

Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS: Pivotal Shifts in Saudi Arabia's Look East Foreign Policy

Seyedmohammad Seyedi Asl^{1*} , Shalaleh Zabardast Alamdari² , Murad Saleh Oglu Sadygzade³ 

1. *PhD in International Relations, Research Fellow, HSE University, Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs; 17 Malaya Ordynka Ulitsa, Moscow, Russia.*

2. *PhD in International Relations, Independent Researcher, Ankara, Türkiye.*

3. *Institute of Oriental Studies Russian Academy of Sciences (IOS RAS), HSE University, Moscow, Russia.*

*Corresponding Author Email: sseyediasl@hse.ru.

Abstract

“Look East” is an approach to foreign policy that refers to the development of each country’s foreign relations and encouraging other countries to cooperate by increasing relations with countries in the Eastern region. On the other hand, it seems that Saudi Arabia’s international and regional role has begun to grow along with the unprecedented developments in the Middle East since the Arab uprisings that began in late 2010.

Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy has increasingly focused on strengthening ties with Asian countries, marking a strategic shift towards the East. This realignment has been a key priority for the nation, reflecting its commitment to fostering relationships with major Asian powers. As a Persian Gulf nation, Saudi Arabia has clearly shifted its focus towards East Asia in response to the ongoing transition period and the decline of American hegemony in recent years. It has strengthened its relations with Asian powers, particularly China, across a broad spectrum of strategic and economic interests, reflecting its commitment to diversifying its partnerships and priorities. On the other hand, signs of the Saudi leadership’s shift in foreign policy towards the East can be seen in its desire to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the BRICS.

Keywords: Look East, Foreign Policy, Saudi Arabia, Shanghai, BRICS

Introduction

The “*American Age*” is ending, and a new world is taking shape. In the 21st century, the rise of the Asian Century has shifted the global balance. Asian countries are no longer weak or dependent on Western powers. Instead, they have grown into independent actors, often able to stand autonomously against Western dominance. In other words, this trend has been one of the important manifestations of the movement of power shifting from West to East. In fact, a new order is taking shape on a global scale, the main characteristics of which are the decline of the West led countries by the United States, and the rise of Asia and the rise of regional powers in the context of a multipolar world with the role of Eastern powers such as Russia, India and China (Сейеди Асл, Джан, 2024: 52). The Look East policy, also known with some nuance as the “*Look to Asia*” policy, is a strategy that shifts foreign policy focus away from Western countries toward Eastern countries (Sheikholeslami, Atazade, 2023).

In pursuit of greater strategic autonomy, Saudi Arabia has diversified its diplomatic agenda and increasingly looks east. From a strategic perspective, Saudi Arabia’s “*look east*” is a countermeasure to Western challenges to its core interests. This is because China’s proposed Belt and Road Initiative could help the country achieve economic transformation (Zhiqiang, 2023).

On the diplomatic side, Saudi Arabia has taken steps to develop a greater understanding of regional and international issues with countries of the Global South, including China and Russia. This is evident in the frequent high-level engagements involving top officials, such as the recent visits to Riyadh by the foreign ministers of Russia, India, and Brazil on September 9-10, 2024. These were followed by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's visit for the fourth meeting of the Saudi-Chinese High-Level Joint Committee on Cooperation and Coordination (Ali, 2024). On the other hand, Saudi Arabia has been actively improving its relations with Russia and China to create a balance due to the apparent US retreat from the region and to synchronize economic interests with strategic interests. High-level meetings, economic agreements and strong political messages have been the hallmarks of their relations (Camille, 2020).

This study aims to explore and analyze Saudi Arabia's foreign policy within the context of its *"Look East"* approach, particularly focusing on its engagement with the BRICS nations and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. By examining these dynamics, the research seeks to shed light on Saudi Arabia's strategic shift toward Eastern alliances as a means of diversifying its international relationships and reducing dependency on traditional Western partners. To achieve this, the study employs a descriptive-analytical method, providing a detailed examination of the policies, initiatives, and interactions shaping this pivot. Data and information for the analysis are collected through a combination of methods, primarily relying on library-based research. By situating Saudi Arabia's foreign policy within the broader geopolitical realignments of the 21st century, the study aims to offer valuable insights into the implications of Eastward orientation for both regional and global politics.

Saudi Arabia and the Look East Policy

Saudi Arabia's "look East Policy" dates back to the late 1990s, when Prince Abdullah was startled by China's rapidly emerging role and position in world politics. Soon after ascending to the throne in August 2005, King Abdullah paved the way for closer ties with Asia, becoming the first Saudi ruler to visit China in January 2006. Saudi-Indian relations also improved significantly under Abdullah, but it was Riyadh's growing ties with Beijing that worried many in the West (Azad, 2019: 142). Arab news, which often reflect the views of those in power, have called the Asia visit history-making. The Khaleej Times, an English-language newspaper in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, called Abdullah's trip *"a strategic shift in the country's foreign policy"*. Arab News, an English-language newspaper in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, said the visit *"is the herald of a new era"* (Giridharadas, 2006).

