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Some aspects of Saudi Arabia's interaction with China and India in the 21st century

Andrei S. Derbenev¹  , Zhanna V. Petrunina² 

¹Georgy Arbatov Institute for the U.S. and Canada Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences,
Moscow, Russian Federation

²Komsomolsk-na-Amure State University, *Komsomolsk-na-Amure, Russian Federation*
 istfak_x_chelovek@mail.ru

Abstract. The relevance of the research topic is due to the transformation of Saudi Arabia into one of the leading partners of India and China in the Persian Gulf. The purpose of the study is to reveal the structural changes in Saudi Arabia's policy towards China and India. Beijing and New Delhi recognize the role of the House of Saudis in regulating world oil prices and the impact that Saudi Arabia's hydrocarbon policy has on the economies of Western and Eastern countries. Based on the synchronous-comparative research method, the authors show the shifts of what magnitude can occur in relations between these states, when the elites are able to competently use each other's considerable capabilities. However, China and India's relations with Riyadh are determined not only by energy. Trade and economic, investment, military, scientific, and humanitarian spheres are promising areas of dialogue between these countries. It has been proven that there is an important political component in Saudi Arabia's strategic thinking. The royal family is determined to work with China and India to create an alternative to its relations with the United States and the EU. In this case, the kingdom will be able to minimize Western pressure on issues such as democratization, terrorism, the economic situation, etc. The authors have identified the causes and features of the dynamics of Saudi Arabia's rapprochement with Asian giants, whose interaction will accelerate in the coming years, but this will not become a panacea for Riyadh, but rather will lead the parties to a difficult a foreign policy choice that they will seek to avoid.

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Некоторые аспекты взаимодействия Саудовской Аравии с Китаем и Индией в XXI в.

А.С. Дербенев¹  , Ж.В. Петрунина² 

¹Институт Соединенных Штатов Америки и Канады имени академика Г.А. Арбатова Российской академии наук, Москва, Российская Федерация

²Комсомольский-на-Амуре государственный университет, Комсомольск-на-Амуре, Российская Федерация

 istfak_x_chelovek@mail.ru

Аннотация. Актуальность исследования обусловлена мощным скачком в динамике и качестве растущего взаимодействия Саудовской Аравии с Индией и Китаем. Пекин и Нью-Дели признают роль Дома Саудидов в регулировании мировых цен на нефть и влияние, которое углеводородная политика Саудовской Аравии оказывает на экономики стран Запада и Востока. Опираясь на синхронно-сопоставительный метод исследования, авторы показывают сдвиги каких масштабов могут происходить в отношениях между государствами, когда элиты способны грамотно использовать немалые возможности друг друга. Однако отношения Китая и Индии с Эр-Риядом определяются не только энергетикой. Торгово-экономическая, инвестиционная, военная, научная, гуманитарная сферы являются перспективными направлениями их диалога. Цель исследования — выявить структурные изменения в политике Саудовской Аравии в отношении Китая и Индии. Доказано, что в стратегическом мышлении Саудовской Аравии есть важная политическая составляющая. Королевская семья настроена взаимодействовать с Китаем и Индией, чтобы создать альтернативу своим отношениям с США и ЕС. В этом случае королевство рассчитывает минимизировать давление Запада по таким вопросам, как демократизация, терроризм, экономическое положение и т.п. Авторы выявили причины и особенности динамики сближения Саудовской Аравии с азиатскими гигантами, взаимодействие которых ускорится в ближайшие годы, однако это не станет панацеей для Эр-Рияда, а, скорее, приведет стороны к трудному внешнеполитическому выбору, которого они будут стремиться избежать.

Ключевые слова: Королевство Саудовская Аравия, Видение Саудовской Аравии 2030, Цифровой Шелковый путь, Один пояс — один путь, Эр-Рияд, Саудиты, США

Вклад авторов. Авторы внесли равный вклад в разработку концепции, сбор данных и их интерпретацию, подготовку статьи к публикации.

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Introduction

The Middle East continues to be a significant component of the foreign policy agenda of major global powers. The evolution of international politics pursued by these nations has exerted a substantial influence on the developmental trajectories of the region. Delegates participating in the sixth online session of the International “Primakov Readings” (held in July 2020) observed that the contemporary Middle East lacks cohesion and stability and cannot be regarded as “a unified subject of international politics¹”. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is widely regarded as a leading contender for regional leadership, possessing both the requisite political clout and substantial natural and economic resources, which makes it a subject of considerable interest to both the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of India, who are engaged in a fierce competition for dominance in the Middle East.

The relevance of the present study derives from two intertwined processes. On the one hand, Saudi Arabia seeks to diversify its economy, given its status as the world’s longtime leading oil exporter, and identify and engage with suitable trade partners, which is instrumental in meeting that target. On the other, Saudi Arabia is competing with economic powerhouses like China and India for domination in the Middle East.

The 9/11 terrorist attacks in Washington, followed by US-led invasion into Iraq, made Saudi Arabia reconsider “special relations” between Washington and Riyadh. Saudi Arabia initiated a policy of courting major Asian states with the aim of diversifying its political alliances. Relations between Riyadh and Beijing,

¹ Primakov Readings: Middle East in the Modern World. *Interfax*. 03.07.2020. URL: <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/715680> (Accessed: 26.07.2023).

as well as those between Riyadh and New Delhi are on the rise due to shifting political and economic circumstances, and these trends are unlikely to reverse in the near future.

