



RESEARCH PAPER

The Strategic Calculus of MBS's Foreign Policy in a Turbulent Middle East

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to analyze his strategies through application of balancing and over-balancing paradigms of neoclassical realism. This research is also an attempt to examine what are the foreign policy interests of Saudi Arabia in the Middle East especially in the context of two perennial conflicts. This study employs descriptive and historic approach to analyze the Saudi Arabia interest in middle east, furthermore primary and secondary data used to justify the argument. Since the discovery of oil, Saudia Arabia has become the apple of the eye of global powers. Being well aware of its significance in the region as well as global level, the Kingdom has strategically used its foreign policy to maintain win-win situation but at some intervals it had to face backlash as well due to its absolute centralized power, control over media and human rights issues. Emergence of Muhammad Bin Salman has once again brought Saudia Arabia in the lime light.

KEYWORDS Foreign Policy, Muhammad bin Salman, Neo-classical liberalism, Saudia Arabia, Transformational Leadership

Introduction

Saudi Arabia is making a valiant effort to reinvent itself on the global scene. The kingdom, whose GDP for the first time hit \$1 trillion in 2022, seeks a less dependent foreign policy from the US and an economy relevant to global transition of energy in the context of catastrophes of climate change. Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has been a great influence over the country's policies since he took the reign of the kingdom. He wants to strengthen his position of authority, prevent the nation off of its reliance on hydrocarbon exports, and establish the kingdom as a major middle power that advances its interests by deepening its connections abroad and gaining more influence on the regional and global stages. As Muhammad Bin Salman strives to achieve these objectives, Saudia Arabia is putting itself more and more at the forefront of crucial diplomatic and mediation initiatives. However, oil-rich kingdom's attempts at self-transformation are probably going to reach a ceiling that is not as high as it had hoped. Saudi Vision 2030, the flagship development project of Muhammad Bin Salman, was introduced in 2016. It serves as a useful framework for understanding many of the recent policy advances in Saudi Arabia .After assuming the power , Muhammad Bin Salman unveiled his new plan, while being appointed as minister of defense, deputy crown prince, and head of the recently established Council of Development and Economic Affairs. Today ,he rules as the prime minister and crown prince His capacity to see Saudi Vision 2030 through to completion is a major criterion for evaluating his effectiveness as a leader, at least for the time being. The main objective of Saudi Vision 2030 is to use economic diversification to better position Saudi Arabia to weather the worldwide shift to sustainable energy. In addition to implementing controversial domestic reforms, Muhammad Bin Salman has started pursuing a foreign policy that prioritizes diplomatic attempts to improve relations with Saudi Arabia's neighbors and settle long-standing problems both inside and outside of the Middle East . Saudi Arabia wants to strengthen its ties with other countries in order to attract more

foreign investment. A few examples include the extraordinary number of significant summits that Saudi Arabia hosted in the years since Muhammad Bin Salman came to power include those with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the United States, China, and several Central Asian nations. However, the kingdom uses more sophisticated geopolitical strategies. It has worked hard to settle conflicts with its neighbors and make a name for itself as a major player in regional and international diplomacy. The goal of this strategy is an improved economic environment in the area. Regional stability and security are essential for success and completion of Vision 2030. The redesigned strategy is also influenced by Saudi views that the United States has lost credibility in its long-standing de facto role as a guardian of Gulf security, increasing Saudi statecraft's need to forge a geopolitical environment that serves its objectives. At its core, Saudi Arabia is attempting to position itself so that it can have positive relations with all parties, even superpowers that are at odds with one another, and where disagreements on particular matters can be tolerated without causing a rift in relations. Saudi Arabia has likewise taken this stance in relation to regional issues. Side by side with UAE, the leaders of both Gulf states are confident and assertive, and they no longer submit to the US's binary "with us or against us" demands. It is showing up as a deepening of links with Asian countries, especially China and India, and a diversification of ties with the US, which has long been the main foreign power in the Gulf. This is partly due to changing trade patterns.

