



The Consequences of Sino-Saudi Multilateral Cooperation on Iran's National Security: A Neorealist Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The rising interactions between China and Saudi Arabia since the start of the new millennium have become a significant factor in Iran's national and regional security. This study aims to answer a key question: "What are the consequences of expanding relations between China and Saudi Arabia on the national security of the Islamic Republic of Iran?" Utilizing a neorealist framework and a descriptive-analytical approach, this paper argues that the growing relationship between China and Saudi Arabia could lead to Iran's increased isolation and have significant military and defensive consequences at national, regional, and international levels. The findings indicate that at the national level, these deepening relations could harm Iran by diverting energy exports and foreign investment, while also weakening its defensive capabilities and reinforcing the perception of Iran as a threat. At the regional level, this partnership could shift the balance of power against Iran, particularly during regional crises. Finally, at the international level, it could facilitate China's greater integration into the global order while increasing the potential for the United States and its regional allies to unite against Iran during a crisis.

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1. Introduction

Following the signing of a memorandum of understanding in November 1988, the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) agreed to open commercial offices. They rapidly established full diplomatic relations in July 1990, despite the events in Beijing's Tiananmen Square. Since the beginning of their official political relations in the 1990s, the relationship between China and Saudi Arabia has steadily expanded, reaching a peak of cooperation across economic, cultural, educational, and religious sectors. Since 2000, mutual political trust has deepened, marked by high-level visits between leaders. A significant milestone was King Abdullah's historic visit to China in 2006, where he hailed China as Saudi Arabia's "best friend," stating, "there is no doubt that the people of great China with their history are in the hearts of Saudi Arabian people" (Tehreen et al., 2024: 376-380). Other critical meetings included Chinese leader Jiang Zemin's visit in 1990 and King Abdullah's visit. In January 2006, a Chinese president visited Saudi Arabia for the first time since 2009. This visit coincided with a period of severe crisis in Saudi-Iran relations following Saudi Arabia's execution of Shiite citizens. The Chinese president announced that the aim of his visit was to establish a sense of balance. The earliest cooperation between the two nations dates back to 1985—five years before diplomatic ties were formalized—when Saudi Arabia purchased CSS-2 medium-range ballistic missiles, known as "East Storm," and their launchers from China. This cooperation reflects Saudi Arabia's broader strategy to counter Iranian influence in Asia, complementing similar efforts by the United States. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have entered into contracts with Asian countries, which the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) also seeks closer ties with to mitigate Western economic pressures. Over the past two years, Riyadh has signed economic, defense, and diplomatic agreements with Malaysia, Indonesia, India, Kazakhstan, and Bangladesh. This signals that Saudi Arabia's closer ties with China are part of a concerted effort to curb Iran's growing relations in Asia and a direct response to the Raisi administration's pivot away from the West.

By signing the Riyadh–Beijing Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement, Saudi Arabia has strengthened its economic ties with China, aiming to limit China's closeness to Iran. The trade volume between China and Saudi Arabia was US\$65 billion in 2020, significantly higher than the US\$14.5 billion trade volume between Iran and China in the same year. This gap is partly a result of Western sanctions, which have restricted the ability of both Chinese and Iranian companies to trade with each other. However, the 2020 signing of the China–Iran Comprehensive Strategic Agreement has the potential to substantially increase trade volume between Iran and China (Haydari 2022: 119). Riyadh is concerned that a sanctioned China, much like Russia, will be compelled to deepen its ties with Iran, given their shared interest in resisting U.S. pressure. Following sanctions against Russia, Iran has leveraged the situation to its advantage by signing major trade agreements, with trade volume significantly increasing from just US\$4 billion in 2021. For example, a US\$40 billion contract with Russia's Gazprom has led to a noticeable increase in travel by Russian merchants to Iran. This has fueled Saudi Arabia's fears that growing trade between Iran and China could shift the regional power balance in favor of Tehran. Thus, Saudi Arabia's strategic partnership with China aims to ensure that China-Iran trade remains far below Tehran's expectations and does not alter the power dynamics (Haydari 2022: 118). Historically, Iran and Saudi Arabia have competed for regional leadership. China has long maintained that it does not intend to become involved in geopolitical conflicts beyond its core national security interests, such as Taiwan and the South and East China Seas. In disputes within West Asia (also known as the Middle East) and Persian Gulf, China has consistently claimed neutrality and pursued balanced relations with all regional actors. However, China's cooperation with Saudi Arabia on