Conversely, given the growing likelihood of an *"Asian century"*, Saudi Arabia's strategic shift toward Asia should come as no surprise (Yamada, 2015: 121). Given that Saudi Arabia's engagement with the United States remains largely strong and stable, and the kingdom is simultaneously increasing its economic engagement with Asian powers, which has become more evident over the past decade. As noted above, Saudi Arabia's *"Look East"* diplomacy emerged during the reign of King Abdullah and has evolved over time, strengthening the Saudi kingdom's engagement with several Asian powers. The fulcrum of engagement with these Asian powers is to diversify the economy and consolidate energy partnerships. Currently, the kingdom's economic relations with Asia are largely dominated by the energy demands of Asia's economic and military powers. However, in recent years, much focus has been placed on infrastructure, technology, tourism, and advanced manufacturing (Moonakal, 2020).

Saudi Arabia's "Look East" policy represents the strategic orientation of its economic and foreign policies towards Asia, particularly China and India. Recognizing the importance of Asia's economic growth and the need to diversify Saudi Arabia's economy, the policy seeks to establish greater economic, political, and cultural ties with Asian countries. It also emphasizes intercultural dialogue and people-to-people interactions. This includes expanding tourism with Asian countries, educational and cultural exchanges, and regular communication through diplomatic channels. In addition, the Look East policy aims to promote technology transfer, educational activities, and human resource development in Saudi Arabia. This will encourage economic diversification, increase employment, and reduce the country's reliance on oil exports (Singh, 2023).

Saudi Arabia has increasingly sought to reduce its reliance on the United States by strengthening political and economic ties with rival powers like China and Russia. It also aims to position itself as a leading voice for the global south. Gulf experts view these moves as part of Riyadh's ambition to spearhead a new *"non-aligned movement,"* while Saudi officials frame them as a reflection of the *"Saudi Arabia first"* nationalism driving the kingdom's foreign policy (Jacobs, 2023).

The Saudi leadership has institutionalized the idea that the world is now fluid and multipolar. In the face of changing global geopolitics, Riyadh presents itself as a self-assured middle power, one that, the prince believes, *"has the right to work with a changing constellation of partners to shift markets and shape political outcomes"* (ecoiran.com). Given the decline in US attention to the Middle East and anticipating a more nuanced and asymmetric multipolar world order, Riyadh is opting for diversification on all fronts, whether economic, strategic or military (Kausch, 2023).

In March 2023, the Saudi cabinet approved the country's accession to the Beijing-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Four months later, the inaugural summit of the Gulf Cooperation Council and five Central Asian countries was held in Jeddah. Saudi cooperation with the five countries could pave the way for increased Saudi access to regional markets and investment in renewable energy and other projects. Saudi Arabia is also considering accepting an invitation to become a full member of the BRICS group ([khabarban.com](https://www.khabarban.com)).

While Saudi Arabia is still geopolitically dependent on the United States for its security, it has shifted geoeconomically to the East. Mohammadbagher Forough, a researcher at the German Institute for Global and Regional Studies, told New Arab. *“China is now its largest trading partner. India and Russia are also becoming increasingly important to it (for different reasons). Given these developments, it is natural that the Saudis would want to join BRICS Plus or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization”* (Siddiqui, 2022).

Ali Shahabi, a prominent commentator with close ties to the Saudi regime, notes that *“this is an irreversible trend for Saudi Arabia. Relations with China, India, and the countries of the global south are too important for Saudi Arabia to ignore. They will continue to strengthen these relations while maintaining their security and diplomatic ties with the United States”* (Molavi, 2023).

The *“Look East”* policy has transformed Saudi Arabia's previously weak ties with Asian nations into strong, multifaceted relationships spanning political, military, economic, technological, and cultural domains. This approach not only addresses gaps in Saudi-Asian relations but also promotes long-term, mutually beneficial partnerships. Asian countries, particularly China, have welcomed these initiatives, seizing the opportunity to expand their interests in the Kingdom by leveraging Saudi Arabia's political will and growing economic influence in the region (Azad, 2019: 150).

The Axis of Change in Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy in “Look East Approach” BRICS and Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia sees itself as an emerging global economic power that seeks to wean itself from its long-term dependence on oil by investing heavily in logistics, entertainment, tourism, sports, and culture. To this end, it is working to create new trade relationships and strengthen global networks and market access (Sons, 2023).