Major oil-related and socio-economic aspects of Saudi Arabia development are addressed in the works by a prominent Russian orientalist A.M. Rodriguez [1]. Principal directions of China and India's policy in the Middle East in the 21st century are discussed in the writings of A.V. Frolov [2], S.I. Lunev [3], M.F. Ilminskaya [4], T.L. Deitch [5], Zhen Yu [6].

Some aspects of bilateral political, economic and humanitarian co-operation between China and Saudi Arabia were reflected in the studies of M.T. Al-Sudairi [7], M. Chaziz [8], A. Leber [9].

Russian and international scholars delve into the topics of trade and economic interdependence connecting India and Arab nation. Principal areas of cooperation between India and the Persian Gulf states are considered in the works of D.A. Makarevich [10], I. Sarvara [11], P.K. Pradhan [12], Z. Hussain [13].

The issues of crosscutting interests of China and India across various global regions are explored in the studies conducted by V.Y. Portyakov [14–16].

The study aims to reveal strategic directions of cooperation between the three states at the current stage, in view of principal vectors of development of Saudi-Chinese and India-Saudi relations, and to identify the factors hindering deeper interaction. The fact that the topic has not yet received sufficient academic coverage especially in relation to Saudi Arabia, lends, as it seems, considerable weight to the relevance of the proposed study, since Saudi Arabia interaction with China and India in the post- COVID era has not been thoroughly reflected in Russian academic writings.

Given the growing importance of Saudi Arabia's interaction with China and India, especially with the expansion of cooperation within BRICS, their collaborative experience is significant not only in itself but also as an example for understanding intergovernmental cooperation in the Middle East and beyond. The authors of this study adhered to the principles of objectivity, historical accuracy, scientific rigor, and evidence-based conclusions. A comprehensive comparative analysis was employed to substantiate their findings.

China and India have a long independent history of engagement with the Arab world.

In the contemporary period, China's relations with the Middle East in general and Saudi Arabia in particular intensified in the 1980s. In 1990, China and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) established formal diplomatic relations. In 1996,

the countries established a joint Saudi-Chinese commission on economic, trade and technical co-operation, with bilateral contacts in the humanitarian sphere gaining momentum. In 1999, Chinese leader Jiang Zemin paid his first visit to Saudi Arabia. The establishment of comprehensive relations between Beijing and Riyadh fostered consistent development of trade and economic cooperation between the two nations [17; 18].

In the late 20th century, China started exporting energy resources from Saudi Arabia, with their further refinement at Chinese industrial enterprises. The deal laid foundations for long-term cooperation between Saudi oil company Aramco and Chinese oil corporations. The volume of oil exports from Saudi Arabia to China demonstrated a consistent upward trend. In 2000 it totaled \$1.5bn, and in 2010 it reached \$25bn [19. P. 221], making China a major buyer of Saudi oil on a global scale. At the same time, China continued to increase its exports to Saudi markets, supplying textiles, electronics and metal products. By 2003, China had become the sixth largest exporter of its products to Saudi Arabia, surpassed only by the United States, Japan, South Korea, India, and Singapore.

The process of political rapprochement between India and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia began in 1955 with the Bandung Conference (a meeting of 29 Asian and African countries held in Bandung, Indonesia, 18–24 April 1955), where India and Saudi Arabia held their first ever discussions over the prospects for relations between the two countries.

According to Pakistani historian Isra Sarwara, the India-Saudi partnership in the second half of the 20th century was influenced by two factors — the relationship between two world leaders, the USSR and the USA, and Saudi Arabia's stance of support for Pakistan in the Indian-Pakistani conflict of 1965. [11. P. 52].

The fall of bipolar Yalta-Potsdam system of international relations had a negative impact on India's political ties with the Arab states. Gradually, India's desire to bolster its position among developing countries was replaced by a targeted diplomacy [2. P. 604].

The process of rapprochement between India and Saudi Arabia rose to prominence after the Cold War came to a halt, with economic factors being of particular importance. At the turn of the 20th–21st centuries, trade and economic ties between India and Saudi Arabia were demonstrating marginal growth. While in 1991 India's share in Saudi Arabia's foreign trade turnover was 2.3%, by 2004 it had increased to 5.85%. In the list of goods supplied by Saudi Arabia to India, oil and liquefied natural gas occupied the most significant position. Over the period 1995–2000, India's oil imports from the Middle East varied according

to circumstances: in 1995–1996 it was \$1.539 million, in 1996–1997 — \$2.140 million, in 1999–2000 — \$1.691 million [11. P. 53]. Cooperation between India and Saudi Arabia has enabled Indian petrochemical companies to launch a number of projects with Saudi Aramco, including an oil refining complex in the Red Sea region. In the early 21st century, India became the fourth largest exporter of its own products to Saudi Arabia, and the tenth largest importer of Saudi goods.²

Saudi Arabia's interest in expanding dialogue with China and India was highlighted by Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud's visit to these countries in 2006. The king's visits resulted in Saudi Arabia signing a series of agreements with each of the parties on mutually beneficial cooperation in oil and gas, trade, investment, science, education, and culture.

The main directions of dialogue between Saudi Arabia and China in the 21st century

Since Chinese leader Xi Jinping announced the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative in 2013, China has consistently expanded investment, trade, and economic co-operation with Saudi Arabia, remaining one of its major trading partners and the largest buyer of its oil.