According to Emile Hokayem, head of regional security at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, "Saudi Arabia and the UAE see more opportunities than risks in this changing world order, and they think they have the policies and instruments to become poles of the emerging multipolar world." They use a very transactional, adaptable, and opportunistic attitude. The days of expecting complete alignment from them are long gone. In the international system, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia possesses the necessary capacities and systemic influence to be categorized as a middle power. However, because of its activities, which deviate from the typical normative or behavioral tendencies of this class of states, the kingdom is frequently overlooked in the pertinent literature. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia does not support the liberal-democratic system, and it frequently prioritizes its own interests before attempting to unite with other middle powers. Saudi Arabia's goal of leading the Islamic world which is bolstered by abundant natural resources has a major influence on the country's foreign policy. The following section will discuss research question and corresponding research objectives to determine MBS foreign policy.

Theoretical Framework

This paper combines the concepts of transformational leadership and neoclassical realism into an extensive theoretical framework to examine Muhammad Bin Salman's impact on Saudi Arabia's foreign policy. Transformational leadership theory, originally developed by American political scientist James MacGregor Burns in the late 1970s, is the best-known and most influential leadership theory (Eaton, Bridgman, & Cummings, 2024). A well-defined plan is used by accomplished political leaders to translate their ideas into action. Leaders that possess high levels of analytical, political, and emotional intelligence can forge ahead with bright futures that include material prosperity, economic expansion, and human well-being. Unfortunately, there aren't many leaders like this in developing nations, where corruption and greed are rampant and institutions are frequently weak. In these situations, responsible leadership has the most potential to bring about the most change. An approach to foreign policy analysis known as neoclassical realism looks at the nature of the international system the political framework in which states interact in order to better understand international politics. Neoclassical realists, starting from neorealism, contend that while states conduct their foreign and security policies in part in response to the opportunities and constraints of the international system, their responses are also influenced by unit-level factors like leader perceptions, state-society relations, the makeup of their domestic political regimes, and strategic culture. (Ripsman, 2017) posits, "Neoclassical realism is a relatively modern attempt to combine the focus on domestic level

institutions, perception issues, and leadership concerns that classical realists raised with the scientific rigor and causal primacy of the international system that characterized structural realism, or neorealism. Neorealists begin with the assumption that states' foreign and security policies are primarily a response to opportunities and constraints presented by the international system, but that these responses are influenced by unit-level factors like leader perceptions, state-society relations, the makeup of domestic political regimes, and strategic culture". However, the neo-classical realist theorists did not define the 'over-balancing' phenomena while discussing the approach of rational states towards their foreign policy analysis. (Juneau, 2024) has fulfilled this gap by providing explanation about 'over-balancing' criteria of analysis of foreign policy. That criteria involves "in depth analysis of independent, dependent and intervening variables to explain sub-optimal behavior of states through commitment of resources to counter a threat, to predict sub-optimal causation of behavior of state and to prescribe the over balancer to identify its mistakes". This research attempts to provide a comprehensive analysis of Muhammad Bin Salman's leadership style and a nuanced assessment of his influence on Saudi Arabia's foreign policy choices by combining transformative leadership and 'balancing-,over-balancing paradigm of neo classical realist theory.

MBS's Transformative leadership and its impact on Foreign Policy of Saudia Arabia