According to Robert Mogilnicki, a senior fellow at the Gulf States Institute in Washington, countries like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates see great potential in developing cooperation with new global groups and blocs. Experts also warn that sudden changes in the economic relations of the UAE or Saudi Arabia with any of the BRICS members could lead to sudden and major changes. One of the benefits of BRICS membership is that it can be beneficial for the UAE and Saudi Arabia's medium- and long-term investment plans (irna.ir).

Saudi Arabia, already a regional leader, is ambitiously striving to become a global power, with stronger ties to China playing a key role in this pursuit, according to Michelle Grace, a senior policy researcher at the RAND Corporation (Jamal, 2023).

The shift toward BRICS highlights the Gulf states' commitment, including Saudi Arabia's, to fostering strong economic partnerships that promote regional development and global economic cooperation. This effort includes reinforcing Saudi Arabia's role as a reliable energy partner to ensure energy market stability (Ali, 2024). As the world's second-largest oil producer after the United States, Saudi Arabia is a strategically significant country for BRICS (Rulence, 2024: 71).

On August 24, 2023, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan said that Saudi Arabia would consider joining BRICS. *“We are waiting for the details of the group regarding the invitation, the nature of the membership and its elements,”* Prince Faisal bin Farhan was quoted as saying by Saudi Arabia's Al Arabiya television. *“Based on that and internal measures, we will take the appropriate decision”* (Ali, 2024).

The expansion of BRICS aims to enhance South-South cooperation and improve global governance. For Saudi Arabia, joining BRICS offers new avenues for collaboration, bolsters its role in achieving development goals, and provides a platform to deepen political and economic ties with countries in the global South. The transition to the BRICS+ format has further positioned the group as a valuable forum for consensus-building and dialogue among developing nations. Saudi Arabia, using its geopolitical opportunity, has used this movement, like the BRICS+ countries, to explore the potential for creating mechanisms that can reflect the needs and imperatives of emerging and developing countries. There are signs that the countries of the global South are demanding a new type of transparent and inclusive multilateral cooperation. BRICS is a mechanism in which such cooperation can be tested (Sager, 2024: 7). For countries in the global South, Saudi Arabia's entry into the BRICS group offers new opportunities for economic cooperation, investment, and development. Riyadh's financial strength, combined with its leadership role in the energy sector, could help rebuild the global economy, especially for emerging economies seeking alternatives to Western-led institutions (leaders-mena.com).

Given this context, Saudi Arabia sees its trade alliances with the BRICS countries as vital due to their increasing influence on the global stage. In 2022, financial exchanges between Saudi Arabia and China increased to \$87 billion, representing 17.5% of total trade (Saudi Arabia Ministry of Commerce 2023). India, another prominent BRICS economy, is a significant importer of Saudi oil, with bilateral trade between the two countries expected to reach \$42.8 billion in 2022. In addition, Saudi Arabia has the opportunity to diversify its imports and

cooperate on energy and food security with Russia and Brazil, both large agricultural and resource-rich economies. South Africa may not be the largest country in terms of scale in the BRICS alliance. However, it is a key link for Saudi exports to African markets, with bilateral trade worth \$4.5 billion in 2022, according to the South African Ministry of Trade and Industry. These trade connections are an example of the economic importance of the BRICS countries in Saudi Arabia's efforts to integrate into global value chains and diversify its economic framework (Benlaria, 2024: 2).

BRICS membership offers Riyadh a multilateral platform to diversify its global partnerships and engage more directly with non-Western powers. The bloc's commitment to non-interference and respect for sovereignty aligns closely with Saudi Arabia's interests. Formal membership also supports the kingdom's political preferences and sensitivities, particularly its stance on regional issues like Palestine. Additionally, with China's growing influence in the region and expanding trade and investment ties with Saudi Arabia, joining BRICS enhances the kingdom's ability to strengthen its bilateral relations with Beijing (Battaloglu, Kozhanov, 2024).

SCO and Saudi Arabia

From Saudi Arabia's perspective, the process of initiating cooperation with the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization is motivated by the desire to diversify multilateral partnerships at the global and regional levels. For decades, Saudi Arabia has pursued a foreign policy based on its interests, which has caused considerable surprise to the world, for example, with the oil embargo of 1973-1974. Since Beijing is Riyadh's largest trading partner, it is quite natural for the country to strengthen its relations with the world's second superpower. Saudi Arabia is interested in deepening cooperation with the Central Asian republics, as well as Pakistan, Russia and India, through a forum where heads of state and government meet every two years. Accepting this partnership would also fill a gap in the development of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy towards the countries of Central Asia and Eurasia (sharghdaily.com).

