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SPECIAL SECTION

The benefits of neutrality: Saudi foreign policy in the wake of the Ukraine war

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Abstract

This article assesses Saudi Arabia's ambivalent response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. On the one hand, the Kingdom has publicly condemned Russia's military aggression as contravening international law. Yet, on the other, it has also failed to take serious measures against Moscow, notably by refusing to join in Western attempts to prevent Russia from earning hydrocarbon revenues on the international market. Saudi Arabia has adopted a neutral position instead, offering to mediate between the warring parties while simultaneously repeatedly rebuffing its longtime ally the United States. By reviewing the Kingdom's foreign policy moves and narratives since the war's onset, it is argued Saudi officials are acting perfectly rationally in that they strive to achieve the optimum outcome as per their definition of Saudi national interests in this conflict, thereby pressing ahead with the diversification of Saudi foreign policy initiated roughly one decade earlier. In concluding, the implications of the Kingdom's stance on the war for future global order-making are discussed.

1 | SAUDI ARABIA'S STANCE ON THE RUSSIA–UKRAINE WAR

Saudi Arabia's likely positioning on Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was difficult to interpret initially, including for some of its own public intellectuals – whose early readings of the conflict suggested that Riyadh would take an anti-Russian stance (al-Rashed, 2022; Bannan, 2022). Such an interpretation was not ill-founded. Roughly 1 week into the war, on 2 March 2022, the Kingdom voted in favour of adopting United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/RES/ES-11/1 calling for an immediate end to Russia's illegal use of force in, and withdrawal of troops from, Ukraine. Later, it sustained its position by supporting comparable resolutions such as the one adopted on 12 October 2022 (A/RES/ES-11/4), which condemned Russia's illegal referendums and annexations in Ukraine. Likewise, Saudi officials, including the crown prince and de facto ruler Muhammad bin Salman, reiterated their firm commitment to the principles of international law, particularly

concerning the need to respect the sovereignty of states and abstain from the use of force in settling disputes, while recurrently stressing the exigency to support humanitarian efforts in Ukraine (al-Hamid, 2022; *Asharq al-Awsat*, 2023). Following up on the latter, the Kingdom pledged to provide Ukraine with USD 400 million in humanitarian aid in February 2023 (The Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2022).

To the detriment of those states cooperating within the framework of the Ukraine Defence Contact Group, however, Saudi Arabia has also refused to take any serious action against Russia. For instance, the Kingdom abstained from voting on UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/ES-11/3 calling for Russia's suspension from the Human Rights Council on 8 April 2022; it has refrained from isolating Russia diplomatically; and, importantly, it has continued to co-operate with Russia within OPEC+ to manage global oil production. In this, the Kingdom even snubbed the United States by ignoring its repeated calls for the Saudis to leverage their dominant position so as to

lower oil prices by releasing spare capacity. Instead, OPEC+ decided to cut oil production by two million barrels per day on 5 October 2022, thereby increasing global oil prices – and, by implication, Russian revenues (Coates Ulrichsen et al., 2022). This decision caused a shock in the United States which ‘was more geopolitical than economic’, for it suggested the special Saudi–US relationship had entered a new phase in which the Kingdom would no longer ‘automatically side with the United States on grand strategic issues’ (Gause, 2023, p. 115, 123).

Yet the realignment of Saudi–US relations and, by extension, the Kingdom's lenient response to the Russian invasion did not come without advance notice. Regardless of its voting behaviour at the UN, the Kingdom – which, unlike other Middle East states, was less dependent on wheat imports from the Black Sea region (Al-Saidi, 2023) – settled on the adoption of a neutral position. Only in May 2023 would Minister of Foreign Affairs Faysal bin Farhan officially acknowledge that stance, holding that Saudi Arabia had adopted ‘positive neutrality’ during the war (*Al Arabiya*, 2023). However, Muhammad bin Salman had alluded to such a proclivity already on 3 March 2022 in phone talks with Russian president Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky by proposing that Saudi Arabia could play the role of mediator (*Al Arabiya*, 2022). Acting on this and analogous suggestions, Saudi diplomacy has sought to mediate between the warring parties and their allies by facilitating prisoner exchanges or by hosting peace talks, for example, in Jeddah in August 2023 (Pradhan, 2023).