ballistic missile production and domestication appears to contradict this claim. By contributing to Saudi Arabia's ballistic missile program—a program that has drawn serious opposition from the U.S.—China is actively entering and influencing regional geopolitical equations. This assistance facilitates the proliferation of unconventional weapons and gives a distinct advantage to a single regional actor. Whether intentional or not, this support for Saudi Arabia's missile program weakens Iran's missile superiority, which is a key component of its defensive strategy, especially since Saudi Arabia has a major advantage through its access to advanced U.S. weapons and new-generation fighter jets. The continued strategic military partnership between China and Saudi Arabia could therefore have significant effects on West Asia's military and security landscape and regional power balance. This study seeks to explore and clarify the consequences of this expanding multilateral cooperation, particularly the military and defensive collaboration, between the People's Republic of China and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on the national security of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

This section reviews several studies on the relationship between China and Saudi Arabia as it pertains to Iran's national security. In her paper, Mahdiah Haydari (2022) examines the reasons for the development of Chinese-Saudi Arabian foreign relations. She argues that with the rise of Mohammed bin Salman in Saudi Arabia and the emergence of China as a major global power, the development of their foreign relations has become a cornerstone of both countries' foreign policy. This raises the question: "What are the reasons for the expansion of Chinese-Saudi Arabian political, economic, and cultural interactions?" Haydari hypothesizes that this expansion is driven by three main factors: (a) China's need for stable energy resources and Saudi Arabia's desire to diversify its sales markets; (b) regional and international competition and tensions between their respective governments; and (c) a shared effort to prevent the spread of Islamic extremism. Using neorealist theory, Haydari's research suggests that by designing the "One Belt, One Road" project and aligning Saudi Arabia's interests with it, China's leaders aim to secure energy resources while simultaneously balancing power against U.S. economic pressures. Conversely, by designing its "Vision 2030" in line with China's initiative and developing its "look to the East" policy, Saudi Arabia's leaders seek to balance against Iran's regional influence and reduce U.S. pressures through a new strategic ally at the regional and international levels.

In their paper on U.S. sanctions against Iran and their impact on China-Saudi Arabia oil cooperation, Seyed Ali Monavary and Hadad Zand Shirin (2021) assert that China's expanding development policies have increased its need for energy resources, particularly oil and gas imports from the Persian Gulf. To meet this demand, China has focused on the region's main energy suppliers: the Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia. However, the relations between China, Saudi Arabia, and Iran have experienced many fluctuations, primarily due to political issues and the special relationships both countries maintain with the United States. Mohammad Reza Adabi, Davood Kiani, and Mashallah Haydarpour (1997), in their study on the status of the Middle East's energy resources in Chinese foreign policy in the post-Cold War era, note that the Middle East has always been a strategically important region for global powers due to its rich oil and gas reserves. The twenty-first century has highlighted China's emergence and its drive to become a dynamic and influential participant in strategic global regions, including the Middle East. Given its need for the region's energy resources to sustain its economic growth, China is attempting to increase its influence through various means, including establishing broad relations with regional nations.

In his master's thesis, "Saudi Arabia's foreign policy toward China and its regional consequences," Mohammad Reza Behjat (2022) argues that a combination of international transformations in the energy sector and shifts in U.S. foreign policy priorities have pushed Saudi Arabia to strengthen its ties with China. The U.S. has reduced its dependency on Saudi

oil and shifted its strategic focus away from the Middle East toward East Asia. This has prompted Saudi leaders to forge closer relations with China—now the world's largest energy importer—to fill the resulting economic and security vacuum. Consequently, Saudi Arabia has become China's biggest oil supplier in recent years. Considering the regional impacts and the importance of this subject, this study aims to answer two main questions: "Which factors have influenced Saudi Arabia's foreign policy toward China in recent years?" and "What are the regional consequences of Saudi Arabia becoming China's top trading partner in the Middle East?"