In the 2020s, Sino-Saudi trade turnover has been growing steadily. By 2020, bilateral trade totaled \$65.2bn, more than three times the volume of trade with the US in the same year³. In 2021, Sino-Saudi trade reached \$87.3bn, with China's exports to the Kingdom totaling \$30.3bn and China's imports from Saudi Arabia totaling \$57bn⁴ (Table 1).

In 2021, Saudi Arabia exported \$48.7bn worth of products to China. Principal products Saudi Arabia exported to China were crude oil (\$38.3bn), ethylene polymers (\$2.19bn) and acyclic alcohols (\$1.81bn). Over the past 26 years, exports from Saudi Arabia to China have been increasing by 20.4% per year, from \$392 million in 1995 to \$48.7 billion in 2021⁵.

² Saudi Arabia: Asian tour of King Abdullah. *RIA Iran.ru*. 07.02.2006. URL: https://www.iran.ru/news/analytics/37345/Saudoovskaya_Araviya_aziatskoe_turne_korolya_Abdally (accessed: 26.07.2023).

³ Lehr D. China's shifting Middle East policy. *Arab News*. 23.03.2023. URL: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2274256> (accessed: 26.07.2023).

⁴ Alhamawi L. How China became Saudi Arabia's top trading partner, revived ancient Silk Road. *Arab News*. 08.12.2022. URL: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2213231/amp> (accessed: 26.07.2023).

⁵ China and Saudi Arabia Trade. OEC — The Observatory of Economic Complexity. URL: <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/chn/partner/sau> (accessed: 25.07.2023).

Table 1

Saudi Arabia's trade with China, the USA, the EU, billion dollars

Saudi Arabia Trade by Years	with China	with the USA	with the EU
2018	63.5	38.2	62.7
2019	78.1	28.3	57.4
2020	67.2	20.6	43.8
2021	87.3	25.1	53.1
2022	106	34.7	75.6

Source: compiled by A.S. Derbenev, Z.V. Petrunina based on statistical and information resources⁶.

According to Al Arabiya TV channel, by the end of 2022, China ranked first on imports and exports in trade with Saudi Arabia in the last 5 years⁷.

Following an exchange of official visits in 2016–2017, the two sides have elevated the relationship to the level of a strategic comprehensive partnership and are making concerted efforts to maintain and develop it. For example, during Xi Jinping's visit to Saudi Arabia in December 2022, the two sides signed a 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement' and approved joint actions to implement the Saudi Vision 2030 and China's 'One Belt, One Road' initiative⁸.

Beijing's interests towards Riyadh are gradually expanding beyond the energy sector [17]. China and Saudi Arabia are willing to expand cooperation in such

⁶ Saudi Arabia's Trade with China Surpasses US and EU combined. *Pakistan Defence*. URL: <https://pdf.defence.pk/threads/saudi-arabias-trade-with-china-surpasses-us-and-eu-combined.761257/> (accessed: 28.07.2023); China and Saudi Arabia Trade. OEC — The Observatory of Economic Complexity. URL: <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/chn/partner/sau> (accessed: обращения: 28.07.2023); Saudi-US trade records 39% increase in 2022: report. Arab News. 10.07.2023. URL: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2320346/business-economy> accessed: 28.07.2023; Obeid G. Saudi FM praises Arab-Chinese relations as business conference opens in Riyadh. *Al Arabiya*. URL: <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/saudi-arabia/2023/06/11/Saudi-FM-praises-Arab-Chinese-relations-as-business-conference-opens-in-Riyadh> accessed: 28.07.2023; European Union, Trade in goods with Saudi Arabia. European Commission. URL: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_saudi-arabia_en.pdf accessed: 29.07.2023.

⁷ China scores best in the volume of bilateral trade with Saudi Arabia. *Greater Asia*. 08.12.2022. URL: <https://bigasia.ru/kitaj-vyshel-na-pervoe-mesto-po-obemu-dvustoronnej-torgovli-s-saudojskoj-araviej/> (accessed: 25.07.2023)

⁸ President Xi Jinping held talks with Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. 09.12.2022. URL: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/rus/zxxx/202212/t20221211_10988854.html (accessed: 27.07.2023).

areas as telecommunications, aerospace, culture, education, health, science and technology, tourism, media and security⁹.

Saudi Arabia is one of the most promising markets in the Middle East for China's technology exports as part of the Digital Silk Road project. By the early 2020s, China had made significant progress in robotics, space industry, and artificial intelligence. The Chinese authorities are making considerable efforts to digitalize its economy and increase the number of Internet users domestically and in the Middle East [6. P. 301]. Beijing is planning to involve Saudi Arabia in the implementation of the 14th five-year plan for the development of digital economy, unveiled by the PRC in January 2022, a proposition that unquestionably resonates with the interests of Riyadh.

China's positive experience of modernization in all spheres of life is being studied and actively used by Saudi Arabia in the course of implementation of the Saudi Vision 2030 program¹⁰, adopted in 2016 to diversify the country's economy and reduce its dependence on oil. One part of Vision 2030 is a digital transformation initiative (Digital Saudi Arabia 2030). According to the newly established Digital Government Authority, Saudi Arabia is expected to allocate \$24.7bn, or 21.7% of total national expenditure¹¹ to create digital economy and implement advanced technologies.