Three characteristics serve as a general definition for Mohammed bin Salman. Initially, an almost brash feeling of confidence in oneself. Secondly, an unrelenting force that is nearly unparalleled in the contemporary chronicles of this slumbering society during the majority of the 20th century. Third, his political instincts, which occasionally err but always serve as a guide. Salman bin Abdul Aziz al Saud, the present King of Saudi Arabia, is the father of Muhammad Bin Salman, who has almost all political power and support. Thus, Muhammad Bin Salman is one of King Abdul's hundreds of grandsons. Aziz was the last Al Saud monarch to have the kind of one-man dominance currently possessed by Muhammad Bin Salman. He founded the most recent Saudi state in 1932. This is a period of significant change and crisis for Saudi Arabia. The Crown Prince presented his ambitious Vision 2030 plan to wean the nation off of its excessive reliance on the diminishing earnings from oil and the Saudi from their severe dependence on government assistance paid for by oil profits. In order to achieve this, his vision proposes the replacement of the outdated oil economy with a contemporary society in which Saudi citizens labor for the private sector rather than the government. More revolutionary still, he imagines Saudis living a social life in their own nation that includes everything from theme parks to resort hotels comparable to those in the West, as well as access to music, movies, and other forms of entertainment. He envisions a nation in which women are free to drive and work without the consent of a male guardian, and in which men and women can mingle in public without worrying about being detained by the Kingdom's intrusive religious police, whom he has marginalized. There is no typical Saudi like Mohammed bin Salman. The majority of Saudis aim to fit in with the group and not deviate from it. After his father, King Abdul Aziz, passed away in 1953, his uncles used consultation and consensus among the elder sons to run the Kingdom. This Crown Prince does not to follow tradition and acts independently. (House, 2019) analyzes the emergence of Muhammad Bin Salman to power while comparing him with his predecessors in their leadership style and policy making endeavors. It is stated , "At 33, the Crown Prince can't simply kick the can down the road as his predecessors have done. He could rule the Kingdom for 50 years or more. Without real economic reform, he understands he is likely to lead a nation of steadily declining wealth and power or worse yet, one that implodes into sectarian, tribal and regional divisions". Four basic concepts have always guided Saudi foreign policy. These include maintaining the country's territorial integrity, safeguarding the regime, fostering economic growth, and advancing the country's type of monarchical Islamic government. But, as the kingdom had limited military power and influence in its early years, leaders typically looked for protection from a superpower. Partnerships with the British after World War I and with the United States after World War II and up until the present were the forms of this. The Saudi state was founded in 1932. Because of its enormous oil

reserves and current position as the world's top oil producer, the Kingdom was able to establish itself as a strategic ally of the United States during the Cold War. The monarchy had to turn inward in order to survive, due to domestic issues. This was made possible in part by its opposition to communism and its capacity to form alliances with other Gulf States. As an aspirant regional hegemon in modern times, the kingdom has successfully maintained its geographical integrity, amassed substantial financial reserves and military equipment, and is prepared to use both force and money to further its own objectives. Because the nation is a monarchy, the king has a disproportionate amount of power to shape the course of state affairs, even though foreign policy and national interests of the Kingdom are determined by an elite-driven process. The assessment that the primary factor guiding Saudi foreign policy is the safeguarding of the domestic regime is noteworthy. Countering and containing Middle East instability has always been a top priority for Saudi foreign policy, as it helps to deter threats, reduces dangers to the unrestricted flow of oil exports from the Gulf, and supports the Kingdom's internal economic growth. This is much clearer now, especially with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's ascent to power in the mid-2010s. Implementing Vision 2030, the enormously ambitious socio-economic transformation program, is Saudi Arabia's top priority. The program's goal is to make Saudi Arabia into a modern, globally integrated knowledge economy that is less and less dependent on its hydrocarbon wealth. Supporting and facilitating this development is the main goal of Saudi foreign policy, in part by lowering the risks that instability or war in Saudi Arabia's surrounding areas provide to the Vision. This goal served as the motivation for many of the early Mohammed bin Salman period activities that brought Saudi Arabia widespread international censure and a reputation for belligerent foreign policy adventurism. With time, Saudi Arabia has refocused its foreign policy, maintaining its support for Vision 2030 as its overarching goal but attempting to use its diplomatic resources more gradually and sensibly. This entails experimenting with novel solutions to pressing problems while acknowledging that they might not be successful, and collaborating with other partners where appropriate, even in the face of opposition from US or other Western powers. (Calabrese, 2024) stipulates that under the leadership of Muhammad Bin Salma, Saudi Arabia seems to be pushing towards adopting an autonomous foreign policy based on preference to national interests over long standing alliance. The following section will delineate Muhammad Bin Salman's foreign policy with focus on two conflicts in region in order to assess his ability to balance and overbalance the behavior of kingdom in the context of regional politics of Middle East and interest of key global actors in the region.