2. Theoretical framework

Kenneth Waltz coined neorealism, or structural realism, in his 1979 book *Theory of International Politics*. Waltz's theory emphasizes that the structure of the international system is the primary determinant of a state's behavior (Waltz, 2013: 167). Neorealists adapted behaviorist concepts of order and structure while remaining loyal to the core principles of realism. Neorealism is often seen as an attempt to make realism a more practical, scientific discipline. Whereas classical realism was criticized as traditional and unscientific, neorealists sought to provide a scientific narrative of realism that was aligned with conventional academic criteria. Another key area of focus for neorealists was international economic issues, which classical realism had largely ignored. In the 1970s, Kenneth Waltz was a pivotal figure in this effort to make realism more scientific (Moshirzadeh, 2005: 112). Despite the diverse differences between states, Waltz observed a consistent similarity in international relations over long periods. He argued this similarity stems from the anarchic structure of the international system (Donnelly, 2000: 15). According to Waltz, these structural pressures broadly explain state behavior and influence international outcomes. He believed that the nature of an international political order is tied to structural factors. Neorealism grants practical independence to international politics and, unlike traditional realism which sees the use of force as a natural feature of international politics, it does not inherently favor its use. Neorealists also consider cooperation in addition to conflict and disputes. In the process of social interaction, states learn to rely on themselves, distrust others, and protect their security by accumulating the means to compete with one another. Neorealism addresses the idea that the international system provides strong nations with the incentives to adopt adaptive policies (Taliaferro, 2006: 465).

Waltz believed that one cannot explain the similarity in state behavior solely by looking at the characteristics of individual states; rather, one must analyze the power of the system as a whole. In other words, the anarchic structure of the international order causes states to form similar perceptions, and the impact of this structure on states leads them to adopt similar courses of action. Waltz's structural realism emphasizes that the anarchic international structure determines the behavior of states as well as their economic goals and the nature of the global economy. He argued that the distribution of power among nations impacts the form of the international economy and shapes their economic behavior. Since nations have different standings in the international order, their roles and impacts on the global economy also vary. Waltz's neorealist theory is built on several key hypotheses, including state rationality, the balance of power, self-reliance, and varied capabilities. By applying this theory, the present study analyzes the behavior of the Chinese and Saudi Arabian governments in various economic and political spheres, with a particular focus on their military and defensive relations.

3. Chinese and Saudi Arabian military – defensive relations in the format of strategic partnership

The first instance of military cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia dates back to 1985, five years before their diplomatic relationship began, with Saudi Arabia's purchase of

CSS-2 mid-range ballistic missiles, known as "East Storm," and their launchers. The deal was primarily orchestrated by General Khalid bin Sultan bin Abdulaziz, often called the "father of the Saudi Arabian missile program." This transaction was not made public until 1988. In 2007, Riyadh acquired additional Dong Feng-21 missiles from China. Both missile types are capable of carrying nuclear warheads, leading to speculation that Riyadh plans to equip them with nuclear payloads. In 2019, U.S. intelligence agencies reported Chinese assistance in launching a new Saudi Arabian missile program, to which the Trump administration did not react. Reports released that same year also revealed the existence of a missile production facility in the Al-Watah region southwest of Riyadh (Shirgholami, 2021: 25). Chinese-Saudi cooperation extends beyond missiles to include nuclear and military drone technology. Saudi Arabia has been interested in nuclear energy for years, and China's ambition to become a major nuclear energy player in West Asia has facilitated their partnership. Since 2017, China has assisted Saudi Arabia in exploring uranium and thorium resources and developing light water reactors. The two countries have also discussed building two nuclear reactors. U.S. intelligence reports indicate a suspicious structure near Riyadh that could be an undeclared nuclear site, as well as a yellowcake production plant in a remote southwestern region. These reports suggest the possibility of a secret initiative by Saudi Arabia and China to produce unenriched uranium, which could be enriched for nuclear weapons in the future. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has stated that his country will immediately pursue nuclear weapons if Iran acquires them.