China's participation in Saudi Arabia's digitalization projects is becoming increasingly apparent. Currently, innovative Chinese companies (Huawei, Alibaba, Dahua and Hikvision) help modernize Saudi telecommunications networks, and are engaged in 5G construction, NEOM smart city development, mobile payment system development, surveillance technologies and other high-tech areas.

Further prospects for mutually beneficial co-operation between China and Saudi Arabia were discussed at the X Arab-China Business Conference held in Riyadh in June 2023. During its opening session, Saudi Investment Minister Khaled Al-Falih announced the launch of a modern 'silk road' between China and the Arab states. Such a project is in the interests of both sides, allowing China to gain a stronger foothold in the markets of Middle Eastern countries. At the same

⁹ Baijie A. China, Saudi Arabia deepen ties. *China Daily*. 17.03.2017. URL: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-03/17/content_28586508.htm (accessed: 25.07.2023).

¹⁰ VISION 2030. URL: <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/> (accessed: 25.07.2023).

¹¹ Radwan R. Why China is a natural partner for Saudi Arabia in its quest to become a tech innovation leader. *Arab News*. 08.12.2022. URL: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2212481/saudi-arabia> (accessed: 25.07.2023).

time, Riyadh declares its readiness to act as a ‘bridge connecting the Arab world with China’¹².

Saudi Arabia perceives China as a pivotal partner in a multipolar world. As the largest economy in the Middle East and the fastest growing in the world as of 2022, it is keen to attract more Chinese investment. At the 10th Arab-China Business Conference, the two countries signed a number of Sino-Saudi agreements, including a \$5.6bn agreement between the Saudi Ministry of Investment and Human Horizons, a Chinese company that develops autonomous driving technology and manufactures electric vehicles under the HiPhi brand, as well as a trilateral agreement between the Saudi Ministry of Industry, SABATCO Group, which specializes in railroad projects, and Hong Kong-based Android developer Hibobi Technology Ltd¹³.

Chinese companies also gain support from a venture capital firm eWTP Arabia Capital, opened in 2019, in their endeavours to expand into the Middle East. In 2022, the company met with more than 500 Chinese companies and investors keen to operate in the Saudi market. Beyond conventional investment domains, Chinese investors discern significant potential in such sectors as the automotive industry, mobile advertising, payment systems, gaming, and online games¹⁴.

In the context of the situation unfolding in Ukraine, China is also engaged in negotiations with Saudi Arabia concerning the supply of arms. This particular domain of interaction is not a novel development in the context of Sino-Saudi relations. The official trade in arms between the two states commenced in the mid-1980s. Currently, the main items procured by Saudi Arabia from China are reconnaissance drones and air defence systems¹⁵.

At the same time, Riyadh is employing Chinese specialists to produce drone payload systems within the country. To this end, Saudi Advanced Communications

¹² Shvaykovsky A. Saudi Arabia announces the launch of a new ‘silk road’ between the PRC and Arab countries. *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*. 11.06.2023. URL: <https://rg.ru/2023/06/11/saudovskaia-araviia-obiavila-o-zapuske-novogo-shelkovogo-puti-mezhdu-kr-i-arabskimi-stranami.html> (accessed: 26.07.2023).

¹³ Arab and Chinese entrepreneurs concluded more than 30 deals at a business conference in Riyadh. *Greater Asia*. 14.06.2023. URL: <https://bigasia.ru/arabskie-i-kitajskie-biznes-krugi-zaklyuchili-bole-30-sdelok-na-delovoj-konferenczii-v-er-riyade/> (accessed: 26.07.2023).

¹⁴ Chinese firm flock to Saudi Arabia in Middle East gold rush. *ThinkChina*. 12.05.2023. URL: <https://www.thinkchina.sg/chinese-firms-flock-saudi-arabia-middle-east-gold-rush> (accessed: 26.07.2023).

¹⁵ Xie K. Why is Saudi Arabia looking to China to buy weapons after years of arms deals with the US? *South China Morning Post*. 08.12.2022. URL: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3202245/why-saudi-arabia-looking-china-buy-weapons-after-years-arms-deals> (accessed: 26.07.2023).

and Electronics Systems Co., ACES formed a partnership with China Electronics Technology Group Corporation (CETC), a state-owned defence consortium specializing in dual-use electronics, in 2022. This initiative is in alignment with the objectives outlined in Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, allowing the Kingdom to localize the production of imported equipment and create new jobs, thus increasing the contribution of various sectors to the national economy¹⁶.

Sino-Saudi military relations have so far been limited to joint military exercises, first held in 2016.

Despite China's potential for a larger number of deals, Chinese arms exports to Saudi Arabia amount to less than 1%¹⁷. This is due to significant American influence over Riyadh on a number of issues, including that of military cooperation.

Sino-Saudi relations are further cemented by Riyadh's position in support of Beijing's policy on the situation in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, which helps exclude religion as a factor for inciting hostilities and destabilizing relations between China and the countries of the Muslim East. Islam in China is professed by Hui, Salar, Dongxiang, Baoan, Uighur, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Tatar and Tajik. According to various estimates, the number of Muslims in China totals about 21 million¹⁸. The highest Muslim body in China is the Chinese Islamic Association. According to US State Department, there are more than 40,000 Islamic places of worship in China, almost half of which are located in the northwestern province of Xinjiang¹⁹. Along with forging stronger bilateral business ties with Riyadh, Beijing is determined to promote a multilateral dialogue as well. In December 2022, Chinese leader Xi Jinping visited Riyadh to attend the China-GCC Cooperation Council summit and the first Sino-Arab summit.