Under the influence of Saudi Arabia's active foreign policy, the kingdom could not ignore the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. However, in light of significant geopolitical shifts that the kingdom has astutely recognized, Saudi Arabia deemed it necessary to join this emerging organization for two key reasons (uwidata.com)

- Expanding Riyadh's alliances amidst the global shift towards multipolarity.
- Seriousness and significance in the goals of the organization, which are mainly focused on open cooperation in many areas.

Saudi Arabia's decision to become a dialogue partner in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization aligns with its broader global engagement strategy, reflecting its commitment to establishing partnerships with international forums, including the Asia-Pacific Partnership and the African Union (Cafiero, 2023).

Ahmed Ibrahim, an expert on international affairs in Saudi Arabia, says that with the increasing influence of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Saudi Arabia is accelerating its "Look East" with its dialogue partner. He further emphasized: "The growing attractiveness of this organization stems from the fact that this organization is a model for regional and international cooperation. Over more than twenty years, this organization has become one of the most influential international organizations in Eurasia, which is an important guarantee for economic and trade cooperation and the security and stability of the countries of the region. This shows that Saudi Arabia is fully aware of the international status of the organization and its growing international influence, and expects to deepen cooperation with member states in various fields, especially in the economic and trade fields" (arabic.news.cn).

Theodore Karasik, former director of the RAND Center for Middle East Public Policy Research, told Amwaj.Media: "Saudi Arabia's joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is an important step as part of a larger regional integration within the Beijing-Moscow security grouping" (etemadonline.com).

Sons noted that joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization sends another signal to the United States that Saudi Arabia is continuing its hedging approach and no longer wants to be seen as a small partner of the West (Siddiqui, 2023).

"From Saudi Arabia's perspective, continuing deep ties with the West alongside growing ties with China is a 'win-win'," says Dr. Craig. "That's the view that most Gulf states have. Even the Chinese don't necessarily see this as a zero-sum game". He added: "The idea in Washington is that 'the closer you get to China, the further away you have to get from the United States'" (Cafiero, 2023)

For Saudi Arabia, joining the SCO would offer significant financial benefits and foster ideological diversity, helping to reduce its isolation and accelerate its currently sluggish progress. Additionally, Saudi Arabia could contribute to strengthening the bloc's interbank consortium. However, despite support from Beijing and Moscow, there remains domestic resistance to integrating the SCO's financial infrastructure with the BRICS bank. Joining the SCO would also open up opportunities for Saudi Arabia's economy and companies to invest in diversified markets with better rates of return in line with the 2030 vision (Al-Sulami, 2023). Especially since the SCO has somewhat scaled back its initial security-focused approach in Central Asia and shifted more towards economic cooperation. Investment opportunities in Central Asia, including reconstruction in Afghanistan and

strengthening important trade ties with China and India, are the most important potential gains that Riyadh is counting on. In addition to China, Russia is the other pole of the SCO, and Saudi Arabia does not hide its desire to develop relations with Moscow at all levels (Warestan, 2023).

Conclusion

Since World War II, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy has predominantly favored the West, particularly the United States. However, its focus has recently shifted eastward, with growing emphasis on building stronger ties and fostering relationships with Asian countries. This shift in Saudi Arabia's strategy in regional and international relations, along with Riyadh's adoption of new positions, reflects its move away from a unilateral reliance on the West. Instead, it underscores a clear focus on strengthening its policy in East Asia. By deepening ties with Asian powers, particularly China, Saudi Arabia signals a deliberate "look east" approach, emphasizing the importance of diversifying its alliances and engaging with the dynamic economies of the region. This effort by Saudi Arabia to create a balance between Eastern and Western powers, along with reducing regional tensions, which eliminates the excuse for the West to play a greater role in West Asia, is the main goal of Saudi Arabia in making a change in its foreign policy, the policy of looking east.

In recent years, Riyadh has been working to establish itself as an independent geopolitical player with a multipolar strategy. Joining organizations like BRICS and the SCO will strengthen Saudi Arabia's ability to forge sustainable, long-term partnerships with its key trading and energy partners, China and Russia. This move also allows the kingdom to gradually distance itself from the intense competition among the rising great powers, positioning itself as a more balanced and strategically autonomous actor on the global stage.

Joining BRICS and the SCO will create an opportunity for the Saudi economy and companies to invest in different markets with better rates of return on investment – which is what Vision 2030 seeks. Wealthy Saudi Arabia's membership in BRICS and the SCO could expand the geographical reach of the two organizations. On the other hand, the "pivot to Asia" policy could be Saudi Arabia's response to Iran's "look east" strategy and bring geopolitical balance to the Middle East region for Saudi Arabia.

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