Saudi Arabia is also dependent on China for aggressive drones. During a 2017 visit by bin Salman, a contract was signed to construct a factory to assemble CH-4 drones, and Saudi Arabia also purchased several Wing-Long 1 and Wing-Long 2 drones from China. The growing military ties between Saudi Arabia and China point to a strategic security partnership, unlike the U.S.-Saudi coalition, which is not based on shared political values but is purely interest-driven. The political and value differences between China and Saudi Arabia hold no importance for their relationship, and Saudi Arabia may even view China's authoritarian model as an appealing alternative. Furthermore, officials from both countries have noted the proper convergence and synergy between Saudi Arabia's "Vision 2030" and China's "Belt and Road" initiatives. In response to reports on missile cooperation, a Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson asserted that the two countries are multilateral strategic partners with friendly ties in all fields, including military commerce. China considers Saudi Arabia one of its most important partners in West Asia and has invested approximately US\$45 billion there since 2005. Saudi Arabia is also currently the largest supplier of crude oil to China. These factors indicate that their cooperation is truly strategic (Shirgholami, 2021: 28).

For several decades, China and Saudi Arabia have been among the most active players in the global arms trade, a trend that has become even more prominent in recent years. Following the 1979 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, the Islamic Revolution in Iran, and the subsequent Iran-Iraq War, Arab states, including Saudi Arabia, felt an urgent need to improve their defensive capabilities by acquiring military hardware to counter new threats. Concurrently, under Deng Xiaoping's leadership, China embarked on a program of industrialization and reform, which necessitated the development of its export market for military weaponry to generate the financial resources needed to sustain its reforms. As a result, Arab states in West Asia became a crucial market for Chinese arms, with 82.8% of China's total arms exports being sold to Arab nations and Iran. Among these, Saudi Arabia was the leading purchaser of Chinese weapons, acquiring advanced missiles to counter perceived threats from both Iran and Israel (Bin Huwaidin, 2008: 69). In the late 1980s, China sold Saudi Arabia military goods worth US 5 billion, including 50–60 surface-to-air medium-range Dong Feng (DF) missiles and 15 portable launchers, with a total

value of US\$3 billion (Lippman, 2008: 2). Based on an agreement signed during a Saudi king's visit, China became the first country to sell missile technology to Saudi Arabia, shocking the U.S. and other traditional military allies. This equipped the kingdom with ballistic missiles and marked the beginning of Chinese-Saudi relations in the arms sector two years before their official diplomatic ties were established (Morillo, 2014: 3).

Although Saudi Arabia was the top importer of Chinese weapons from 1997 to 2001 (Wezeman, 2014: 1), their military cooperation declined in the 1990s. Despite the growth in economic ties, the first Persian Gulf War prompted Saudi Arabia to purchase a large portion of its military equipment from the nations involved in expelling Iraq from Kuwait. As a result, Chinese arms exports to Saudi Arabia during this period did not exceed US\$1.5-2 billion (Sevilla, 2024: 1-3). Some scholars argue that the reduction in Chinese arms exports to West Asian countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, was a result of U.S. economic sanctions aimed at preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction after the 9/11 attacks. Others suggest that the decline was due to the poor quality of Chinese arms in the battlefield (Tehreen et al., 2024: 381-382), with Saudi military leaders asserting that Chinese missiles are outdated, lack accuracy, and have limited mobility. A different perspective attributes the cooling of relations to China's defense cooperation with and arms sales to Iran (da Silveira, 2014: 46-47). Regardless, the two countries' arms relationship has grown in recent years, though not at a steady pace, due to Saudi Arabia's preference for acquiring U.S. arms. By a significant margin, Saudi Arabia is the largest importer of U.S. military weapons, while it is not among the top importers of Chinese arms. However, what is significant is the remarkable development of Riyadh-Beijing relations over the past two decades, especially in the new millennium. This improvement, considering the different roles Iran plays against each country, suggests serious implications for Iran's security.

