

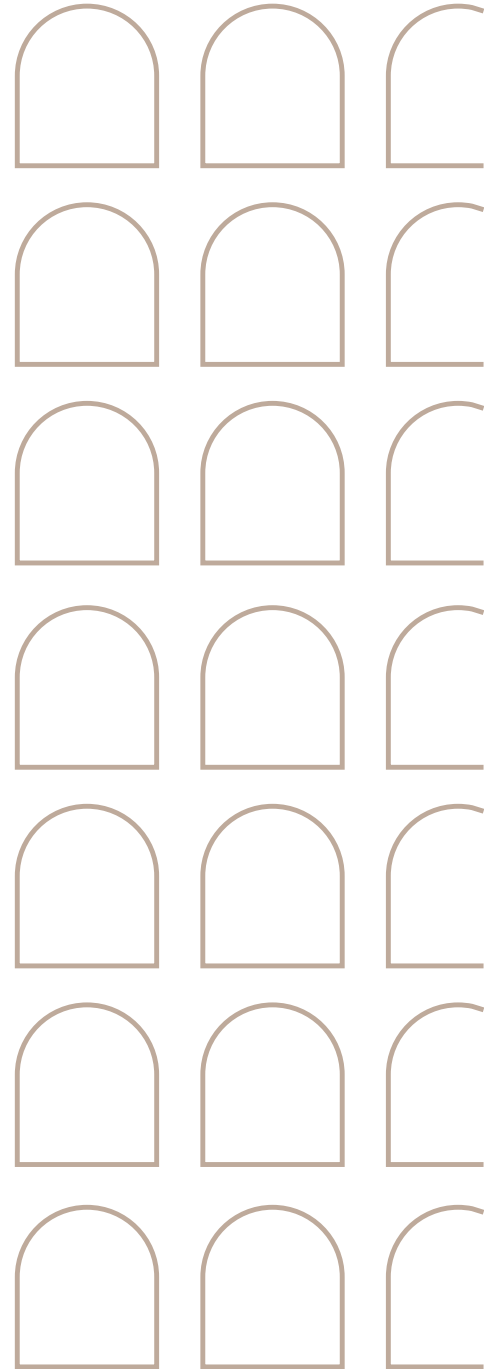
STG Policy Papers

POLICY BRIEF

**WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES
FOR MIDDLE POWERS, SUCH AS
THE KINGDOM OF SAUDI
ARABIA, OF A MULTI-ORDER
FUTURE?**

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IN MEMORY OF JACOPO GIORGIO

The following policy brief was written by our beloved friend, Jaco. The STG John Ruggie cohort expresses its gratitude to have met such a special person. We hold on to all the dear memories of our time spent together in the city he cherished most, Firenze.

“To live in hearts we leave behind is not to die.”
(Thomas Campbell)