Saudia Interest in Yemen

A 1,300-kilometer border separates the mountainous country, Yemen from Saudi Arabia. The Bab el-Mandeb Strait, also known as the "Gate of Tears" in Arabic, is a crucial shipping route that is used by much of the world's marine traffic and it is located along the Yemen's west coast. Yemen was the poorest nation in the Arab world prior to the start of its civil war in 2014. Yemen is a war-torn country and the long war is the result of sectarian conflict between political and tribal factions for accumulation of power. The struggle for power started following the unification of Northern and Southern part of the country in 1990's but the consequential spillover effects of Arab Spring has placed Yemen at the heart of proxy war in Middle East between Saudi Arabia and Iran, between Sunni and Shia ideologies. The alliance politics has made this issue a hotbed of global power politics as well. (Muzaffar, et. al. 2017; Muzaffar, 2018; Haddad, 2022) explains key local, regional and global players in Yemen conflict through interactive map.



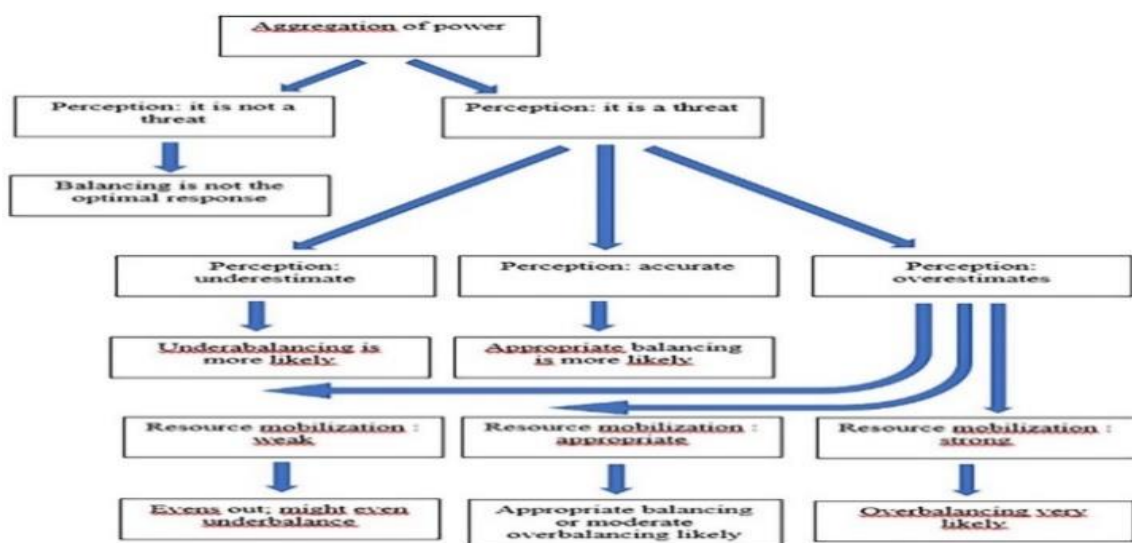
Figure no 1: Key Players Involved in Yemen Conflict, Source: (Haddad, 2022)