4. Chinese–Saudi Arabian Defensive Relations and Their Outcomes on Iran's Security

For decades, Iran and China have maintained strong economic and political ties. Since the 1980s, China's critical perspective on the international order, its capability for mass production, and its aid to developing nations have made it an important partner for Iran. Conversely, China has regarded Iran as a significant country due to its need for large markets for its goods and weapons, as well as its increasing demand for energy resources, prompting it to strengthen relations with Iran (Arghavani Pirsalami, 2016: 17). Saudi Arabia, concerned that improved Iranian-Chinese relations could undermine its own partnership with China, seeks to prevent this by portraying Iran as a regional threat. This strategy is intended to isolate Iran and prevent any further expansion of its ties with China. Chinese officials, for their part, have attempted to remain neutral in the tensions between these two regional powers, discouraging such beliefs within the Saudi Arabian leadership. They have consistently urged both Iran and Saudi Arabia to resolve their disagreements through negotiation and to contribute to regional stability (Garver, 2016: 6). Saudi Arabia's concerns about Iran's growing regional influence have therefore led it to focus its efforts on strengthening political and economic ties with China. The kingdom uses its oil-backed political leverage to counter Iran's political influence and, in particular, its nuclear program (Tehreen et al., 2024: 381-382). The strengthening of political and economic ties between China and Saudi Arabia in areas such as energy, commerce, and arms can directly affect Iran's national security. By providing energy supply and demand security, Saudi Arabia is able to compete with Iran and expand its financial and trade relations with China. Thus, the deepening relationship between China and Saudi Arabia in the aforementioned fields can have significant impacts on Iran's national security at both the political and economic levels, while also targeting its security in the broader regional context.

4-1. Economic Consequences

Iran is one of China's largest crude oil suppliers. For the past decade, Iran has ranked among the top three crude oil exporters to China, with the exception of 2004, when it was fourth. By 2009, Iran was exporting 456,000 barrels per day (bpd) of crude oil to China, but this figure decreased by 35% in 2010. This decline was heavily influenced by UN and U.S. economic sanctions against Iran in late 2009 and early 2010, imposed over its nuclear activities. At that time, the U.S. suggested that Saudi Arabia could compensate for the reduction in China's oil imports from Iran, offering to supply crude oil at significantly lower prices. However, some sources also believe the primary reason for the decrease in Chinese imports from Iran was the dissatisfaction of Chinese merchants with Iran's higher prices during those years, in addition to the sanctions (Wu, 2011: 68).

Following the sanctions imposed by its long-standing partner, the U.S., Saudi Arabia has sought to expand its relations with China and become its biggest crude oil supplier. This strategy aims to fuel Saudi Arabia's own economic growth and secure access to China's strategic markets (Alterman, 2015: 3). In addition to supplying cheaper crude oil, Saudi Arabia has also promised to provide long-term access to its hydrocarbon reserves, ensuring China's economic development does not face any shortages. Since China's peaceful development strategy is a cornerstone of its foreign policy, it has been compelled not to oppose the increasing pressure on Iran from the U.S. and has accepted the proposal to replace Iran with Saudi Arabia (Arghavani Pirsalami, 2016: 35). Consequently, Iran has been trying to attract major Asian powers to invest in its energy sector and develop its oil and gas fields to overcome the barriers and sanctions imposed by the West. So far, Iran has had very limited success (Herberg, 2009: 4) as the rising investment costs due to sanctions have made China perceive Iran as a risky trading partner. Instead, China views Saudi Arabia as a reliable supplier with ample production capacity (Wu, 2011: 3). The nuclear agreement with the West failed to revive the expected trust, and the subsequent U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA renewed doubts about Iran's reliability in meeting China's energy needs. To capitalize on this, Saudi Arabia increased its crude oil production capacity to over 10 million bpd by July 2011 (Tehreen et al., 2024: 383-384). The combination of sanctions against Iran and its relatively strict domestic trading regulations, in contrast to Saudi Arabia's flexible rules, has caused Chinese investors to favor deals with Saudi Arabia, effectively replacing Tehran as a trading partner. This poses a significant threat to Iran's national security in the economic sphere, as the reduction or elimination of such major exports would deprive Iran of much-needed foreign currency and foreign investment. These resources are critical for the dynamism and enhancement of national security in the economic sector (Arghavani Pirsalami and Forutan, 2019: 85-86). Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia is progressively expanding its trading ties with China to economically isolate Iran and advance its own growth and development.