The Saudi leadership has done so because it anticipates that neutrality is the best way to achieve its domestic, regional and international goals, notably concerning its aim to establish the Kingdom as a rising power in a post-unipolar international order. While selectively invoking international law and humanitarian concerns to justify its ambiguous stance, Saudi foreign policy has acted perfectly rationally in that it strives to achieve the optimum outcome as per its leadership's definition of Saudi national interests. Therefore, the Saudi response to the Ukraine war might be best described as oscillating between ‘varied consequentialism’ and ‘strategic opportunism’ (Brosig & Verma, 2024).

2 | THE UKRAINE WAR AS A CATALYST FOR SAUDI FOREIGN POLICY DIVERSIFICATION

The Kingdom's position on the war must be understood against the backdrop of its strategic goal to diversify foreign policy (Ramani, 2023). Up until about the time of the 2011 Arab uprisings, the Kingdom had almost exclusively relied on the United States as a provider of regional security. However, the Barack Obama

administration's strategic ‘Pivot to Asia’ as well as its willingness to conclude in 2015 an agreement (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) on the nuclear programme of Iran, Saudi Arabia's main regional adversary, prompted the Kingdom's leadership to reconsider its security dependence on the United States. Doubts hardened further during the presidency of Donald Trump, who failed to adequately respond to an alleged Iranian drone attack on Saudi Aramco facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais in 2019, as well as under President Joe Biden, who during his electoral campaign had promised to make Saudi Arabia a global ‘pariah’ following the assassination of dissident Jamal Khashoggi in 2018. All this led to heightened bitterness towards, and mistrust of, the Kingdom's longtime ally (Alyahya, 2022).

Well before the full-scale war in Ukraine started, then, Saudi Arabia had already begun to hedge its bets by strategically upgrading its relations with China and Russia (Demmelhuber, 2019). The warming of Saudi relations with the latter began in the wake of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, which both Moscow and Riyadh disapproved of. But the enhancing of Saudi–Russian relations would only gain momentum after the coming to power of King Salman and his son, Crown Prince Muhammad, in 2015, with the two countries envisaging joint endeavours in the fields of defence and nuclear technology as well as high-level cooperation between their respective sovereign wealth funds (Mason, 2023, pp. 194–213; Muraviev, 2023). The fact that trade relations between both sides not only continued amidst Western sanctions against Russia but also saw the latter's fuel-oil exports to Saudi Arabia hit record volumes (Katz, 2023, p. 113; Lerh, 2023) is just one indication of how the diversification of Saudi foreign policy is accelerating apace.

Two factors especially drove Saudi calculations regarding the conscious intensification of relations with Russia. Firstly, and despite the tensions (which have significantly eased recently) between the Kingdom and Russia owing to their support of opposing factions in the Syrian Civil War, the former had come to see the latter as an incremental asset in terms of its regional security interests. For one thing, engaging with Russia was deemed a viable avenue to make the United States revisit its (so-perceived) waning security commitment to the Middle East. For another, upgrading relations with Russia, whose major regional ally was and indeed still is Iran, was seen by the Saudi leadership as a way ‘to give Moscow incentives to take their interests into account, and not back Tehran against them’ (Katz, 2022). Furthermore, in the face of increasing US Congress opposition to Washington's continued support for Saudi Arabia's military intervention in Yemen, the Kingdom's policymakers had become more and more frustrated with the United States' failure to comprehend, and ultimately accept,

their security concerns in the immediate neighbourhood (Roberts, 2023, p. 67) – unlike, indeed, Russia.

In what is likely to mirror the Saudi leadership's own assessment, for instance, Salih bin Muhammad al-Khathlan, Professor of Political Science at King Saud University, likened the Kingdom's intervention in Yemen in 2015 to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, stating that both states were effectively driven by legitimate security concerns. It was the demise of US hegemony which 'offered an opportunity for Riyadh and Moscow to ... upgrade relations to an advanced level, based on their belief that restoring regional stability must take priority' (al-Khathlan, 2022). It is also in this context that one could interpret those parts of Muhammad bin Salman's speech given during the Arab League summit in Jeddah on 19 May 2023: namely, as addressing 'our neighbouring countries and our friends in East and West', reminding them 'that we will not allow our region to turn into conflict zones' (*Asharq al-Awsat*, 2023).

