partnership diplomacy on a global scale. It has established partnerships at different levels ranging from "all-weather partnership" with Russia and Pakistan, "strategic partnerships" with Azerbaijan and Georgia to "friendly cooperative partnership" with Armenia and Japan (Shiriyev, 2024). Among the types of the partnerships, CSP indicates one of the highest level of partnerships that underlines the significance of the partners for China's vital interests and foreign policy goals. China's pattern of strategic partnership basically revolves around forging privileged bilateral partnerships and utilizing material and strategic opportunities the collaboration offers (Michalski, 2019, p. 10). China builds on a network of strategic partnerships with a vision of strengthening its global power status, bolstering its commercial position, expanding the reach of the BRI and deepening its strategic leverage.

The Sino-Saudi Relations: from a Marginal Significance to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

The blossoming relations between China and Saudi Arabia have come a long way in a short time. Despite the fact that Sino-Saudi relations do not have a long diplomatic history, the relations have transformed from having a marginal significance to a comprehensive strategic partnership in the post-Cold War period. The parties have demonstrated a great deal of enthusiasm to develop their relations and substantial progress has been reached in variety of areas, such as in energy and financial sectors.

The CSP is especially significant in realizing the goals of each party. While China utilizes the CSP with a view to expand the geography of the BRI and its sphere of influence, Saudi Arabia perceives it as an opportunity to diversify its economy and materialize the Vision 2030 project. On the basis of their regional and global role, the partners posses range of ambitions which have also found reflections in the design of the CSP. So, to be able to discuss on the possible implications of the CSP, this part analyzes the essential features of the CSP with a special focus on the expectations of the partners.

The Context of the Sino-Saudi Relations

Since the establishment of the official diplomatic relations in 1990, the Sino-Saudi relations have undergone a rapid progress and upgraded into a level of comprehensive strategic partnership that ranks among one of the highest positions in their hierarchy of international relations. The Saudi-Chinese CSP reveals one of an examples of states' responses to the transitioning world system. In an era of complex global challenges and heightened competition, rather than being restricted by the rigid structure of alliances, both of the parties choose to build their collaborations around economic concerns within a pragmatic and flexible structure.

In a brief historical context, while the Sino-Saudi relations have been restricted on the basis of ideological differences and the policies of opposing camps during the Cold War, the 'under the table negotiations' and 'clandestine trade' which have developed especially in the 1980's have paved the way for the establishment of the official relations in the 1990 (Cengiz, 2020, p.7). Between the years 1991-1998, the relations have grown steadily with more than 16 high-level visits and increasing contacts, including King Abdullah's, then Crown Prince, visit to China in 1998. In a reciprocal visit, the Chinese President Jiang Zemin has visited Riyadh in 1999 as the first ever Chinese leader to visit the Kingdom. The visit produced the conclusion of a strategic oil partnership between the two countries which was functional both in the development of a collaboration in the energy sector and making Saudi Arabia the top oil supplier to China in 2002 (Tamimi, 2022, pp.140-141). The year 2006 marked a significant point in Sino-Saudi relations with King Abdullah's visit to Beijing. As the first ever Saudi king to visit China, his trip has resulted in five agreements that included closer energy collaboration. Three months later, President Hu Jintao reciprocated a visit to Riyadh and expanded the scale of collaboration with

additional agreements on the areas of energy and security. Afterwards, the year 2009 saw another state visit to Riyadh by the President Hu Jintao. The reciprocal high-level visits and the developing relations did not only exhibit the significance of expanding ties between the parties but have also produced durable outcomes in the spheres of broadening economic relations, increasing energy cooperation and heightening collaboration in security issues such as in combating terrorism, military visits and maritime piracy (Tamimi, 2022, p.141). At its early stages of Saudi Arabia's dual strategy, the Saudi Kingdom enthusiastically embraced the terms of developing a geo-economic partnership with China while sustaining its strategic relations, especially in the defense sector, with the Western powers.

