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To cite this article: Jun Ding & Qian Zhao (2019): The Diplomatic Strategy of GCC States: A Case Study of Saudi Arabia's Recent Changing Diplomacy, Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, DOI: [10.1080/25765949.2018.1564860](https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2018.1564860)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2018.1564860>



Published online: 26 Jan 2019.



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The Diplomatic Strategy of GCC States: A Case Study of Saudi Arabia's Recent Changing Diplomacy

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ABSTRACT

As an important regional organization in the Middle East, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) faces many challenges in its current development. Today, trapped in intensified internal and external problems, as well as caught in increasingly crises, the GCC is standing at a difficult crossroad. The diplomatic strategies of the GCC in general since its establishment have always been looking towards the West, especially towards the United States (the US). All member states of the GCC maintain close ties with the US and their diplomatic strategies are heavily dependent on it. However, in recent years, the drastic changes in the Middle East and of the international political patterns have posed severe challenges to the GCC states' diplomatic strategies, which have also brought some opportunities with which the GCC states begin to change their diplomatic strategies significantly. Under the new circumstances, the GCC states, especially Saudi Arabia, are extricating themselves from the diplomatic tradition of looking westwards while beginning to make remarkable changes towards looking and going eastwards instead, gradually showing their trend of diversification and autonomy in diplomacy and trying to balance their diplomacy among regional and world powers, also between the East and the West. Therefore, any development on diplomatic orientation of the GCC states, especially Saudi Arabia, along with the accompanying impact on the geopolitical situation in the Middle East, deserves sustained attention. Indeed, it is really a problem for the GCC states to go eastwards or go westwards.

KEYWORDS

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC); Saudi Arabia; diplomatic strategies; east Asia and the gulf

1. Introduction

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), an important regional organization in the Middle East, has faced various challenges recently. With the increasingly worrisome internal strife and external interference, the GCC states face a series of crises, standing at tough crossroads. Based on the situation, the changes and trend of their diplomatic strategies have become key issues worthy of great attention and research. Since the establishment in 1981, the diplomatic strategies of the GCC have always tended

towards the West, especially the United States. Its close relation with the US as an ally for many decades has resulted in heavy dependence on the US in diplomatic strategies. However, in recent years, dramatic changes in both the geopolitical situation and international political landscape of the Middle East have brought serious challenges to the diplomatic strategies of the GCC states. These crises could have been opportunities to hasten significant diplomatic improvements for the GCC states, pushing the diplomatic strategies of GCC states especially Saudi Arabia to change from the tradition of looking westwards to looking eastward under the new situation. The most striking example of this strategic change is the diplomatic trend change of Saudi Arabia, the major member of the GCC. The vital sign of this change is King Salman's successive visits to China (March 2017) and Russia (October 2017). In the traditional practice of international political strategy, China and Russia are both 'Oriental' powers to the 'Western' world, and both countries are important members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The values of the SCO in international politics, security and diplomacy are very different from those of Western powers.

In fact, with the exception of Saudi Arabia, the diplomacy of other members of the GCC has also changed with regional and international geopolitical transformations. For example, Qatar, as a traditional ally of the US, hosting America's most important military base in the region, is adjusting and changing its diplomacy. Qatar pursues a good-neighborly and friendly policy towards the regional power, Iran, instead of practicing a policy of confrontation and hostility like the US. In addition, Qatar has signed a strategic partnership with China in November 2014. Qatar has had no such grand strategic agreement with the US or any other western powers hitherto. In July 2018, at the Eight Ministerial Meeting of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum held in Beijing, China and Arab countries had agreed to establish a "future-oriented strategic partnership of comprehensive cooperation and common development". As members of the League of Arab States, the GCC states have not established such a strategic relationship with Western countries. Now, for the diplomacy of GCC members, it is indeed a rather significant and realistic strategic issue whether to 'go eastwards' or to 'go westwards'. Obviously, the GCC members are shifting their diplomatic strategies out of the tradition of 'looking westwards' and beginning to undergo a marked change to 'looking eastwards' even 'going eastwards'. The GCC has gradually represented a pluralistic and autonomous tendency, seeking balanced diplomacy among the regional and world powers as well as between the East and the West. Therefore, the further development on diplomatic orientation of the GCC states, and its resultant impact on the geopolitical patterns of the Middle East region are worthy of attention. Saudi Arabia's changes in diplomatic trend and its impact on the Middle East in recent years are essential topics that deserve continuous attention and deep exploration.