Saudia Arabia apparently entered the Yemen conflict when Houthis attempted to take the control of northwest of country and capital as a result of civil war and the government was forced to exile to Saudia Arabia in 2014. Saudia Arabia with its coalition partner UAE intervened through military and strategic support to other Yemini groups to fight and ouster Houthis. The coalition led strikes mostly killed the civilians and destroyed the infrastructure making condition worse for an average Yemini who already had been suffering with poverty. Saudia became unpopular among Yeminis when its bombs targeted civilian buildings instead of rebel hideouts. As per the report of armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project ACLED, a think tank that reports conflicts and war zones, a decade long civil war and Saudi led coalition support has deaths and famine in Yemen, “Hundreds of thousands of deaths from the fighting or its indirect consequences, such as hunger, the United Nations says. The devastating air campaign alone — carried out by a Saudi-led coalition has killed almost 24,000 people, a number that includes combatants and nearly 9,000 civilians, according to conservative estimation”. (Kelly & Mirza, 2022)

The Houthi movement strengthened its connections with Iran and gained ground since Saudi Arabia began intervening in Yemen in 2015. Thus, the influence of the Iranian-Houthi alliance was felt more and more outside of Yemen. Iranian support for it most likely started around 2009. However, Yemen was not a top priority for Iran at the time, so this early help was insignificant. The significant turning point occurred in March 2015 when Saudi Arabia formally began a military intervention in Yemen with the goal of driving out the Houthis and restoring President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi's internationally recognized government. Since then, the intervention has turned into a complete catastrophe. After a decade long intervention, Saudia decided to ‘off-ramp’ of the conflict in 2022 under Muhammad bin Salman’s leadership. This term is used by US policy makers while developing ‘a safe exit strategy’ from a conflict. Muhammad Bin Salman used his influence to pressurize Yemen’s exiled president, Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi residing in Saudia to cede power. He transferred the power to presidential council to lead negotiations with Houthis but the key members of that council including Rashad Al-Alimi were close aides of Saudia Arabia. The strategy of Muhammad bin Salman stipulated that he successfully ‘off-ramped’ the conflict while retaining control over internal politics of its southern neighbor side by side with securing upper hand in comparison to Iran in proxy war and clearing his image in

the eyes of US. (Is MBS Looking for an Exit Ramp in Yemen?, 2022). The recent developments highlight the role of China as a mediator between Saudi Arabia and Iran to end the hostilities in Yemen and resolve the conflict through negotiations. By analyzing MBS's policies through the prism of neo-classical realism, one can better understand how Saudi Arabia's actions in Yemen and the Middle East are shaped by the interaction between domestic political factors and external threats. However, (Khan, et. al 2019; Juneau, 2024) explains that Saudi Arabia's response towards Yemen conflict under the leadership of Muhammad Bin Salman as 'neo-classical realism theory of over-balancing' as Saudi Arabia launched military campaign and imposed a maritime and air blockade that resulted in a costly war. Following figure shows (Juneau, 2024)'s classification of elements of balancing and over balancing in neo-classical realism theory.

Figure no 2: Classification of elements of balancing and over-balancing in neo-classical realism theory



Source : (Juneau, 2024)

He reiterates further, “A neoclassical realist theory of overbalancing, first, provides a nuanced explanation of Saudi Arabia’s decision to launch its large-scale intervention in Yemen. It leads to an explanation superior to single-factor accounts. It sacrifices parsimony by incorporating multiple variables, but it gains accuracy and specificity. It is also comprehensive as it explains how the regional balance of power in the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf in combination with domestic political processes in Saudi Arabia steered the country toward costly overbalancing”.