The Ruggie cohort, class of 2024, Master in Transnational Governance

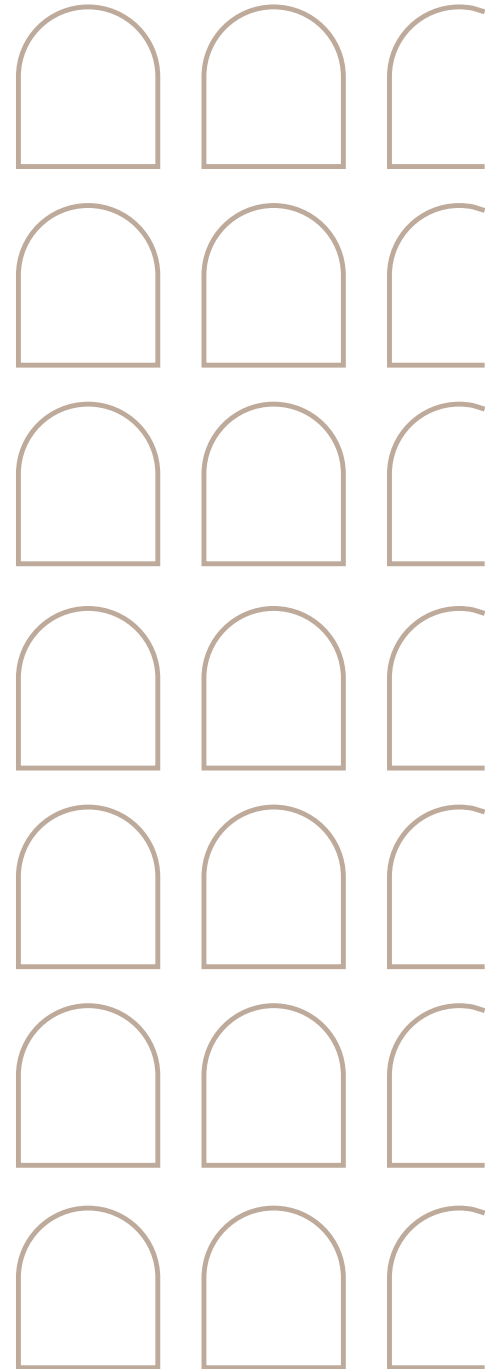
Jacopo was a wonderful human being, a dear colleague to his fellow students, and has left a terrible void to his family and friends. He was also a remarkable scholar to those of us who had the opportunity to teach and learn from him. As a small tribute to his intellectual legacy, and in his honour and memory, we’ve therefore decided to publish one of the term essays written during his time at the Florence STG.

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1. THE KING AND THE PARIAH

After the Cold War, the rules-based global order extended its reach, centring more on democracy and human rights. While not universally embraced, these liberal values were considered enduring, boasting global appeal because of their norms and inclusivity. There seemed to be no compelling alternatives, making this order open for all to participate. A prevailing belief was that most nations would gain from its regulations and have a voice via multilateral institutions. However, recent times have replaced this optimism with growing unease and caution.¹ The expansion of liberal values at the core of the international order also increased the discontent of those who were not fond of those liberal values from the beginning but still benefitted from being part of the order. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been one of these countries: an absolute monarchy with strict religious laws, illiberal by nature, but still one of the closest allies of the leader of the liberal international order, the United States (US). However, as the liberal nature of the international order became more central to the international order and the pressure to adhere to liberal norms and values more felt, the relationship between Washington and Riyadh gradually became increasingly uneasy. Yet, for the Kingdom, there was no alternative on the horizon. Thus, it had to bandwagon with the US regardless. However, with the rise of China, things started to change, and space for autonomy and contestation gradually opened. Saudi Arabia is thus hedging its bets under the US security umbrella while flirting with China and Chinese-led institutions.

The essay will start by analysing the evolution of the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the US amidst the change going on in the liberal international order, introducing the concept of liberal intrusiveness. It will then explain why a space for contesting the liberal intrusiveness opened for Saudi Arabia, by looking at the growing relationship with Beijing. Ultimately, it will draw some conclusions on the consequences of the changing international order towards a multi-order future for middle powers such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

2. ON THE HEDGE OF THE LIO

Börzel and Zürn argue that the 1990s saw a systemic shift from a thin liberal post-World War II international order of liberal multilateralism (LIO I) to a post-Cold War international order of postnational liberalism (LIO II). According to the scholars, postnational liberalism is substantially more intrusive than liberal multilateralism. Hence, a more felt liberal intrusiveness leads to an increased level and variety of contestation² and can also cast shadows on traditional alliances.

During the Cold War, with LIO I, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia had little choice but to support the United States' geopolitical goals. While the Kingdom has undoubtedly never been fond of liberal values, shared enemies and complementary economic needs made them partners by default. Common interests substituted for common values.³

The relationship between Washington and Riyadh started in 1938 when the Arabian American Oil Company (later to be called

1 Flockhart, T. (2018). A Multi-Order World? *RSA Journal*, 164(3 (5575)), p.26.

2 Börzel, T., & Zürn, M. (2021). Contestations of the Liberal International Order/ From Liberal Multilateralism to Postnational Liberalism. *International Organization*, 75(2), pp.282-284.