2. Promoting High-level Interactions with China, the US, Russia and other Countries, while Seeking for Diplomatic Balance among Great Powers

In recent years, Saudi Arabia has made efforts to promote relations with foreign great powers, trying to leverage the powers of the surrounding countries to dispel the diplomatic difficulties around while seeking for diplomatic balance among great powers.

Throughout 2017, Saudi Arabia successfully conducted high-level diplomatic interactions with China, the US and Russia, the three major global powers, focusing on deepening and expanding comprehensive strategic cooperation with China, meanwhile consolidating and strengthening an ally-based relation with the US, at the same time promoting and developing relations with Russia.

On 15–18 March 2017, King Salman led a large delegation to visit China. The two heads of state held talks and agreed to maintain the developmental momentum of the bilateral relations, to enhance pragmatic cooperation in various fields, and to promote the continuous new results of the comprehensive strategic partnership between the two. Chinese President Xi Jinping stated that Sino-Saudi relations had the potential and conditions for greater development, and both sides should grasp the general direction of development of the bilateral relations to create a better future for Sino-Saudi relations. King Salman agreed with President Xi Jinping's statement and evaluation about the relations between the two states and expressed his great satisfaction with the high-level development of the Saudi-Chinese relations. He emphasized that Saudi was willing to deepen the cooperation further and promote the comprehensive strategic partnership between the two through the 'Saudi-China High-level Joint Commission' platform.¹ During King Salman's visit, Saudi Arabia and China signed 14 agreements and memorandums of understanding, including 35 cooperation projects with totally 65 billion dollars, covering various fields, such as economy, trade, energy, military, security and so on.² The visit of the King to China not only shows Saudi Arabia's urgent desire to further develop and enhance its relations with China, while strengthening its all-round cooperation with China; it also shows the strengthening of its diplomatic trend of 'looking eastwards' and 'going eastwards'. Saudi Arabia's former professional diplomat Abdullah commented: 'Saudi's foreign policy has become more active and confident', which has sent a message to Washington: 'Yes, you are our friend, but we also have other choices.'³

Actually, Saudi Arabia began to show its trend of 'looking eastward' in diplomacy more than a decade ago, especially focusing on developing relations with China. A prominent example is that as early as January 2006, King Abdullah chose China as the first country to visit after his succession. This is also the first time for the Saudi King to visit China after the establishment of Sino-Saudi diplomatic relations in 1990.

However, the US is still Saudi Arabia's 'old friend', which it cannot forsake, and its 'backer' in the security field. While Saudi Arabia's diplomacy is 'looking eastwards' and 'going eastwards', its traditional 'westward looking' diplomatic orientation is still very strong. While King Salman enjoyed his visit to China, the Deputy Crown Prince and Minister of Defense Mohammad Ben Salman visited the US and met with President Trump. The two sides discussed topics, such as Saudi-US relations and the security situation in the Middle East. This visit aimed at establishing mutual trust with the new

¹Xi Jinping holds talks with Saudi's King Salman, agreeing to push China-Saudi Arabia comprehensive strategic partnership for constant and new achievements', Xinhua News Agency, (16 March 2017), available at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-03/16/c_1120641501.htm

²X. Han, Q. Chen, and X. Li, 'China, Saudi Arabia sign \$65 billion in cooperation deals', Global Times, (16 March 2017).