¹⁶ Saudi firm ACES partners with China Electronics to locally manufacture UAV payload systems. *Arab News*. 08.03.2022. URL: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2037136/business-economy> (accessed: 25.07.2023).

¹⁷ Al-Tamimi N. Saudi Arabia's once marginal relationship with China has grown into a comprehensive strategic partnership. Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS). 18.08.2022. URL: <https://merics.org/en/saudi-arabias-once-marginal-relationship-china-has-grown-comprehensive-strategic-partnership> (accessed: 27.07.2023).

¹⁸ Cook S. Islam: Religious Freedom in China. *Freedom House*. URL: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/2017/battle-china-spirit-islam-religious-freedom> (accessed: 25.07.2023).

¹⁹ China (includes Tibet, Hong Kong, and Macau). 2005 Report of International Religious Freedom. Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. U.S. Department of State. 08.11.2005. URL: <https://webarchive.library.unt.edu/eot2008/20081105145610/http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2005/51509.htm> (accessed: 28.07.2023).

China's expanding diplomatic capabilities on the world stage are evidenced by the talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran held in the Chinese capital in March 2023, during which the Middle Eastern states managed to restore relations after a hiatus of almost seven years²⁰. The role played by Beijing in facilitating the agreement between Riyadh and Tehran is indicative of two key factors. Firstly, it shows China's growing influence on the global stage. Secondly, it demonstrates the capacity of polarized Arab world to resolve complex issues without the need for US patronage.

Thus, China is pursuing a proactive policy towards Saudi Arabia. In addition to a traditional sphere of trade in raw materials, China employs mechanisms that promote dialogue in other areas. Beijing's foreign policy course meets the interests of Saudi politicians, who are seeking opportunities to diversify the country's economy.

Current state of affairs between India and Saudi Arabia

Modern relations between India and Saudi Arabia are characterised by extensive economic and trade ties. India is in dire need of stable supplies of Saudi hydrocarbons, but recurrent conflicts in the Middle East constitute a major concern for Indian policymakers [19].

At present, the Republic of India is a vibrant and stable economy. The Government of India is keen to develop relations with the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The Indian economy, while having initiated its industrial development trajectory at a later stage than other countries, has been able to capitalize on the availability of relatively inexpensive labour, advancement of scientific and technological capabilities, and rapid expansion of the service sector. More than 2.6 million Indians work in Saudi Arabia, remitting more than \$8bn annually²¹ to their home country.

The expansion of India's presence in the Middle East continued throughout the 2010s, a trend that accelerated notably following Narendra Modi's of BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party-Indian People's Party) appointment as Prime Minister in 2014.

²⁰ Iran and Saudi Arabia agree to normalize relations. *TASS*. 10.03.2023. URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/17237023> (accessed: 25.07.2023).

²¹ Navigating Shifting Geopolitics: India-Saudi Arabia Economic Ties in Focus. *India Briefing*. 28.04.2023. URL: <https://www.india-briefing.com/news/trends-in-india-saudi-arabia-economic-ties-amid-shifting-geopolitics-27986.html/> (accessed: 19.05.2023).

The government of N. Modi adjusted the country's foreign policy course, which was expressed in its 'Look West' policy [11. P. 58]. Modi's ambition was to transform India into a dominant regional power. Between 2014 and 2018, he undertook several significant diplomatic trips to Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Iran, and ultimately succeeded in signing bilateral cooperation treaties on defence, energy, trade and investment. Despite predictions that Indian foreign policy would reorient towards Israel after the BJP came to power, Modi's first official visits were to Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Since the mid-2010s, there has been a marked increase in the level of contacts between India and Saudi Arabia. The two nations have been taking steps to address pressing economic and social issues. In 2016, N. Modi's talks with the Saudi government focused on the partnership in the energy sector. In 2016, India accounted for a mere 6% of global energy production [3. P. 606]. India is a net importer of hydrocarbon resources from various countries in the Persian Gulf, resulting in its significant reliance on regional supplies. Notably, Saudi Arabia is a primary supplier of oil to India, whereas Qatar assumes a comparable role in the supply of natural gas.

Authorities in India attach great importance to material and social conditions of Indian guest workers in Saudi Arabia, whose number reached about 3 million in the mid-2010s²². Indian migrants work mainly in the country's construction sector and send most of the income they earn in the Middle East back home, stimulating the growth of the Indian economy, enabling Indian families to pay for medical care and children's education, and, in the long term, changing their social status and rising to the middle class. However, the situation for Indian workers in Saudi Arabia remains precarious. For example, the fall in global oil prices in 2016 led to economic hardship in the kingdom, resulting in mass layoffs of Indian guest workers, loss of wages and protests²³.

Another important component of Saudi-Indian partnership is trade and economic cooperation. Despite fluctuations, for nearly a decade, India's imports from Saudi Arabia surpassed its exports to the Saudi state (Table 2).

Major exports from India to Saudi Arabia include engineering goods, rice, chemicals, textiles, food products and ceramic tiles.

²² Skosyrev V. Indian construction workers in Saudi Arabia are starving. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*. 02.08.2016. URL: https://www.ng.ru/world/2016-08-02/6_india.html (accessed: 26.07.2023).