Secondly, Saudi Arabia needs Russia (and vice versa) to administer the global oil market in accordance with its interests. Put differently, to hit their targets Saudi Arabia and Russia must act in concert within OPEC+ – which, on a side note, came into being in 2016 in the wake of the shale oil boom and the massive surge in US oil production. Although both states have had their disagreements within the organisation in the past (Krauss & Kurmanaev, 2023), they are still natural partners in this, for only if they pull together within OPEC+ can they achieve high oil prices and maximise export revenues. From a Saudi point of view, then, there are few good reasons for why the Kingdom should forfeit oil revenues in the face of the nearing post-hydrocarbon age. Depriving Russia of badly needed oil gains at its own expense apparently is insufficient motivation for so doing. Rather, the Kingdom needs oil revenues itself not only to achieve its ambitious yet costly foreign policy goals in and beyond the Middle East but also on domestic grounds to ensure regime stability. In this respect, the Saudi 'Vision 2030' might be an important step towards diversifying the national economy and making it less dependent on oil revenues. To balance the costs of economic transformation, however, hinges on a high-yielding hydrocarbon sector for now at least.

When substantiating its OPEC+ decision of October 2022, the Kingdom stressed to the Biden administration that its underlying deliberations were not political but 'purely economic', and ultimately of benefit to global economic stability (Reuters, 2022; Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). Notwithstanding such assertions, the message sent to Washington was, if unintentionally, that the United States could not bank on the Kingdom in a war that Biden had defined as 'a battle between democracy and autocracy' (The White House, 2022). Also, how the Kingdom would henceforth cooperate with the United States only if it was in

its own genuine interest to do so (Gause, 2023, p. 123). Undoubtedly, rebuffing the United States' requests on this and other occasions considerably boosted the popularity of the Kingdom and its crown prince, who was said to have gained 'an importance that no Arab leader has had since Nasser' (Rabih, 2023).

3 | REPERCUSSIONS FOR GLOBAL ORDER-MAKING

The decisions taken in Saudi Arabia following Russia's invasion of Ukraine have had considerable international ramifications, although it is still too early to fully assess their impact on a global order in flux. To begin with, the Kingdom's behaviour within OPEC+ has helped alleviate Russian budgetary pressures created by the tightening of the Western sanctions regime. In doing so, it has contributed to keeping Russia afloat and capable of continuing its military campaign in Ukraine – which, for all intents and purposes, is in breach of key principles of the UN Charter. Therefore, Saudi policies in effect have redounded to further weakening the rules-based international order despite official statements to the contrary. Furthermore, while their relations were already strained, the Kingdom's decision to cut oil production in October 2022 led to a serious falling out with the United States, inducing qualitative shifts in an alliance which had significantly contributed to the shaping of the Middle East regional – and, indeed, global – order after the Second World War.

The Saudi–US alliance has not come to an end, but it has now become more tactical in nature. As Saudi Arabia has grown more assertive, it is less willing to accept what it regards as patronising United States (and, overall, Western) behaviour, particularly concerning the criticism of its political system and human rights record. Instead, it stands to reason that the Kingdom will proceed to step up its cooperation with China, Russia and other non-Western powers, thereby making alliance-building on global issues less predictable and international developments more volatile. One notable step in this direction was taken in August 2023 when Saudi Arabia, amongst others, was invited to become a BRICS member – an invitation the Kingdom was still mulling over as of early February 2024.

Finally, from its viewpoint, the war in Ukraine has evinced the emergence of a new international player set to co-determine the future global order – that is, Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom today is not lacking in ambition. Since the ascension to power of Muhammad bin Salman, Saudi Arabia has aspired to assume leadership in the Middle East and has embarked on controversial regional policies to this end (Heibach, 2021). At the international level, too, the Kingdom has pushed its claim of being an independent power which actively shapes global affairs, rather than being shaped

by them. International conferences such as the 2023 Jeddah peace talks, which were attended by high-ranking representatives of more than 40 countries, also attest to Saudi Arabia having become an international diplomatic heavyweight.

According to Saudi narratives, then, the war in Ukraine has clearly demonstrated the Kingdom's rise to global power: not just owing to its weight on the global oil market has it become 'the decisive factor in the war equation', with global leaders now flooding to Riyadh; the war, moreover, has been a 'revealing event', proving that 'political and economic stability in the great states of the world' is 'largely dependent on wilful Saudi decisions' (Al-Mujim, 2022). As the crown prince asserted, 'our Arab nation possesses the civilisational and cultural skills as well as the human and natural resources which qualify it to assume an advanced leadership position' (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, 2023). To be sure, this statement was made during the 2023 Arab League summit, meaning that 'our Arab nation' (*watan-na al-'arabi*) was to encompass the entirety of all Arab states. But then, the summit was also widely regarded as having been orchestrated in such a way as to show to domestic and international audiences alike how the Kingdom was finally at the helm of that Arab nation, henceforth representing the latter's interests in global affairs (Habtur, 2023; Harb, 2023).

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