4-2. Political Consequences

In addition to the economic effects, the expansion of Chinese-Saudi Arabian relations can have destructive political impacts on Iran's national security. Highly concerned about Iran's potential in various fields, especially its defensive and deterrent capabilities, Saudi Arabia considers Iran a significant threat to its regional goals. Consequently, the kingdom attempts to weaken Iran's political power and national security by purchasing weapons from countries like the U.S. and, more recently, China. From 1997 to 2001, Saudi Arabia ranked as the top buyer of weaponry (Wezeman, 2014). By claiming that Iran is a potential regional threat, Saudi Arabia seeks to enhance its military capabilities by acquiring more advanced weapons. The U.S. sale of US\$60 billion in weapons to Saudi Arabia and the establishment of a 35,000-troop security force, recommended by the U.S. within the Saudi Ministry of Interior, reflect the combined efforts of Riyadh and Washington to politically isolate and contain Iran. This is

driven by Saudi Arabia's perception that Iran is capable of destabilizing the region (da Silveira, 2014: 49-50). China is another country that has supplied Saudi Arabia's military needs. To curb Iran's regional influence and limit its military capabilities, Saudi Arabia has explicitly stated that it will become a nuclear country if Iran acquires nuclear weapons. As a major power, China is increasingly interfering in the distribution of power in West Asia through its growing military cooperation with Saudi Arabia (Buzan and Vior, 2009: 127). This cooperation could upset the power balance between Riyadh and Tehran. Despite their broad military partnership, China has been hesitant to deepen its military relations with Iran, fearing tensions with the U.S., which is concerned that providing Iran with advanced arms could challenge its military power in West Asia and contribute to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (Wuthnow, 2016: 19; Harold and Nader, 2012: 1). However, the effects of the increasing Chinese-Saudi relationship are not limited to the national level; these relations can also eclipse Iran's security regionally.

4-3. Military Consequences with an Emphasis on the Missile Sector

Iran possesses the largest and most diverse missile arsenal in West Asia. In 2022, General Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., head of U.S. CENTCOM, announced that Iran has over 3,000 ballistic missiles. This figure does not include a growing number of cruise missiles designed to strike land targets, nor does it account for ground-to-ground missiles. Over the past decade, Iran has made remarkable progress in improving the accuracy of its missiles, transforming them into a more potent conventional threat. Iran initially focused on missiles with a range of 2,000 km, a limitation first confirmed in 2015, which it can set aside at its discretion (Iran Watch, 2022). Although its initial missiles relied on liquid fuel, Iran has since prioritized the development of solid-fuel missiles, a trend that is likely to continue. The Islamic Republic of Iran's missile power, controlled by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Aerospace Force, constitutes a vital part of Tehran's regional power strategy, alongside unconventional warfare and cyber operations. Christian Sanders, a senior defense information official at the U.S. Defense Information Agency, emphasized in a statement: "Iran uses a combined approach to warfare that includes both conventional and unconventional elements. Fundamentally, Iran's military strategy is based on deterrence and reciprocity. Iran also uses unconventional warfare and a network of partner and paramilitary proxy forces to achieve its regional goals and maintain a reliable strategic depth." Missiles enable Iran to strike almost any point in the region and even parts of Eastern Europe, serving as a vital strategic deterrent and a key factor in projecting Iran's power. Competition between Tehran and Riyadh would undoubtedly lead to a special emphasis on Saudi Arabian capabilities in any potential negotiations. However, Iran would likely insist on including the capabilities of Israel and even Turkey in any regional framework. A comprehensive view of the region indicates that Iran remains exceptional in the high diversity of its short- and mid-range missiles and in its ability to supply missiles to non-governmental actors such as the Houthis and Hezbollah (Lye, 2019).

On August 4, 2020, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that Western officials were concerned about nuclear cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia to construct facilities for extracting uranium yellowcake from uranium ore. This development marks a notable change in Riyadh's non-military nuclear program. According to the report, these facilities would be built with the assistance of two Chinese companies in a remote desert area near the city of Al-Ula in northwestern Saudi Arabia, located between Medina and Tabuk and at the point farthest from Iran. Yellowcake is a semi-processed form of uranium and is a critical component for both nuclear reactors and weapons. Although the Saudi Arabian Energy Ministry has denied building uranium yellowcake enrichment facilities, the Kingdom has publicly stated its intention to become proficient in all aspects of the nuclear fuel cycle. In recent years, Saudi Arabia and