²³ Ibid

Table 2

India's trade with Saudi Arabia (2014–2022), billion dollars

Years	India's imports	India's imports	Всего
2014–2015	28.10	11.16	39.26
2015–2016	20.32	6.39	26.71
2016–2017	19.94	5.13	25.07
2017–2018	22.06	5.41	27.47
2018–2019	28.48	5.55	34.03
2019–2020	20.37	4.35	24.72
2020–2021	25.60	8.69	34.29
2021–2022 (April–December)	22.65	6.63	29.28

Source: *India Saudi Arabia Trade*. India Brand Equity Foundation. URL: <https://www.ibef.org/indian-exports/india-saudi-arabia-trade> (accessed: 18.05.2023).

According to American researcher Stephen Cook, in the Middle East, India remains at a distinct disadvantage despite importing 59 per cent of its oil from the Gulf and the fact that millions of Indians work in the region, sending home billions of dollars in remittances²⁴. The country faces considerable influence from China on the situation, and despite considerable success of India's government, it appears to be an outsider compared to China with its 'One Belt, One Road' policy.

Over the period 2014–2020, economic cooperation between India and Saudi Arabia was largely focused on the energy sector, trade in food, consumer goods and chemicals with a consistently high share of Indian imports. In 2017, bilateral trade showed some decline, and yet, in 2020, Saudi oil replaced Iraqi oil in the Indian market. In March 2021, India, despite its growing demand for hydrocarbons, had to slightly reduce oil imports from Saudi Arabia due to rising global oil prices and an outbreak of COVID-19²⁵.

Indian-Saudi cooperation also covers other areas of importance for both countries. Saudi Arabia is making significant efforts to develop information and communication technologies [20], hence its interest in strategic partnership with

²⁴ Cook S. *The rivalry of major powers in the Middle East*. URL: https://cdn.cfr.org/sites/default/files/pdf/discussion-paper-by-cook-final_russian_1.pdf (accessed: 27.11.2021)

²⁵ India reduces oil purchases from Saudi Arabia. *OilResurs*. 30.03.2021. URL: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/energy/oil-gas/india-to-cut-saudi-arabian-oil-imports-and-buy-more-from-us/articleshow/81549950.cms?from=mdr> (accessed: 09.07.2022).

India in the field of cyber security. India, with its nuclear weapons and enormous demographics, is interested in ensuring the security of maritime cargo.

Cooperation between Indian and Saudi business is also growing. One of Saudi Aramco's major PARTNERS is an Indian company Reliance that operates in energy, petrochemicals, etc. The company is owned by a well-known Indian businessman M. Ambani.

In February 2019, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman paid an official visit to India. He met with the Prime Minister and a number of senior officials. The visit was aimed to improve long-standing ties between the two countries. Both sides agreed to enhance bilateral trade relations. The Saudi prince expressed his expectation of increased Saudi investment in India, which could reach \$100 billion in the next few years (significant Saudi funds have been invested in an oil refinery project in the state of Maharashtra, as well as joint projects in infrastructure, industry and agriculture)²⁶. In the 2020s, Saudi Arabia is investing significant sums in India's oil industry, technology and innovation, and wind energy projects. India, in turn, is investing in Saudi IT technology²⁷.

According to I. Sarwar, Crown Prince's Asian tour was aimed to garner support from prominent figures in the region, as anti-Saudi sentiment was beginning to grow in Turkey and the United States following the murder of opposition journalist J. Khashoggi, which dealt a heavy blow to Saudi-American relations [11. P. 60].

In October 2019, Prime Minister N. Modi of India paid a return visit to Saudi Arabia. Following the visit, he noted that India-Saudi Arabia ties had long been evolving from mere buyer-seller relations to a strategic partnership. In his interview with Saudi Arab News, Modi emphasized that India valued Saudi Arabia's role as an important and reliable supplier of hydrocarbons²⁸, a stance further confirmed by agreements reached in February 2019.

The interview also highlighted other significant issues, including the enhancement of work-life conditions for Indian migrants in Saudi Arabia and

²⁶ Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman pledges commitment to Saudi-Indian relations. *Arab News*. 21.02.2019. URL: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1455216/saudi-arabia> (accessed: 29.01.2022). Indian PM Narendra Modi: 'We value the Kingdom's vital role'. *Arab News*. 30.10.2019. URL: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1575756/saudi-arabia> (accessed: 01.12.2021).

²⁷ Saudi-Indian relations. *Invest India. National Investment Promotion and Facilitation Agency*. URL: <https://www.investindia.gov.in/blogs/launch-india-kingdom-saudi-arabia-startup-innovation-bridge-india-taiwan-startup-innovation> (accessed: 28.07.2023).

²⁸ Indian PM Narendra Modi: 'We value the Kingdom's vital role'. *Arab News*. 30.10.2019. URL: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1575756/saudi-arabia> (accessed: 01.12.2021).

the facilitation of access to the Indian RuPay payment system in Saudi Arabia²⁹. This would help streamline payments and remittances from Indian guest workers. Another topic of discussion was the development of smart cities, given Saudi Arabia's extensive experience in their construction. At the end of the talks, the sides condemned international terrorism and expressed their intention to sign several agreements concerning cooperation in areas such as security, military-industrial sector, market regulation, and the prevention of drug trafficking. A significant development was the establishment of the Strategic Partnership Council³⁰, which, as per the agreement, is to convene biennially.