³Z. An, 'Interviewing on Liu Zhongmin and Zhu Weilie about Saudi Arabia's diplomacy in the new era', (2 March 2017), Shanghai Observer, available at: <https://www.shobserver.com/news/detail?id=46223>

Trump administration as well as bridging the rift between Saudi and the US that appeared during the period of President Barack Obama. The king sought strong support from the US regarding Saudi Arabia's regional affairs. He also sought to consolidate the traditional ally-based relations between the two sides. Two months later, on 20 May 2017, Trump picked Saudi Arabia as his first diplomatic debut and the two sides signed a multi-billion-dollar arms sales agreement. The US said that it aimed at protecting the security of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf region and enhancing the regional antiterrorism capabilities. Trump also held summits in Riyadh with 55 Arab-Islamic states. Leaders of the US and Saudi Arabia unanimously called on the regional states to fight terrorism and actively respond to the Iranian threat. Trump's visit not only excited Saudi Arabia and suggested that Saudi Arabia was backed up in response to 'regional threats', but also provided the US with huge arms sales orders and helped it earn a lot. However, it never contributed to the peace and stability of the Middle East area. As commented in CNN, 'The purpose of Trump's visit is to order arms instead of promoting peace.'⁴

It is noteworthy that just a few days after Trump left Saudi Arabia, Mohammed Ben Salman, the Deputy Crown Prince and Minister of National Defense visited Russia on May 29 to develop relations with Russia. President Putin met with him and suggested that the relations between Russia and Saudi Arabia were developing smoothly and they were very much looking forward to King Salman's visit. On 4 October 2017, King Salman officially visited Russia, which is the King's first visit to Russia since the establishment of the two countries' diplomatic relations. This was a great move of Saudi diplomacy in recent years. On October 5, Putin held a grand welcoming ceremony at the Kremlin and held formal talks with King Salman. Putin said that the visit of King Salman was a landmark event that would provide a good impetus for the development of the bilateral relations; King Salman said that the development of Saudi-Russian relations would have beneficial effects on international peace and security as well as the global economic development. During King Salman's visit to Russia, the two sides signed 14 cooperation documents covering various fields, such as economy, trade, military, oil and gas, including an energy investment project of about 1 billion dollars. What attracted attention the most was that Saudi Arabia ordered the S-400 air defense system from Russia. For Saudi Arabia, which has long pursued pro-American diplomacy and relied completely on the US in military and security fields, and had just signed a huge arms sale agreement with the US, it undoubtedly has its own important strategic considerations by such a move.

King Salman's visit to Russia demonstrated Saudi Arabia's intention to pursue a more autonomous and balanced diplomatic strategy with great powers, indicating that Saudi Arabia is no longer willing to tie its own security interests and diplomatic strategy solely to the US. For Saudi Arabia, this multi-national diplomacy in dealing with the great powers is a significant and huge strategic adjustment. Some media commented that, 'The 'unbelievable' partnership between Moscow and Riyadh marked a drastic change of the wind direction since the Cold War era.'⁵ During the period

⁴Trump's first visit to Saudi Arabia and other countries causes much controversy, US diplomacy once again focuses on the Middle East', *People's Daily*, (23 May 2017).

⁵Z. An, 'Saudi King Salman visits Moscow historically, why the former rivals are 'dear to each other'', (6 October 2017), *Shanghai Observer*, available at <http://www.jfdaily.com/news/detail?id=67340>

between March and April 2018, Crown Prince Muhammad Ben Salman visited the UK, the US and France, further showing that while Saudi continued to consolidate its relations with the US, it was actively seeking a balanced diplomacy with foreign countries especially with China and Russia. At the same time, it also clearly shows Saudi Arabia's tension in diplomatic strategy between the new trend of 'looking eastwards' and the historic tradition of 'looking westwards'. Certainly, this tension will have a major and lasting impact on the future diplomatic strategic tendency of Saudi Arabia and even other GCC states.