China have openly placed several joint nuclear projects on their agenda. A CNN report, citing U.S. intelligence organizations and satellite images, suggests that Saudi Arabia is developing a solid-fuel missile program with Chinese aid. The remnants of a missile engine foundry and solid fuel are reportedly visible in these images (Chaziza, 2020). Chinese-Saudi Arabian cooperation in ballistic missile development could have a significant impact on the power balance in West Asia. While China claims to be deepening its ties with all West Asian countries, it has so far avoided involvement in regional geopolitical competitions and conflicts, and has not advocated for any single regional player. However, as part of this cooperation, China is helping Saudi Arabia produce and sell ballistic missiles and drones. Analysts and politicians believe that China's efforts to enhance Saudi Arabia's missile capabilities are a response to Riyadh's negative experiences in its indirect war with Iran in Yemen. The U.S.'s opposition to selling ballistic missiles to Saudi Arabia and its recent withdrawal of advanced defensive missile systems and Patriot batteries from Saudi Arabia and their transfer to East Asia have made the Kingdom more resolute in this strategy.

Saudi Arabia first purchased DF-21 missiles from China in 2007, which were publicly displayed in 2014. This Chinese-Saudi Arabian cooperation in manufacturing ballistic missiles highlights China's soft military approach in West Asia. By avoiding heightened tensions with dominant military powers like the U.S. (which maintains 5,000 personnel in the region), the UK, and France, China has sought to establish a subtle military presence in West Asia and the Persian Gulf littoral states. Their cooperation on weapons, particularly ballistic missiles, extends beyond mere know-how transfer (Bagher, 2022). This collaboration has created a new type of equilibrium in the missile and arms competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia. In the long term, China's efforts to balance Iranian and Saudi Arabian missile and nuclear capabilities could pose risks to Tehran, potentially generating more serious security problems for Iran's national borders. Following its negative experience in the war against Yemen, Saudi Arabia turned to military and technological cooperation with China on ballistic missiles, underscoring the importance of a powerful air force for Saudi Arabia in confronting Iran. Riyadh's efforts suggest a new focus on air-sector deterrence against Iran, a development that military, intelligence, and security agencies should carefully consider.

Furthermore, one must not be indifferent to China's military cooperation with other West Asian nations—including Saudi Arabia—that have political and military tensions with Iran. This could, in the long term, threaten Iran's defensive and deterrent capabilities. Consequently, Iranian officials should consider and question this cooperation between Beijing and Riyadh when engaging in military and security diplomacy with China. With growing uncertainty in its relations with the U.S., particularly during the Biden administration, Saudi Arabia has increased its military cooperation with China. China's balancing act in the region should not, in the long term, result in either potential or actual security threats against Iran. However, we have already observed China's differential treatment of Iran, particularly regarding the revival of the JCPOA. The current challenges facing Tehran—including sanctions and a stalemate in the JCPOA revival negotiations—combined with China's increasing cooperation with Iran's neighbors and even rivals, could lead to numerous military and security damages and challenges, especially for Iran's missile deterrence capabilities.

4-4. Regional Consequences

One of Saudi Arabia's strategies in recent years has been to introduce Iran as a serious threat to regional security. Through this, the kingdom aims to form a coalition against Tehran by attracting the support of major global powers (Nejat et al., 2016: 42–45). By strengthening political and economic ties with powers like China, Saudi Arabia attempts to undermine Iran's strategic and diplomatic influence through lobbying. King Abdullah's visit to Beijing in

2006, followed by Hu Jintao's visit to Riyadh in the same year, can be seen as signs of Saudi diplomatic efforts to prevent broad cooperation between Iran and China. The increase in ties between Saudi Arabia and a major new emerging power like China would allow Riyadh to move closer to its goal of isolating Iran and containing its regional policies. According to some reports, the most important request of Saudi Arabian officials to China has been for a reduction in its cooperation with Iran (Arghavani Pirsalami, 2016: 33–34).