In 2020, the relationship between India and Saudi Arabia continued to thaw, as evidenced by Prime Minister N. Modi's telephone conversation with King Salman of Saudi Arabia, during which the leaders exchanged views on the novel Coronavirus pandemic.

India and Saudi Arabia are exploring opportunities to enhance their military cooperation. In December 2020, India's Chief of Army Staff M. Naravan visited Saudi Arabia and held talks with senior military officials. On 9–11 August 2021, India and Saudi Arabia conducted a joint naval exercise Al-Mohed Al-Hind in the Persian Gulf³¹.

Another factor that influenced Indian-Saudi relations was the policy adopted by Pakistan in the Middle East. Specifically, Islamabad's decision not to endorse the coalition against the Yemeni Houthi in a military campaign waged by Riyadh presented itself as a strategic opportunity for India. According to Nicholas Blarel of the Institute of Political Science at Leiden University, India saw this as a chance to boost relations with Saudi Arabia³².

For Indian strategic planners, any ally that can act as a counterweight to Pakistan in the Islamic world is important. New Delhi initially sought to draw closer to Tehran, but such efforts have stalled in recent years as Iran has adopted an increasingly aggressive anti-Western stance. Now, Saudi Arabia is coming to the

²⁹ Indian PM Narendra Modi: 'We value the Kingdom's vital role'. *Arab News*. 30.10.2019. URL: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1575756/saudi-arabia> (accessed: 01.12.2021).

³⁰ India and Saudi Arabia agreed to establish a Strategic Partnership Council. *Radio 'Voice of Vietnam'*. 30.10.2019. URL: <https://vovworld.vn/ru-RU/новости/индия-и-саудовская-аравия-договорились-о-создании-совета-стратегического-партнерства-797326.vov> (accessed: 30.11.2021).

³¹ Bishnoi T. 'Al-Mohed Al-Hind': The first-ever joint naval exercise between India & Saudi Arabia. *NewsOnAir*. 12.08.2021. URL: <https://newsonair.com/2021/08/12/al-mohed-al-hind-the-first-ever-joint-naval-exercise-between-india-saudi-arabia/> (accessed: 19.07.2021).

³² Blarel N. *Between Israel and the Saudis: India's new policy in the Middle East*. URL: <https://carnegie.ru/2016/04/28/ru-pub-63478> (accessed: 01.12.2021).

fore as India's primary ally in the area. It appears that Iranian nuclear ambitions have contributed to the rapprochement between New Delhi and Riyadh.

The Indian military has been waging a fight against separatist groups in the northern state of Kashmir for several years. The Saudis finance numerous Pakistani and Kashmiri groups that perpetrate terrorist attacks, a state of affairs which the Indian government is keen to see addressed. In this respect, the two sides have repeatedly emphasized that their common challenge remains the fight against terrorism. In the course of meetings between the Indian Prime Minister and the Saudi King, the two governments signed a memorandum of understanding on terrorism and transnational crime [21; 22]. The Indian government, through its agreements with Saudi Arabia, sought to ensure that Indian and Pakistani terrorists would be unable to escape from Indian intelligence agencies, while Saudi Arabia has expressed its willingness to provide India with intelligence information that would contribute to security in the region.

A factor of religion also plays a role in India-Saudi relations. Muslims in India account for 14.4% of the country's population or about 202 million people³³. However, Saudi-funded religious schools in India represent a significant obstacle to closer cooperation between the two nations. The Salafi movement has capitalized on India's liberal environment and Muslim concern over resurgent Hindu nationalism.

The situation is further aggravated by Saudi Arabia's associations with jihadist groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba³⁴, responsible for attacks on Indian citizens³⁵. According to the Ministry of Minority Affairs, in 2018–2019, India was home to 24,010 madrassas, of which 4,878 were unrecognized³⁶.

In February 2020, India witnessed a surge in anti-Muslim riots, with at least 46 people, predominantly Muslim, losing their lives in Delhi alone³⁷.

³³ Ning A. Muslim and Islam in India. *Asia Highlights*. URL: <https://www.asiahighlights.com/india/muslim-and-islam> (accessed: 28.07.2023).

³⁴ Organization recognized as terrorist and prohibited on the territory of the Russian Federation.

³⁵ What's Terror? India, Saudi Differ. *Hindustan Times*. 27.01.2006. URL: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/what-s-terror-india-saudi-differ/story-wntMFsVS3VoXIQGIXq2L.html> (accessed: 28.07.2023).

³⁶ Kumar N. 'Nearly 20% of madrasas are unrecognized'. *The Sunday Guardian*. 15.02.2020. URL: <https://sundayguardianlive.com/news/nearly-20-madrasas-unrecognised> (accessed: 28.07.2023).

³⁷ Ellis-Petersen H, Rahman SA. Delhi's Muslims despair of justice after police implicated in riots. *The Guardian*. 16.03.2020. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/16/delhis-muslims-despair-justice-police-implicated-hindu-riots> (accessed: 28.07.2023).