3. Sparing no Effort to Develop Diplomacy in Asia while Trapped again in Peripheral Relations

From February to March in 2017, King Salman led a large team to start the trip to Asia for a month. Besides the visit to China, he also visited Malaysia, Indonesia, Japan, and Brunei. Malaysia is the first stop of King Salman's Asian trip. During the visit, the two sides agreed on enhancing cooperation in energy, trade, economy, security, culture and other fields, and signed contracts, including a petrochemical investment agreement of 7 billion dollars as well as some other multiple bilateral cooperation agreements. During the visit to Indonesia, the two sides discussed some important issues like energy cooperation, extremism and the fight against terrorism. They signed 11 cooperation agreements involving energy, trade and investment, marine fisheries, small and medium-size enterprises, aviation, education, health, religion, transnational crimes crackdown and some other fields. Saudi Aramco and the Indonesian National Petroleum Corporation have reached a \$6 billion project on refinery upgrade and expansion. In Japan, King Salman met with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and the two sides stated that they would strengthen cooperation in promoting Saudi Arabia's economic diversification. The two leaders jointly issued an agreement document entitled 'Vision 2030 between Japan and Saudi Arabia', which includes supporting Saudi Arabia's construction of a special economic zone, facilitating the entry of Japanese companies into Saudi Arabia, and promoting cooperation in the fields of renewable energy and seawater desalination.

As to the King Salman's Asian trip, the media seems to focus on his luxurious lineup and grand parade, but what behind the luxurious appearance in fact is his increasingly potential worry. It was exactly the series of major crises and challenges which burned Saudi Arabia with anxiety that forced the old King with an age of over 80 to step forward personally with the aim of opening up new space for Saudi Arabia's economic development and foreign relations. Therefore, King Salman's trip to Asia is undoubtedly one of Saudi Arabia's most important foreign events in recent years. It is a strategic diplomatic move in Saudi's foreign relations under a changing, complicated international and regional situation, highlighting Saudi Arabia's multiple strategic considerations and great practical concerns in domestic and foreign affairs. As for the economy, due to the continuously low international oil prices in recent years, Saudi Arabia has been forced to seek economic diversification; meanwhile, 'Strengthening cooperation with the Asia-Pacific region and attracting Asian investors will drive Saudi Arabian domestic economic transition to go forward to a large

extent.⁶ Politically, Saudi Arabia's peripheral relations have continued to deteriorate in recent years and its status kept declining in the geopolitical game, especially with the tense relations with Iran. Their confrontation has weakened Saudi Arabia's status as the leader of the Islamic world. Therefore, the Asian trip to some Islamic countries, such as Malaysia and Indonesia, also aimed at enhancing Saudi Arabia's influence in the Islamic world and consolidating the power of the Sunni anti-terrorism camp.

Saudi Arabia broke off relations with Qatar in 2017 after breaking off with Iran in 2016, resulting in another major diplomatic and security crisis in the Middle East. On 5 June 2017, Saudi Arabia announced that it had cut ties with Qatar, the member of the GCC. Together with Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and some other states also severed relations with Qatar. Saudi Arabia and other states accused Qatar of undermining regional security and stability and supporting terrorism. While the trigger for this event stemmed from a rumor regarding an alleged statement by the Emir of Qatar supporting Iran. However, the official of Qatar subsequently clarified that the site was hacked and the content of the speech was not true. Regardless, after the summit in which Saudi Arabia and the US had called for a concerted effort to respond to the 'terrorist vanguard', a contrary tone to the 'antiterrorist' idea of Saudi Arabia and the US did undoubtedly make Saudi Arabia and other states feel 'offensive'. Therefore, Saudi Arabia not only ignored Qatar's explanation, but also further implemented the sea-land-air blockade along with other states that had cut ties with Qatar, thus deepening the crisis. Iran, Turkey, and other regional states took the opportunity to draw over Qatar and intensify their penetration in the Gulf region. The US was even more deeply involved in it and constantly provoked behind the scenes. Saudi Arabia and other states put forward a series of conditions for reconciliation, including the closure of Al-Jazeera TV stations and the reduction of diplomatic relations with Iran, which Qatar deemed unacceptable because they would be detrimental to its sovereignty. Attempts at mediation have all failed and the crisis has not abated.