Saudi Arabia's dual strategy of maintaining strategic ties with the West while developing relations with the East, particularly China, has further developed and produced considerable results in the second decade of the 21st century. Under the framework of the Look-East Diplomacy, Saudi high-level visits to China continued and reciprocated by Beijing. The visits facilitated the ties in energy and economic sectors, diversified the areas of collaboration and paved the way for a higher level of cooperation. In this respect, the parties have agreed to elevate the status of their relationship to comprehensive strategic partnership in 2016 with the end result of the CSP agreement in 2022 (Saudi Press Agency).

Several steps have been taken to institutionalize the Sino-Saudi CSP. As a consultation mechanism High Level Joint Committee (HLJC) has been established and Vice Premier Zhang Gaoli and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman have been appointed as the co-chairs. The HLJC and the six sub-committees are not only designed as an instrument of steering cooperation but also to act as a mechanism of policy-coordination between the BRI and the Vision 2030. China's global initiative of BRI entails large-scale infrastructure and development projects that seeks to connect Asia with Africa and Europe through maritime (Maritime Silk Road) and land (Silk Road Economic Belt) routes. Saudi Arabia was among the first countries to participate the BRI who sees the initiative as an important opportunity to materialize its ambitious project of Vision 2030 which encompasses modernization projects, diversified economy and a vibrant society. While the BRI is expected to serve for underlining China's international identity as a global power, Vision 2030 can be instrumental in reinforcing Saudi Arabia's increasing regional role that goes beyond the region.

The synergy between the BRI and the Vision 2030 plays one of a vital role in the development of the CSP. The scope of the two ambitious projects reflects the extent of their mutual interests as well as their need for growing collaboration in order to materialize their visions. In this respect, the two sides have signed a 'harmonization plan' between the BRI and the Vision 2030 with a view to accelerate the pace of the projects and to further the degree of cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). China has also unveiled a cooperation priorities agenda under the Vision and Actions document, which is useful in assessing the framework of its bilateral relations and collaboration. In this vein, the five policy priorities of the Vision and Actions document can be functional in analyzing the extent of the harmonization and implementation of the BRI and Vision 2030 (Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, 2017).

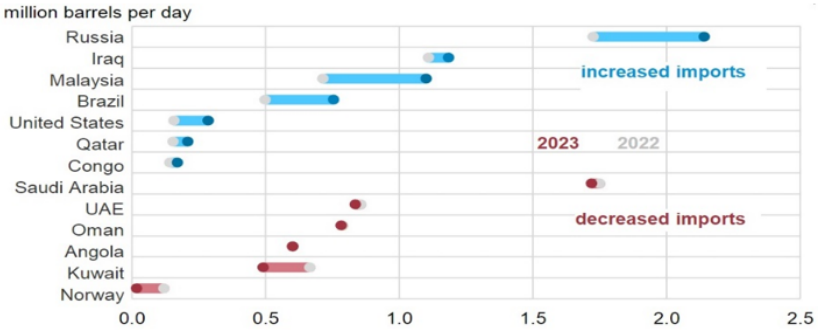
The Vision and Actions document essentially highlights five specific goals for partnering states in BRI, which are; policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration and people-to-people bonds. Under the *policy coordination*, communication mechanisms and multi-level intergovernmental macro policy exchange are urged. In these high-level visits, variety of agreements and Memorandum of Understandings (MoU) which include diverse sectors of energy, mining, oil, petrochemical plants, renewable energy and e-commerce have been signed (Fulton, 2020a, p.11). The foundation of the HLJC and the six sub-committees as well as high-level visits are instrumental in facilitating the policy coordination not only between the BRI and Vision 2030, but also for a functioning framework of the comprehensive strategic partnership. Under the priority area of *facilities connectivity*,

partners are expected to improve connectivity of their infrastructure connection plans and technical systems. Starting from 2007, China continued to expand its infrastructure and construction projects in Saudi Arabia and the Kingdom received the highest level of construction volume across 61 BRI countries in 2023 (Nedopil, 2024, p.11). Some of the examples of Chinese infrastructure and transportation construction projects that have been launched in Saudi Arabia encompass; Chinese investments in Jazan city for port and industrial park construction, China Railway Construction Corporation's adit tunnel project for Saudi NEOM City and Chinese digital infrastructure investments in Saudi digital transformation under the Vision 2030.