The current state of affairs between India and Saudi Arabia is generally positive, although there are some contentious issues between the two nations. One of them was the statement made by the Saudi Foreign Ministry in 2020, which described Kashmir as a disputed territory, a position that faced fierce opposition from India. Such a stance almost amounts to sacrilege in India³⁸, given the sensitivity of the problem of Kashmir in Indian politics. Tensions were further exacerbated in October 2020, when Saudi Arabia issued a 20 Saudi riyal banknote depicting Kashmir outside Indian borders. Another contributing factor is Saudi Arabia's reluctance in its assumed capacity of the guardian of the holy places in Islam to deal with the oppression of Muslims in India, while India turns a blind eye on the legislation that targets its citizens. Additionally, India opposes Wahhabism, practiced in Saudi Arabia, which also contributes to the complexity of Saudi-Indian relations. Nevertheless, economic benefits still outweigh many contentious issues.

As shown above, India-Saudi Arabia relations have deep historical roots. In the 21st century, Indo-Saudi cooperation continues to grow in importance, influencing many processes of regional and global significance. India remains dependent on Saudi Arabia as one of the world's leading oil exporters. Its growing demand for hydrocarbons prompts New Delhi to diversify the pool of partners able to satisfy its resource needs. At the same time, instability in the Middle East makes India vulnerable to energy challenges.

Conclusion

Saudi Arabia holds a leading position in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and regulates world oil prices, which China and India are bound to take into account in their policies. China-Saudi and India-Saudi relations at the present stage are developing with due regard to the mutual interest of the parties in expanding comprehensive cooperation and enhancing dialogue in bilateral and multilateral formats.

China and India, seeking a sustained supply of energy resources, continue to prioritize the energy sector as a key area of cooperation with Saudi Arabia. At the same time, Beijing and New Delhi aspire to achieve closer cooperation with Riyadh in information and telecommunication technologies, e-commerce,

³⁸ India-Saudi Arabia Relationship is no longer cozy. *The Siasat Daily*. 27.09.2021. URL: <https://www.siasat.com/india-saudi-arabia-relationship-no-more-cozy-2198162/> (accessed: 02.12.2021).

transport and construction; cooperate on defence, counter-terrorism and other challenges; and create conditions for the diversification of small and medium-sized enterprises in the countries. China, India and Saudi Arabia are working to integrate national payment systems to boost trade and economic ties between them.

The current volume of trade between India and Saudi Arabia is lower than that of China and Saudi Arabia. The fact that China is performing better in its dealings with Saudi Arabia poses a challenge for New Delhi, and India intends to respond to this with a balanced policy. This policy will include the use of various mechanisms to enhance trade, boost economic ties, and strengthen military-political dialogue with Saudi Arabia. Some media even describe the strategy of Middle East partnership adopted by N. Modi as aggressive³⁹. Evidently, in a number of areas (trade and economic, investment, scientific, military), the interests of China and India may soon come to overlap, which will. Evidently, in various domains — such as trade and economics, investment, and scientific and military spheres — strategic interests of China and India are poised to overlap, which is likely to have a pronounced impact on the balance of power in the broader Middle East.

Riyadh welcomes better relations with both Beijing and New Delhi as serving Saudi interests. However, Sino-Indian rivalry (e.g., in the energy sector) in the Middle East could present Saudi officials with challenging dilemmas and result in the United States involvement in addressing the situation. The rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and China is a matter of concern for the United States, which perceives China as a competitor both in the region and on the global stage. In order to maintain influence over Saudi Arabia, Washington is actively working to forge U.S.-India ties, a policy seen by some as a destabilizing factor in the Sino-Indian-Saudi dialogue.

In order to enhance cooperation, countries seek to use a variety of forums for dialogue. China, India and Saudi Arabia are all members of the G20, which allows them to meet on the sidelines of its summits to address emerging issues.

China and India welcomed Saudi Arabia's decision to join the SCO as a partner in March 2023. This diplomatic initiative will allow the parties to continue to combat terrorism and advance endeavours to ensure international security.

³⁹A Foreign Policy: India gradually changing its approach in the Middle East. *IA Regnum*. 27.03.2019. URL: <https://regnum.ru/news/2599302.html> (accessed: 28.11.2021).

In terms of forging stronger ties between emerging economies, Saudi Arabia's offer to join the BRICS New Development Bank appears important and beneficial for China and India. Riyadh has been negotiating this proposal since May 2023. Closer ties with the BRICS countries will allow Saudi Arabia, on the one hand, to enjoy all the opportunities offered by the organization on equal terms, and on the other hand, to pursue a policy that is more independent of the West.

Humanitarian contacts can become another effective way to enhance trilateral interaction. In recent years, individuals from China, India and Saudi Arabia have increasingly embraced opportunities in tourism, education, youth exchange and intercultural dialogue.

Thus, China, India and Saudi Arabia are making efforts to boost cooperation. Concurrently, their collaborative endeavours hold the potential to influence prospective shifts in the balance of power within the Middle East, and, in the long term, the international arena as a whole.

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Information about authors:

Andrei S. Derbenev — Phd in History, Researcher, Department of Foreign Policy Studies, Georgy Arbatov Institute for the U.S. and Canada Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences (ISKRAN), 2 Khlebny per., bldg. 3, Moscow, 121069, Russian Federation, e-mail: istfak_x_chelovek@mail.ru ORCID: 0000-0003-0355-5100. SPIN-code: 9419-4787.

Zhanna V. Petrunina — Doctor of History, Professor, History and Culture Studies Department, Komsomolsk-na-Amure State University, 27 Lenin st., Komsomolsk-on-Amur, Khabarovsk territory, 681013, Russian Federation, e-mail: petrunina71@bk.ru ORCID: 0000-0003-0121-2147. SPIN-code: 4349-3852.