Daniel Levy, a president of US -Middle East project and a peace negotiator for Israel has published a cheat sheet that explains web of allies and foes in Middle East. (Levy, 2024) The sheet is interesting in a way that it clearly delineates the dimensions of regional politics and active global players in the region. Levy presents a critique of ‘The New Middle-East Map’ presented by Benjamin Netanyahu, the prime minister of Israel in United Nations in September 2023 and a diplomatic narrative espoused by Jake Sullivan, US National Security advisor that Middle East has become peaceful as it never used to be. US has been a traditional ally of Israel since its foundation in 1948 and their alliance went well to counter the influence of USSR in Middle East during cold war. US provides moral, economic and strategic support to it. But now the dynamics are shifting and Israel is building close ties with both China and Russia. Israel only has handful diplomatic relations in the region that ushered specifically after Abraham Accords but most of the states in region including Saudi Arabia neither have formal relations with Israel nor intend to do so as long as Israel retreats from

Palestinian land. Historically, Saudia has been the supporter of Palestinian cause and refused to recognize Israel. US is interested in establishing formal diplomatic relations between Saudia and Israel as the approval of custodian of holy sites of Muslims would bring the opportunity for Israel to be recognized by other oil rich Muslim states in region and beyond Middle East. Moreover, the nod of crowned prince Muhammad Bin Salman could avert Israel of criticism regarding its tyranny in Palestine. For Saudia Arabia, the establishment of formal ties with Israel is beneficial in terms of direct access to advanced military technology of Israel and upgradation of its status with US. In order to understand the potential of Saudia's establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel under the leadership of Muhammad Bin Salman, there is a need to analyze multiple factors that can play a decisive role. US has been actively pursuing this cause as it has dual purpose; to get Israel recognized by Muhammad Bin Salman and keep Saudia away from its rivals.

Historically US and Saudia have had mixed relations sometimes as an exemplary partnership and sometimes as estranged states working on opposite goals. US's relationship began with Muhammad Bin Salman when he visited US in 2018 in highly anticipated visit. Historically, oil played the greatest role in US-Saudia bilateral relations. Notably American oil corporations' interest in tapping into the massive oil reserves they believed lay beneath the sand in the kingdom, was, fittingly, the catalyst for the U.S. relationship with Saudi Arabia. In the late 1930s, they started looking for oil. Ibn Saud was excited about the money oil could bring in and about having Americans handle the labor instead of Europeans. He had a valid suspicion that the kingdom would soon become just another European empire's imperial domain if he chose to work with a British or Italian oil corporation. The United States was too far away to be considering imperialist plans in the Middle East. Exactly eight decades ago, in 1938, the first oil was discovered. Oil was another reason that heightened Franklin De Roosvelt's interest in the monarchy. Oil was burnt at an incredible rate during the Second World War. The president aimed to guarantee American availability to the greatest extent feasible. Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes informed the president in February 1943 that his agency thought Saudi Arabia had the world's biggest oil supplies. Less than a week later, despite Saudi Arabia's status as a neutral country, Roosevelt said that the country was "vital to the defense of the United States" and that it could obtain Lend Lease aid along with other warring nations. King Faysal and the US had a tense relationship during his reign as king. In 1963, Faysal opened up education for women and abolished slavery in an effort to modernize and restructure (Ottaway, 2021). The kingdom received significant backing from President John F. Kennedy. Later, in response to Richard Nixon's resupply of Israel during the 1973 Arab Israeli War, kingdom severed oil exports to the United States. There have been highs and lows in the Saudi-American relationship, which is complex and dynamic and continued long after Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman's visit.

However, 'The Khashoggi Murder' episode brought an extreme low in the bilateral relations of Us and Saudia Arabia. (Jamal Khashoggi: All you need to know about Saudi journalist's death, 2021) Jamal Khashoggi was a close aide of Saudia royal family as well as an advisor to government but in 2017 he opted for self-imposed exile to US after falling from favor of Saudi royal family. He started writing columns in Washington Post that used to criticize the policies of Muhammad Bin Salman. He was murdered while visiting Saudi consulate in Istanbul in 2018. Later, CIA released an assessment report that alleged Muhammad Bin Salman for giving the approval of murder of Kashoggi. It led to cut-off personal level ties between American president and Muhammad Bin Salman and US also imposed 'Khashoggi Ban' to impose visa restrictions for 76 Saudi nationals close to Muhammad Bin Salman. (Ottaway, 2021) believes that alleged involvement of Saudi prince in murder of Kashoggi strained US-Saudia bilateral relations'. But, US needed Saudia's support for Israel. American president Joe Biden visited Middle East in 2023 and finalized high level agreements with different stake holders including some strategic agreements with Muhammad Bin Salman related to Israel. Highly significant agreements included the opening of Saudi Airspace for civilian aircrafts of Israel and enhanced maritime security cooperation in strategic water ways like Red Sea. (Bazoobandi & Talebian, 2024) have well