Unimpeded Trade priority includes expansion of new areas of trade, improvement in trade structure and promotion of trade balance between the parties. Trade in the energy sector is historically essential to the Sino-Saudi collaboration. As the world's largest oil importer in 2023, China is the largest recipient of Saudi oil and Saudi Arabia has ranked as the second crude oil supplier to China (US Energy Information Administration, 2024). Not only this but today the scope of the collaboration goes beyond fossil energy to include green low carbon energy. Saudi Arabia has received 19 percent of the Chinese green energy investment in BRI in 2023 and the collaboration has expanded to include the development of technological and industrial capacity of renewable energy projects in solar and wind energy (Nedopil, 2024, p.16). One of the primary examples of China's investments include Silk Road Forum (SRF)'s acquisition of the %49 of the Saudi Arabia's ACWA Power Renewable Energy Holding (ACWA Power RenewCo)(Power Technology,2020). In addition to energy, trade stands at the core of the bilateral relations which continuous with an accelerated pace. Over the years, the volume of bilateral trade has grown tremendously to exceed $100 billion in 2023 and China has become Saudi Arabia's largest trading partner (Yang, 2024). In general trade rates, while China's exports include electronics, consumer goods, construction and industrial materials, Saudi Arabia's 90% of exports and nearly 87% of the total revenues are restricted to oil and petrochemical exports (Yu, 2024, p.132). Despite high revenues, this single-commodity structure reveals a kind of vulnerability for the Saudi economy. In this vein, Saudi Arabia aims to utilize the synergy between the BRI and Vision 2030 to diversify its economy, to expand the areas of trade and to reduce its dependence on oil.

Figure 1

Crude Oil Imports to China from Top Trading Partners (2022-2023)



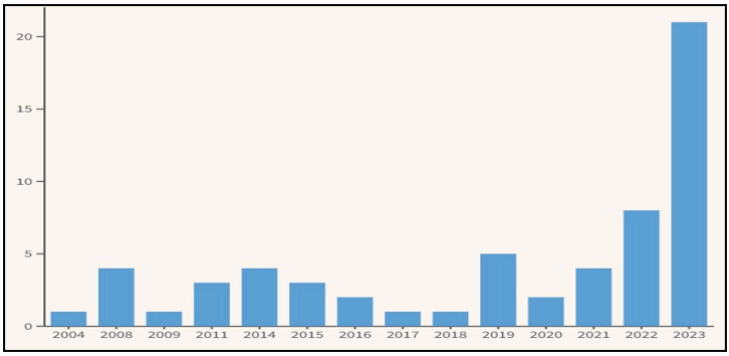
Source: US Energy Information Administration (2024)

The priority in *financial integration* aims to deepen integration in financial cooperation, establishment of financing and investment systems, and coordination in currency. In parallel to growing importance of the BRI infrastructure projects, Chinese investments have grown substantially and it has become one of the largest sources of the Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Saudi Arabia. While the Vision 2030 offers new investment opportunities to diversify the economic agenda, the realization of both the Vision 2030 and the BRI targets still require more steps for trade financing, infrastructure

financing, insurance services and currency settlement services (Chen and Han, 2019, p. 14). The developments such as the establishment of the first office of National Commercial Bank of Saudi Arabia in Shanghai in 2013, the opening of the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China in Riyadh in 2015, the establishment of joint investment fund by Saudi Arabia and China, and the signing of a bilateral currency swap agreement worth of $7 billion are among the prominent examples for financial integration.