A second serious regional consequence for Iran is China's deliberate passivity in many West Asian conflicts. While many believe that this passivity is due to China's general diplomatic policy of non-involvement in other regions' problems, it should be noted that with the Arab-Western bloc doing its best to isolate Iran and its regional allies, the general expectation was that China would enter the fray. Aside from the Syrian crisis, where China, along with Russia, vetoed Western-proposed resolutions in the UN Security Council, China has not intervened in other major regional issues, particularly on the ground in Syria (da Silveira, 2014: 51-52). In the Yemen crisis, despite its lack of active effort to change the military dynamics, some evidence suggests that China has supported the administration of Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi (Ali et al., 2024: 472-473). Additionally, Saudi Arabia's emphasis on developing energy and trade ties with China over the past two decades aligns with China's pragmatic economic worldview. This emphasis directly counters Iran's attitude toward China's regional role. Iran has always expected China to play a strong political role in curbing U.S. intervention, while Saudi Arabia attempts to prevent Chinese political intervention by highlighting its own benefits for China. This Saudi approach is gaining traction due to China's growing will and determination (Ali et al., 2024: 474-475).

5. Conclusion

For China, energy security has been the central focus of its bilateral relationship with Saudi Arabia, a dynamic that has defined their strategic ties over the past two decades. Since 2002, Saudi Arabia has been China's primary oil supplier, a role likely to continue. Beijing views Saudi Arabia as a vital player among oil producers and aims to remain a preferred long-term consumer in Riyadh's energy calculations. Saudi Arabia's ability to control the global oil market during periods of significant price pressure has given it considerable political influence. Given China's sensitivity to oil price fluctuations, maintaining Saudi Arabia's oil supply is of paramount importance. However, this close and developing economic relationship is inseparable from its political consequences and its impact on China's relations with Iran. From China's perspective, a stable relationship with Saudi Arabia is the most reliable way to secure vital oil resources, especially during times of strained China-U.S. relations or regional instability. During periods of significant unrest, such as the Libyan political riots in 2002, economic sanctions against Iran in 2012, and the Syrian civil war since 2011, Saudi Arabia has consistently served as China's main oil supplier. Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War in 1981, Saudi Arabia became the best alternative for supplying oil (Douglas, 2017: 14).

Since diplomatic relations were established in 1990, the trade relationship has been primarily based on Saudi Arabia's oil exports to China. Their bilateral trade has surged from just US\$1.28 million in 1990 to US\$64.39 million, with China now surpassing the U.S. as Saudi Arabia's top trading partner. Currently, Saudi Arabia is China's largest trading partner in West Asia, with mutual trade reaching US\$417.955 million between January 1993 and February 2020. This trade is aimed at diversifying export and import markets across West Asia, East Asia, and North Africa. In 2005, King Abdullah initiated a "look to the East" foreign policy to diversify Saudi Arabia's strategic and trade interests, which led to a significant increase in Saudi exports to Asian nations, particularly China. Since 2005, Saudi Arabia has also been the

leading recipient of Chinese investment among West Asian countries, attracting 15% of all Chinese investment in the MENA region. This investment has been concentrated in the energy sector (39%), followed by metals (17%), real estate (16%), and other areas.

In addition to economic and trade relations, a major component of their partnership has been in the defensive and military sectors, with some political analysts and experts describing their relationship as a strategic partnership. A significant part of this military relationship involves cooperation on missile technology. China has consistently claimed it does not intend to become involved in geopolitical conflicts beyond its core national security interests, such as Taiwan and the South and East China Seas. It has also claimed to have balanced relations with all regional countries, without advocating for any single player. However, China's cooperation with Saudi Arabia on the production and localization of ballistic missiles appears to contradict this claim. By contributing to the development of Saudi Arabia's ballistic missile program, which is even opposed by the U.S., China is actively influencing regional geopolitical equations. This assistance facilitates the proliferation of unconventional weapons to a regional actor, whether intentionally or not. By helping Saudi Arabia, China is weakening Iran's superior missile deterrence capabilities. This is particularly significant because while Iran's superiority has historically been in its ballistic missiles, Saudi Arabia enjoys a major advantage through its access to advanced U.S. weapons, especially new-generation fighter jets. The continued strategic military partnership between China and Saudi Arabia could therefore have a profound impact on West Asia's military and security dynamics and the regional balance of power. As this strategic cooperation has economic, political, military, and regional consequences for the Islamic Republic of Iran, Iranian security and intelligence officials should develop proactive diplomacy and a robust defense and military policy concerning China, while closely monitoring Chinese-Saudi Arabian military and defensive relations.

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