The current diplomatic crisis with Qatar is a major event in Saudi Arabia's peripheral relations in recent years. The series of geopolitical changes triggered by this crisis will have a long-term negative impact on Saudi Arabia and the GCC states and even the Middle East, which become important variables in the future development of the region. As for Saudi Arabia, the crisis has once again trapped it in peripheral relations, throwing it in an awkward place. This caused damage to the GCC, Saudi Arabia's important platform for exerting regional and international influence. It also resulted in instrumentalizing and politicizing, as well as dividing the national counterterrorism strategies and adding complication to the geopolitics in this region. Therefore, in the end, Saudi Arabia may have to pay unexpectedly for the crisis. It may ultimately lead to the 'All Loss' to GCC as the price for the 'Half Loss' to Qatar as expected. Just as the Arab old saying goes, 'The stick waver will hurt himself in the end'.

On 4 November 2017, Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, who was in Saudi Arabia, suddenly announced his resignation from his position of Lebanon's prime minister. He accused Iran and its agents of destroying peace and stability in Lebanon and in the Middle East. His announcement of resignation had puzzled the world, especially

⁶Z. An, 'Saudi King leads 1500 people to visit the six Asian countries', Jiefang Daily, (3 March 2017).

since he had met with Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's Foreign Affairs Advisor before leaving for Saudi Arabia. The mystery prompted a variety of speculations. Clearly, Ben Salman intimidated Saad Hariri and put him under house arrest. After the mediation from France, Saad Hariri returned to Paris and resumed his post. The resignation event almost triggered a diplomatic crisis in the Middle East. The role Saudi Arabia has played in it reflects the complex situation in Saudi Arabia's peripheral relations.

In recent years, Saudi Arabia has been deeply involved in unsustainable chaos in Yemen and Syria. Riyadh, has suffered continuous missile attacks from Yemen, and the security crisis continues to deepen. Meanwhile, with the increasing tensions with Iran, it also entered competition openly and secretly with Turkey, the great power in the region. When Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman visited Egypt in April 2018, he even publicly described Iran, Turkey and extremist forces as the 'Evil Triangle' in the Middle East. In addition, he accused the highest spiritual leader of Iran of being the new 'Hitler' in the Middle East⁷ and claimed that Saudi Arabia would launch a war against Iran in the future. Iran responded that this showed that the Crown Prince was immature in politics, warning him not to forget about the lesson of the war launched by Iraq's former President Saddam Hussein.⁸ The new Crown Prince's obtrusive remarks show his aggressiveness against neighboring diplomacy and its eagerness to compete for the leading position among regional powers. Iran has kept good cooperative relations with Russia and China. Turkey, as a member of NATO, is increasingly moving away from the West and gradually driving closer to Russia and China. Both states have even expressed their willingness to join the SCO. Based on the situation, if Saudi Arabia obstinately clings to the regional game against Iran and Turkey, it will have a negative impact on its eastward strategy, which will eventually trap it in the quagmire of geopolitics. In addition, the murder case of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on 2 October 2018 damaged the image of the Saudi Arabia again greatly. The aftermath of the case once again brought severe challenges to Saudi Arabia's diplomacy. The case may invite more possibilities for changing the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Turkey, as well as with the NATO states.

Saudi Arabia's peripheral diplomacy in recent years can be described as lackluster. The turbulent surrounding environment and the confrontational peripheral relations have seriously hampered Saudi Arabia's smooth reform and development. Only when Saudi Arabia's authorities hold long-term perspective, adhere to the goodwill of getting along with its neighbors, and uphold the principle of mutual benefit and win-win cooperation, create a safe and stable peripheral environment as well as a normal and harmonious peripheral relationship, can they finally walk out of this besieged diplomatic dilemma.