Figure 2

The Rise of Chinese FDI in Saudi Arabia (2004-2023)



Source: Crawford (2023)

The *people-to-people exchanges* involve the expansion of exchanges and growing collaboration in the areas of culture, education and media to promote public support for the initiative and the bilateral relations. In this respect, Sino-Saudi partnership has encouraged people to people contacts through several practices. For instance, Saudi Arabia is included in China's list of destinations for group travel, personnel exchanges have been deepened and the range of opportunities under educational exchanges have been proliferated. While the Chinese language is included in the curricula of Saudi Arabia's public schools and universities, the Arabic language is being taught in 44 Chinese universities (Vaidya, 2023). With a view to encourage cultural diversity of the Vision 2030, a total of 174 Saudi students, including 131 scholarship recipients, are enrolled in Chinese universities in 2022. In turn, Saudi Arabia has provided 477 annual scholarships for Chinese students at Saudi universities (Ministry of Education, 2022). All of these complementary priorities and respective practices represent a holistic approach in the realization and development of the Sino-Saudi CSP. The synchronization of the visions of the partners seems to be promising in the long run. Still, the future of the relations will be affected by the realization of mutual expectations and the transforming dynamics. To be able to assess the future of the relations and the implementation of the CSP, the next part will focus on the expectations of the partners as well as the dynamics that can be affective in the long run.

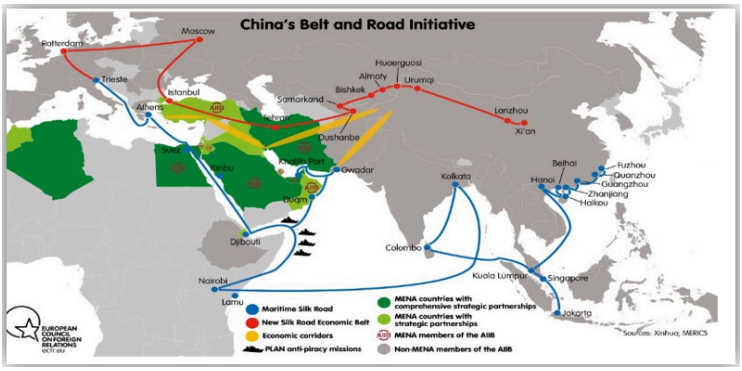
Expectations of the Partners

The Sino-Saudi relations have transformed from a short-term, limited type of oil and trade-based relations to a long-term, diversified structure of a strategic partnership. Despite the fact that the energy and trade issues still play a vital role in the relations, a spillover effect has enlarged the context of the relations to encompass diverse areas of partnership. In the post-Cold War era under the context of the Sino-Saudi relations, the meaning of the term 'strategic' has transformed from a restricted agenda of political and military issues to a more pragmatic context to encompass long-term, sustainable and uninterrupted flow of relations. Under this framework, the expectations of the parties have reconfigured and played a determinant role in the development of relations.

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao has once defined comprehensive strategic partnership as a multilayered, all-dimensional collaboration to cover economic, politic, scientific, technologic, and cultural fields that is conducted both by the governments and non-governmental groups on equal-footed, mutually beneficial and win-win basis. For Jiabao the term 'strategic' means long-term and stable cooperation which transcends the differences in ideology and is not subjected to the impacts of individual events (Fulton, 2019, p.34). Under the context of energy security, establishing a reliable partnership with the top oil supplier will not only safeguard Beijing's energy interests but it can also strengthen China's posture against the US by the possibility to limit Washington's capability to influence energy flow to China in a crisis or war (Tamimi, 2022, p.142). China perceives Saudi Arabia as a pivot state in the region and its overall weight is significant from the perspective of China's expanding economic ties, foreign policy and influence. Pivot state means a regional comprehensive power which acts as a hub in the partnership network of China in the region (Sun, 2022, p.302). Saudi Arabia's geo-strategic location is vital in the conduct of BRI both in geographic and economic terms. Neighboring to eight states, Saudi Arabia is located in the central position in the Middle East with a coastal access to Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. Given the potential choke points of Straits of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb, Saudi Arabia can offer logistic options across the peninsula via alternative land and maritime routes in the case of a limited access to global energy markets (Fulton, 2020a, pp.6-7). Saudi Arabia can play a pivotal role in the MENA region (Middle East and North Africa) for China's initiatives and continuous economic transactions. The Kingdom is not only significant from the perspective of China's energy and economic security but its diplomatic (especially with its strong position in the Muslim World) and economic outreach can also play a powerful role in expanding the scope of the BRI to other geographies. Therefore, Saudi Arabia's geo-strategic position offers the options of a continuous and secure oil supply together with growing economic and social ties through the advantages of expanding landscape of the BRI.