3 Gause, F. (2023). The kingdom and the power/ how to salvage the u.s.-saudi relationship. *Foreign Affairs*, 102(1), p.117.

Aramco) first struck oil in commercial quantities. The Kingdom's unparalleled oil resources laid the foundations of the relationship. Over the following decades, control of Aramco and its revenues passed by steps from American into Saudi hands, but Washington's attention remained strong. The Americans eventually concluded that their ultimate national interest in the Persian Gulf was to keep out unfriendly hands. For the Saudis, never confident of their ability to defend their borders but determined to secure the integrity and sovereignty of the Kingdom and their hold on power within it, the US was the only possible security provider. The result has been a continuous American military presence from the end of the Second World War to the present.⁴

The only instance where their alignment diverged significantly was regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict. This discord resulted in the watershed moment of the oil embargo of 1973–74. This disruption caused panic buying, a fourfold increase in oil prices, and a substantial shift in power dynamics within the oil market. Saudi Arabia and other producer countries started calling the shots. Saudi policies directly impacted the American economy, prompting Washington to threaten military intervention. However, diplomacy intervened, ending the war and initiating the negotiations that ultimately led to the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty of 1979, averting the crisis.⁵ The embargo highlighted the boundaries within the relationship for both parties involved. Subsequent American administrations, acknowledging the risk of another crisis, sought their own Middle East peace

initiatives. The Saudis, in later Israeli-Arab conflicts, avoided wielding the oil weapon, seemingly apprehensive about the negative impact of a renewed embargo on the oil market in the long run. They considered both its severe repercussions on Western economies and the potential boost it might give to developing alternative energy sources. There was also a concern about a hasty American response to such actions.⁶

As oil became an increasingly salient issue for US policymakers in the following years, maintaining good relations with the Saudis became an increasingly vital bipartisan goal. Cooperation grew during the 1980s, as the two countries cooperated against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and reached its peak during the Gulf War of 1990–91, which coincided with the end of the Cold War and demonstrated the utility of the bilateral relationship to both sides.⁷

However, the US unipolar moment and the shift to postnational liberalism brought even deeper cleavage than the 1973-74 embargo. As Börzel and Zürn recognize, LIO II intrusiveness is accentuated by moments of crisis, which function as an accelerator and transparency mechanism for liberal international authority.⁸ The devastating terrorist attacks of 9/11, which included 15 Saudi hijackers, rearranged regional politics and dealt a stunning blow to U.S.-Saudi relations. Suddenly, on the defensive, the Saudis quickly stabilised oil prices and then severed relations with the Taliban as the United States prepared to carry its war onto Afghanistan. Nonetheless, a wave of harshly critical commentary from journalists, commentators, and Congressmen pointed

4 Pollack, J. (2002) Saudi Arabia and the United States, 1931-2002. *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 6, No. 3, pp.78-81.

5 Gause, F. (2023). pp.117-118.

6 Pollack, J. (2002) pp.81-83.

7 Gause, F. (2023). p.118.

8 Börzel, T., & Zürn, M. (2021) p.288.

out the limits of Saudi cooperation and attributed the rise of al-Qaeda to Saudi decisions to encourage virulent anti-Americanism.⁹ During the subsequent "war on terror", Washington was the only power in town, and Riyadh backed US initiatives even when the Kingdom publicly questioned their wisdom,¹⁰ most notably during the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which increased suspicions that the LIO II mainly served the national interest of the hegemon.¹¹

Furthermore, postnational liberalism pushes states to respect human rights, the rule of law, and democratic principles, placing universal liberal ideas over popular sovereignty.¹² This push has become more felt in Riyadh during and after the Arab Springs, causing tension in the close relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia. In the words of the then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton: *Democracies make for stronger and stabler partners. [...] Opening political systems, societies, and economies is not simply a matter of idealism. It is a strategic necessity.*¹³ Coming from their closest allies, words like these must have shaken King Abdullah.