⁷Media: 'Saudi's Crown prince: the spirit leader of Iran is the new 'Hitler' in the Middle East', (25 November 2017), Phoenix New, available at: http://news.ifeng.com/a/20171125/53580555_0.shtml

⁸World Wide Web: 'Crown Prince states to launch war against Iran in the next 10-15 years', (31 March 2018), available at: <http://world.huangqiu.com/article/2018-03/11734498.html>

4. Conclusion

In recent years especially since 2017, Saudi Arabia's internal affairs and diplomacy have undergone dramatic changes. The upper level of the royal family has established a power center with the new Crown Prince Mohammed Ben Salman as the core through major political actions, such as fighting corruption, realizing a smooth transition and a downward move of gravity of the royal power center. The new Crown Prince has continuously introduced various new policies to enhance women's rights and interests, to weaken religious power, to improve the investment environment, to promote social openness, and to restructure the economy and promote diversified development. In terms of diplomacy, Saudi Arabia has successfully conducted high-level interactions with countries such as China, the US, and Russia, seeking a more autonomous and balanced diplomacy among great powers. It also pays attention to opening up space for diplomacy in Asia and strengthens its strategic trend of 'looking eastwards' and 'going eastwards'. At the same time, it actively safeguards and consolidates its traditional ally-based relations with Western countries especially the US. However, Saudi Arabia has faced deep chaos in Yemen and Syria, while its tensions with Iran have worsened. It poisoned relations with Qatar by triggering a crisis in the region, and bringing about serious negative impacts on the security and stability of the Gulf region and the joint development of the GCC states.

The reasons for the major changes in Saudi Arabia's recent diplomatic strategy can be analyzed from many angles and aspects including both internal and external factors, which is not part of this article. However, a few points can be mentioned here: Firstly, the power structure of the Saudi royal family has changed and the power center with the new Crown Prince as the core is taking shape. Regardless of internal affairs and diplomacy, the new generation of leaders is extremely ambitious for changing. Secondly, the continuous drop of the international oil prices affects the change in Saudi Arabia's industrial structure with energy export as its economic pillar before. Therefore, the importance of the 'Oil Weapon' in the country's diplomatic strategy has been weakened. At the same time, due to the growing economic capacity of Asian countries, especially China, the role of Western countries as the traditional trade partners of the GCC states has gradually being replaced by Asian countries. This can be explained by the continuous increase in trade volume between the GCC states, especially Saudi Arabia and China, as well as other Asian countries. Thirdly, Islam is also an important diplomatic resource to Saudi Arabia, which boasts two holy cities; however, this resource seems to be a double-edged sword that the authorities have realized the danger of self-hurting if not used properly. Fourthly, the situation in the Middle East has undergone major changes since the 'Arab Spring', and many of Saudi Arabia's neighboring countries were trapped in upheavals and turmoil; Thus, the dramatic changes related to the surrounding situation have also brought tremendous pressure on Saudi Arabia's internal affairs and diplomacy. Fifthly, the international geopolitical situation has also undergone great changes. The world powers are actively involved in Middle Eastern affairs; indeed, the US has readjusted its Middle East policy, and Trump has almost completely overthrown Obama's policy in this area, forcing Saudi Arabia from the outside to change its diplomatic policy and strategy.

For the leaders of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, the practical challenge is whether to move to the East or the West, toward peace and development or to conflicts and chaos. Therefore, it matters to the stability and the development of Saudi Arabia as well as the collective development of the GCC states even the overall stability of the Middle East. The questions are how they should handle the diplomatic relations with the neighboring countries and the great powers, how to effectively slow down and resolve the tension between 'going eastwards' and 'going westwards', how to create a positive surrounding environment, and how to prevent regional turbulence and conflict caused by worsening the neighboring relations. Obviously, these are the major diplomatic challenges, which will test the political wisdom of the new generation leaders of Saudi Arabia in the future.

Acknowledgement

This paper was submitted to the Gulf Research Meeting held by the Gulf Research Centre Cambridge, at the University of Cambridge, from 31 July to 3 August 2018. The authors are indebted to Prof. Tim Niblock, Amb. Talmiz Ahmad, Prof. Degang Sun, Dr. Rasmus Gjedso Bertelsen, Dr. Gaafar Karar Ahmed and other scholars during the meeting for their invaluable advice on the earlier version.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This article is one of the research outcomes of the Academic Leading Project "Research on the Contemporary Social Transformation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia" [JX01X0212018032], a project in its second term held by Shanghai International Studies University.