Map 2

China's Belt and Road Initiative



Source: European Council on Foreign Relations (2019)

By expanding its partnerships with pivot states such as Saudi Arabia, China does not only aim to secure its economic and energy interests but also seeks to expand its influence and diplomatic prestige to a wider strategic landscape. China's increasing connection with the region through multitude of ties and without targeting a third country also reinforces the legitimacy of its foreign policy targets and instruments. China's discourse of non-interference offers numerous opportunities for those states that face harsh criticisms in their relations with the West. In this respect, China's emphasis on mutual respect and domestic sovereignty was warmly welcomed by Saudi Arabia at a time when George W. Bush administration was propagating democracy promotion in the Middle East (Fulton, 2020b, p. 6). China represents an enthusiastic and pragmatic global partner without conditions on human rights and

with variety of stakes to materialize the Vision 2030. Rather than being bound by the issues of human rights, Saudi Arabia primarily expects to find a long-term partner to realize its Vision with huge volume of investment, funding opportunities, infrastructure expertise and high-tech knowledge.

From the perspective of Saudi Arabia, China firstly stands as a prominent partner for guaranteeing the long-term demand for oil. While China's long-term oil demand makes it an attractive market, it also responds to the Kingdoms' need to diversify its economy by diverse areas and instruments of collaboration. In the areas of energy, the relationship goes beyond the buyer-seller framework with Saudi Aramco's increasing investments in petrochemical projects in China (Suratman, 2024). Not only this, but with a view to alleviate the dependence on a single-commodity, the Kingdom also looks for alternative sectors of renewable and nuclear energy. In this vein, increasing number of joint projects in renewable energy such as Sino-Saudi joint ventures in building solar power plants in Saudi Arabia is remarkable (Reuters, 2024). In the case of Riyadh's consideration of nuclear energy, China responds positively to build nuclear power station in the Kingdom, whereas the US side insists on placing curbs on the use of nuclear technology (Al-Atrush, 2023).

The synergy between the Vision 2030 and the BRI seems promising both for diversification of Saudi economy and realization of its projects. China stands as a vital investment and trade partner of Saudi Arabia and thus offers new investment and financial opportunities as well as high-tech support to diversify economy and materialize Vision 2030. China offers its expertise on digital infrastructure and has the capacity to facilitate the construction of smart cities under Saudi Vision. Under the context of Sino-Saudi partnership, the components of Saudi's expectations can be realized without conditions on the issues of human rights but under the rising suspicions of its historical ally, the US. While all the economic, energy and high-tech opportunities can satisfy the Saudi Vision 2030, still these fell short of guaranteeing Saudi's critical security concerns in the region. On the one hand, the Chinese option brings an opportunity to hedge between the two global powers and to designate a more autonomous and robust politics that will be more independent from the influence of the West. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia continues to be one of the most prominent partners of the US and security needs of the Kingdom still depends on the US security architecture. Although the US plays the role of a predominant arms supplier to Saudi Arabia, China's arms transfers to the Kingdom has increased approximately 400 % between the years 2016-2020 as compared to the period between 2011-2015 (Ali, 2022). In parallel to the developing Sino-Saudi relations in the defense sector, the US side has lifted its ban on offensive weapon sales to the Kingdom, as well as reaching the final stage of concluding a comprehensive defense agreement with Saudi Arabia (Ali, 2024). Since China seems to be incapable of providing security in the region, the US will likely to remain a vital security partner of the Kingdom for the near future. Therefore, at this stage rather than taking provocative actions, a balanced approach between the two global powers and carefully managed relations can produce beneficial results from the perspective of Saudi foreign policy.