Nevertheless, Washington remained the only available option as a security provider. Thus, despite increased liberal intrusiveness and the fear of abandonment spurred by Obama's Pivot to Asia, contestation remained far to be seen, and the Kingdom had no choice but to follow the US, who provided them with security shelter and no

alternative was yet to be visible. With the Trump Administration, the liberal intrusiveness might have been less felt, but when missile and drone attacks were launched on Saudi oil facilities in September 2019, the Trump administration did nothing, despite the rhetoric of friendship it had fostered with Riyadh.¹⁴ Thus, discontent in the Kingdom was increasingly growing, as the liberal intrusiveness was no longer matched with an automatic security shelter.

3. AN ALTERNATIVE ON THE HORIZON

During his presidential campaign, Biden echoed Obama's strategy by pledging to withdraw from the Middle East and shift focus to China. He committed to rejoining the nuclear deal with Iran, ending the Yemen conflict, and treating Saudi Arabia as a "pariah" state. In his initial year as President, Biden released an intelligence report implicating Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (MBS) in Jamal Khashoggi's murder, disclosed a 9/11 report potentially linking Saudi Arabia, withheld precision missiles for Saudi's Yemen war, engaged in Iran nuclear deal talks, and avoided communication with MBS. However, failure to revive the Iran deal and Russia's Ukraine invasion made Biden refocus priorities. Struggling to stabilise the energy market without the Gulf states' cooperation, Biden reluctantly visited Saudi Arabia in the summer of 2022, seeking increased oil production.¹⁵ The President received a sound 'no' from the Kingdom.

9 Pollack, J. (2002) pp.89-91.

10 Gause, F. (2023). p.118.

11 Börzel, T., & Zürn, M. (2021). p.288.

12 *Ibid.* p.287.

13 Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, November 7, 2011. Available at: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/11/176750.htm>

14 Gause, F. (2023) p.120.

15 Alghannam, H. and Yaghi, M. (2022) Biden's Trip to Saudi Arabia: Successes and Failures. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/87662>

For the first time since their relationship started in the mid-twentieth century, Riyadh was not aligned with Washington's grand strategy.

A few months after Biden's visit, President Xi Jinping visited Riyadh in December. The cordial meeting contrasted sharply with President Joe Biden's encounter with Crown Prince MBS, followed by Saudi Arabia's decision to reduce oil production, much to Biden's dismay. This visit marked the fifth visit of a Chinese president to the Kingdom, starting with Jiang Zemin in 1999, contributing to a progressively deeper and broader bilateral relationship. Over the past century, the KSA and the PRC have strengthened their ties, and Xi's visit continued that trend. It went beyond merely responding to perceived missteps by the US. It showed that Saudi Arabia and the region's other countries are not without options, and they will continue to leverage their increased strategic importance for global stakeholders to gain the best of both worlds.¹⁶

Indeed, systemic shifts since the 1960s significantly shaped Saudi–China relations. Initially constrained by ideological and geopolitical differences, their connection evolved as China prioritised economic development, altering its Middle East policies and establishing diplomatic ties with Saudi Arabia in 1990. The post-Cold War era further strengthened their bond amid mutual support for the US-led global order and China's economic integration.¹⁷

After that, China's growing interest in the region was driven by its need for energy resources, expanding trade, infrastructure investments, and pivotal location for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). American military preponderance in the Persian Gulf has provided China with a low-cost entry into the region, allowing it to develop its deeper presence without a corresponding security role.¹⁸

China pursued a non-interference policy in the region, historically capitalising on America's security role to extend its economic influence.¹⁹ Thus, Gulf states view its economic solutions positively, providing opportunities to strengthen their economies and diversify income sources. On the security side, while the US restricts arms sales to maintain regional balance, China has been more willing to supply military equipment, such as advanced missile systems and drone technology.²⁰