explained the Iran element in the context of Israel's trade through strategic route of Red Sea. Biden administration understands the importance of alliance with Oil-rich kingdom in Middle East and Saudia has come to know its importance in this regard. US and Saudia have decided to sign a 'NATO Style' defense agreement that aims the provision of advanced US weaponry to Saudia to halt Chinese presence in the region. Saudia Arabia has played a strategic move by putting the condition of free state of Palestine as a bargain chip to halt Chinese presence in the Middle East. (Holland & Stone, 2024)

A complex interaction of balancing and over-balancing techniques is revealed when neoclassical realism is applied to evaluate Muhammad Bin Salman's foreign policy towards the United States, with specific reference to Israel and the influence of China. (Surkov, 2022) explains that neoclassical realism explains foreign policy decisions as a response to both internal and external influences by integrating systemic constraints with domestic concerns. Muhammad Bin Salman's strategy can be viewed as a balancing act that navigates the geopolitical objectives of major Middle Eastern states. In order to preserve a strategic partnership with the United States, Muhammad Bin Salman has adopted a pragmatist foreign policy. The necessity to protect Saudi interests in a geopolitical environment that is changing quickly due to China's increasing influence and the United States' shifting priorities motivates this strategy.

The neoclassical realist viewpoint can clarify how Muhammad Bin Salman's policies, in the context of U.S.-Israel ties, seek to oppose China's growing power in the Middle East and strike a balance between U.S. dominance. In order to preserve its power and offset China's growing influence in the area, the United States backs Israel as a strategic partner. Under the leadership of Muhammad Bin Salman, Saudi Arabia employs a strategy to contain regional dangers and maximize economic gains with China while avoiding entanglement with the United States. (Cengiz, 2020) explains Saudi Arabia's careful rapprochement with Israel, which is made possible by mutual interests and indirect collaboration against common enemies like Iran, is an example of this balancing act. To ensure that it can exercise its sovereignty and negotiate the bipolarity of the U.S.-China competition, Saudi Arabia is working to fortify its military and economic connections with China. This over-balancing feature is evident in these efforts. Through the prism of neoclassical realism, Muhammad Bin Salman's foreign policy between the United States and Israel entails a careful balancing approach to uphold Saudi interests while managing the geopolitical tensions between the United States and China in the Middle East.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Muhammad Bin Salman, the de facto ruler of oil-rich kingdom has been trying to opt policies that align with his Vision 2030 that is aimed to end the reliance of the kingdom on hydrocarbons and shift it to sustainable gains. To achieve this goal, Muhammad Bin Salman has opted a pragmatic foreign policy which has transformed from an interventionist to a balanced approach. Through the analysis of two burgeoning conflicts in Middle East, this study applied 'balancing-over-balancing' paradigm of neo classical realism to analyze the foreign policy of Muhammad Bin Salman. The in-depth analysis of different agencies involved clarifies that Muhammad Bin Salman's foreign policy is a mix of balance and over-balance calculation strategy. Following are some of the recommendations

- Muhammad Bin Salman should adopt a balanced approach while pursuing his Vision 2030 keeping domestic and regional factors in mind.
- The foreign policy should be balanced towards Iran and the countries where Iranian proxies are creating hurdles for Saudi interests.
- The foreign policy should be more pragmatic instead of interventionist to avoid any over-balancing act.
- Muhammad Bin Salman should adopt a balanced approach towards American and Chinese interest in the region.

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