Strategic Outlook: The Possible Implications of the Sino-Saudi CSP

The trend of catalyzing the ties between Saudi Arabia and China implies far reaching consequences that go beyond the Middle East to the Central Asia. It is seen that Saudi Arabia, as a rising regional power in Türkiye's nearby geography, has recently made a serious breakthrough and diversified its collaborations through number of projects. The partnership relation with China is important in terms of understanding both the degree of affecting Saudi Arabia's role as a regional power and the extent of expanding China's sphere of influence as a global power. Not only this, but also the enlarging geography of the collaboration is noteworthy. Since Saudi Arabia and China deepen their collaboration by embarking on variety of joint projects in Central Asia, such as energy projects in Uzbekistan, then the scale of cooperation is also significant from the perspective of engagement in the Central Asian

geopolitics (Lucente, 2024). In this part of the study, the possible far-reaching implications of the Sino-Saudi CSP are discussed under the framework of Türkiye, the Middle East and the Central Asia.

Türkiye

With its geo-strategic location and dynamic economy Türkiye stands as an important regional power that can play a significant role in the BRI. The ambitious projects of BRI and Türkiye's Middle Corridor offer a high potential to promote range of opportunities through trans-continental transactions. With a view to facilitate economic development and further areas of collaboration, Türkiye continuous to develop the links such as between the Silk Road and Turkish seaports in the Black Sea and Mediterranean (Colakoğlu, 2019). In this respect, the issues of the development of the BRI in Türkiye's near geography and the position of Saudi Arabia both in the BRI and in its relations with China are closely related with Türkiye's long-term regional policy and its relations with China.

Saudi Arabia's geo-strategic location and its significance within the Middle Eastern politics occupy one of a primary place in discussing the Sino-Saudi CSP. Situated in Türkiye's near geography, Saudi Arabia plays the role of an ambitious regional power which has the capacity to expand its influence beyond the Middle Eastern geography. In this respect, while Saudi Arabia's collaboration with a rising global power China can facilitate its economic development and increase its influence, a well-played hedging strategy between the two global powers can further leverage its position in and beyond the region.

Under the context of transforming international system and volatile regional dynamics, enhancing Sino-Saudi relations can multiply Saudi affect through strengthening its pivot role in the region. Since Türkiye also stands as another prominent pivot state in the region, China's rising interest in Saudi Arabia, its investment and other funding opportunities for the Vision 2030 can be instrumental in turning Saudi Arabia into a major pivot state in the region. In this respect, Türkiye can consider Sino-Saudi CSP under the conditions of diverse strategic collaborations and accelerating competition in the region.

The Middle East

Saudi Arabia is a significant regional actor in the Middle East both through the factors of geostrategic location, economy, oil and its position in the Muslim World. The development of relations under the realization of joint projects can offer economic prospects not only for bilateral relations but also for the other states in the region. This can provide an opportunity for Arab states to diversify their economies and escape from chronic vulnerabilities.

In the context of transforming dynamics of international system, China increases its ties with the region which is visible in the number of partnerships. China has already established strategic partnership relations with Iraq, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar while it has established comprehensive strategic partnership with Iran and United Arab Emirates. Therefore, China effectively taking the advantage of this new type of relation as an instrument to reinforce its economic interests not only with Saudi Arabia but with the region as a whole. In the long run, this process can produce increasing Chinese economic stakes and influence, more roboust economies of the region and more autonomous polices independent of the Western influence. With the opportunity of diversifying their partners, investment and trade, the Arab states can strengthen their economies which in turn can reinforce multiplication of foreign policy choices. By reducing their dependencies on the West, these states can take more autonomous decisions in the long run.

The Central Asia

Under the framework of Central Asian politics, the increasing collaboration between Saudi Arabia and China reinforces controversial questions on the nature of their investments and projects. Since the region is historically dominated by Russia and China both politically and economically, then Central Asian states are eager to capitalize on alternatives to reduce their reliance on these two states and to diversify their economies as well as their partners. In that vein, while Saudi Arabia offers the opportunity to diversify their partnership on the one hand, its increasing collaboration with China and their joint projects in Central Asia can rise the questions on the dynamics and the limitations of partnership with regard to Chinese stakes on the other hand.