China's diplomatic approach in the Gulf differs from Western interventionist policies. It emphasises economic ties, partnership diplomacy, and non-interference in internal affairs, offering an alternative narrative for cooperation that suits Saudi's interests.²¹ Beijing's principle of non-interference in other states' internal affairs stands in sharp contrast with the liberal intrusiveness of LIO II, and it is one of the building pillars of the relationship between the People's Republic and the Kingdom. Indeed, Saudi Arabia has reciprocated such a principle concerning China's ethnic minorities policies and Islam:

16 Atlantic Council Experts (2022) What Xi Jinping's Saudi Arabia visit means for the Middle East. Atlantic Council.

Available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/what-xi-jinpings-saudi-arabia-visit-means-for-the-middle-east/>

17 Duan, X., and Aldamer, S. (2022). The Saudi Arabia–China relationship at a crossroad: A neoclassical realist analysis. *Asian Politics and Policy*, 14(4), pp.117-119.

18 Fulton, J. (2020) China in the Persian Gulf. In Kamrava, M. (Ed.). *Routledge Handbook of Persian Gulf Politics* (1st ed.). Routledge. p.492.

19 Da Vinha, L. (2022) The Sino-American Rivalry and Arabian Gulf Security. *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, Vol. 08, No. 03n04, pp.218-220.

20 *Ibid.* pp.227-242.

21 Chaziza, M. (2023). The Non-interference Principle and the BRI Grand Strategy in the GCC. *China Report*, 59(1), pp.45-53.

Riyadh initially echoed criticisms but, during Crown Prince MBS's 2019 visit to Beijing, conveyed support for China's 'antiterrorism measures', leading to a muted stance on the Xinjiang issues.²² Economic pragmatism trumps any other possible controversial issue in the relationship.

Therefore, at the moment, China is the greatest alternative on the horizon for Saudi Arabia. Even if it will not replace Washington as a security provider for Riyadh soon, Beijing gives the Kingdom the leverage it needs to contest the liberal intrusiveness of postnational liberalism. It opens the way for contestation of the liberal agenda of the LIO II. Following Börzel and Zürn and their different variety of contestation, it can be argued that Saudi Arabia is following a strategy of 'pushback', which is a strategy to reduce liberal international authority from the inside.²³ In fact, the Kingdom does not necessarily reject key institutions of the LIO, but targets the liberal content within them. For instance, taking two resolutions of the United Nations General Assembly, i.e. ES-11/1 of 2 March 2022, condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine and demanding a full withdrawal, and ES-11/3 of 7 April 2022, suspending the Russian Federation from the Human Rights Council, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia voted in favour of the former while it abstained from the latter.

As Saudi Arabia grapples with geopolitical recalibrations and the shifting tides of global alliances, the emergence of a new landscape of international relations is defining a change in the structure of the international order. The Kingdom finds itself at a critical crossroads, balancing its historical ties with the United States against

the evolving appeal of a growing partnership with China. This juncture underscores the transformative nature of global dynamics.

4. NAVIGATING A MULTI-ORDER FUTURE

In the face of the growing discontent with LIO II and the increasing contestation from both the outside and the inside, there are significant signs that the international order is transforming. Scholars have questioned themselves on what order is in the making. Among them, Flockhart has contended that the new international system will be characterised by a diffusion of power and a diversity of ideas and identities, defining a multi-order future where the LIO is only one of the existing orders. In a multi-order future, the primary dynamics are likely to be within and between different orders rather than between multiple sovereign states, and relationships are likely to be inter-organizational, transnational, or supranational, increasingly taking place within regional or order-specific secondary institutions.²⁴

As Flockhart notes, the challenge in a multi-order world will be to reach a global consensus on how to meet collective challenges while accepting diversity in domestic and order-specific affairs.²⁵ The answer is probably the economic pragmatism of a system that will be more regional, de-centred, and influenced by the convergence of economic principles through different forms of capitalism while being characterised by increased divergence in political ideology and religious belief and diverse forms of

22 Duan, X., and Aldamer, S. (2022). pp.119-124.

23 Börzel, T., & Zürn, M. (2021). pp.290.

24 Flockhart, T. (2016) The coming multi-order world. *Contemporary Security Policy*, 37/1, pp. 23-26.

25 Flockhart, T. (2018). p.31.

domestic governance structures.²⁶ As the narrative of international relations shifts from a state-centric focus to one encompassing inter-organizational and transnational dynamics, Riyadh's engagement in regional and order-specific secondary institutions like the BRICS, of which is becoming a member, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, of which is a dialogue partner, exemplifies a strategic embrace of economic pragmatism within a diversifying global landscape. In this sense, even though the Kingdom still seems reluctant to abandon for good the security benefits of the friendship with Washington and fully enter a new cluster of more like-minded states, Riyadh is already adopting some of the practices and institutions of the leading state of a different order.

What is sure is that the global balance of power has shifted. Washington's relative influence is weakening as the international order changes, making middle-power countries such as Saudi Arabia more likely to hedge their bets and less likely to bandwagon with just one great power. For moderately powerful states, such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, navigating a multi-order world increases their strategic agency and reasserts their autonomy instead of being only at the receiving end of the influence of this or that superpower.

In this sense, the evolving Saudi-US relationship amid the changing global order illustrates a critical shift. Initially based on shared interests rather than values, tensions arose due to increased US pressure regarding liberal values. With its non-interference and economic focus, China's emergence as an alternative attracted Saudi Arabia. This signifies a multi-order future in international relations, where diverse

alliances and institutions are pivotal. Saudi Arabia's engagement in various global forums signals a strategic shift toward economic pragmatism and autonomy. Therefore, the changing global power balance allows middle-power nations like Saudi Arabia to navigate diverse alliances, showcasing their autonomy in a multi-order world. As Riyadh balances ties with the US and embraces partnerships with China and others, it mirrors the evolving dynamics of international relations beyond the influence of a single superpower towards a multi-order future.

²⁶ Flockhart, T. (2016) pp.23-26.

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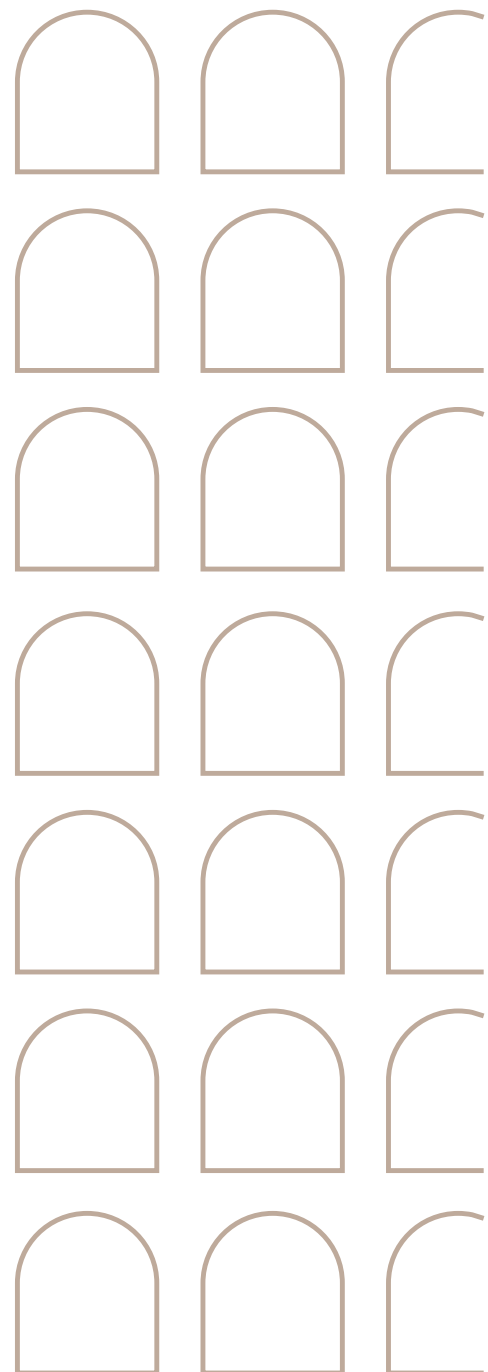
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