Some argues that the possible increase of Saudi influence in the Central Asian landscape can be welcomed by China to some extent. Expansion of Saudi presence can be instrumental in undermining the influence of the West and Türkiye, and in maintaining unchallenged relations with the major powers in the region (Panfilova, 2023). From another point, under the geopolitical calculations of China, whether it can try to change the investor behavior in the Middle East and constrain their influence in the Central Asia through its investment and partnership policies stands as a significant question to be asked. Especially, since Saudi Arabia's oil industry received nearly 70% of Chinese investment in the Gulf between 2020-2023, making Riyadh particularly susceptible to Chinese retaliation in any case (Dinçer, 2024), then the depth and the vulnerabilities of this relationship can mean possible consequences for the region and Saudi Arabia's policies.

Conclusion

In recent years, the Sino-Saudi relations have taken a significant way to transform from a one-dimensional bilateral relation to a structure of comprehensive strategic partnership. The Sino-Saudi relations is symbolical to understand the states' response to changing dynamics and context of the international system. As a new form of inter-state alignment, the number of strategic partnerships has increased profoundly and states highly utilized partnership diplomacy to realize their interests and to maintain greater degree of autonomy in their patterns of relations.

Rather than being restricted by the rigid structure of alliances, states prefer to rely on more pragmatic and flexible channels of partnerships in the post-Cold War era. In the absence of identification of any "enemy" and with an increasing focus on attaining specific material foreign policy goals, the strategic partnerships become well-suited to respond to global power shifts and diffusion of power. In the 21st century, under the context of Sino-Saudi CSP the term "strategic" goes well beyond to encompass the expanding areas of collaboration in economic, energy, digital, cultural, and other areas to offer long-term, interest-based relations with a stress on states sovereignty and identity. As opposed to the contested functions of Western-oriented multilateral institutions and conditions, bilateral solutions under different levels of partnerships become more attractive to states.

The transformation of the Sino-Saudi relations to CSP reveals the level of significance attached to the bilateral relations and mutual interests by both parties. Despite their diverse social structures, ideologies and foreign policies, their pragmatic and goal-driven approach facilitates the progress in the CSP. With a special focus on the projects of BRI and Vision 2030, the structure of the CSP both enlarges by diversification of collaboration and deepens by the mechanisms that are established to institutionalize the relations. Partners mutual expectations are instrumental in both realizing their own agendas and in deepening the scope of the collaboration. Under the context of the Saudi Arabia's geo-strategic location and pivot role in the region China utilizes the CSP with a view to extend the geography of the BRI and its sphere of influence. By partnering with a rising global power, China, Riyadh aims

to guarantee a long-term market for its oil, diversify its economy, benefit from a Chinese high-tech expertise and materialize the Vision 2030. In their foreign policy goals, while the expansion of the BRI can reinforce Chinese identity as a global power, the Vision 2030 can be instrumental in reinforcing Saudi Arabia's increasing regional role that goes beyond the region.

The Saudi-Chinese CSP can have further strategic implications in the long run. From the perspective of Türkiye, the developments in its near geography are significant under the context of regional dynamics. As a pivot country it can evaluate increasing Sino-Saudi collaboration from the aspects of diverse strategic collaborations and accelerating competition in the region. For the states of the region, increased Chinese presence through the instruments of partnerships can offer alternative prospects to the region. The expanding areas of collaboration can contribute to the development of the economies and can facilitate the escape from chronic vulnerabilities and dependencies in the long run. By offering alternative visions, investment, and trade opportunities this process can result in strengthening their economies and proliferate foreign policy choices. However, still the security architecture of Saudi Arabia and the region depends on the US and China seems reluctant and incapable to play this role in the near future. Therefore, while becoming a strong partner in the region China still falls short of responding to the most vital dynamics of the region. Lastly, China increasingly plays an active role in the Central Asian landscape and the Sino-Saudi CSP can have some implications in the long-run. On the one hand, increasing Saudi stake through joint projects can be instrumental in undermining the influence of the West and Türkiye in the region. On the other hand, whether Chinese investments in the Kingdom can play an instrumental role in influencing Saudi engagement in the region can be discussed as another issue. Since the conventional forms of alignments are transforming to respond to the volatile structure of the international system, then diverse strategic instruments under new partnership structures in expanding geographies can play a more influential role in the future of relations.

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