

Column

The Strategic Value of China for Saudi Arabia and the Limitations

President Xi Jinping's visit to Saudi Arabia in January 2016 marked a major turning point in deepening the relationship between Saudi Arabia and China. On this occasion, the two countries declared the establishment of a "comprehensive strategic partnership" and agreed to enhance security cooperation to tackle terrorism. In the following year, King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud visited China, and shortly afterwards, it was announced that a Chinese company would open a drone manufacturing facility in Saudi Arabia. It is reported to be developing not only drones but also ballistic missiles with the help of China, and appears to have manufactured them by 2021. As Riyadh's relations with Beijing developed, Deputy Defense Minister Khalid bin Salman held a virtual meeting with State Councilor and Defense Minister Wei Fenghe of China in January 2022, and they agreed to strengthen their military cooperation. In December of that year, President Xi made his first visit to Saudi Arabia in approximately seven years, and the two countries signed the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia hosted three China-related summits, including the China-Arab States Summit. These events suggest that their military relationship has deepened through, among other means, high-level visits and weapons development cooperation.

Saudi Arabia is thought to have deployed weapons procured from China in actual combat. Riyadh supports the internationally recognized

legitimate government in the Yemeni civil war, and has carried out military interventions, including airstrikes against the Houthis opposed to the legitimate government. According to reports from Houthi-affiliated media, the Houthi air defense unit shot down Chinese-made unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) assigned to the Royal Saudi Air Force, such as Rainbow-4 (CH-4) and Wing Loong-2 (GJ-2). Apart from the Saudi Arabian military, a Chinese-made UAV assigned to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) forces was responsible for the 2018 killing of Saleh al-Sammad, whom the Houthis claimed as the president, according to *Foreign Policy*.

In the military context, the strategic value of China for Saudi Arabia can be understood through the changes in the U.S.-Saudi relationship. The United States, a Saudi Arabian ally, had explored withdrawal from the Middle East after the Barack Obama administration announced the rebalancing strategy. As a result, Saudi Arabia, which relies on the United States for security, grew concerned about the security environment deteriorating due to the decreasing U.S. presence and about their alliance being abandoned. Consequently, Saudi Arabia commenced its intervention in the Middle East, which included use of military force, while cooperating with the UAE and other countries. Although pro-Saudi policy, rhetoric, and behavior stood out during the Donald Trump administration, even Trump stuck to withdrawing from the Middle East. When the Joseph Biden administration came into office, it initially mentioned the humanitarian impact of the Yemeni civil war, and until the war in Ukraine, hardened its stance toward Saudi Arabia. The Biden administration, for instance, restricted arms sales to Saudi Arabia. By early January 2022, it was reported that Saudi Arabia was low on Patriot surface-to-air missiles used for defense against the Houthis. Although tensions between the two countries eased temporarily, the relationship deteriorated once again following the OPEC Plus decision to cut oil production, prompting the Biden administration's decision to review the relationship, including supporting Saudi security.

With these changes in the bilateral relationship, the Saudi Arabian public has begun to give priority to China over the United States. According to a public opinion poll conducted by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy in July-August 2022, only 41% of Saudis responded that good relations with the United States were "very important" or "somewhat important," which was lower than the percentage for China (55%) and Russia (52%). Moreover, when asked whether respondents agree that "We cannot count on the United States these days, so we should look more to Russia and China as partners," 59% answered "strongly agree" or "somewhat agree." The public's attachment of importance to China was echoed by Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud, who described China as a "reliable strategic partner."

Against this backdrop and amid the growing public distrust toward the United States, Saudi Arabia appears to have strengthened its military relationship with China in the context of exploring its new security strategy.

However, the deepening Saudi-China military relationship faces considerable constraints. While distrust of Washington persists, the United States remains the most important ally for Saudi Arabia. Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Adel Al-Jubeir stated that the Saudi-U.S. relationship is strong and can overcome tensions, while acknowledging their disagreement over the decision to lower oil production. The U.S. Fifth Fleet headquartered in Bahrain, an island nation located between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and other U.S. military assets deployed throughout the Middle East remain essential means to deter Iran. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the United States is Saudi Arabia's top arms supplier (2017–2021) and accounted for 82% of its total arms imports. Additionally, it is unlikely that Riyadh will replace Washington with China as its provider of security, given that Beijing is in a 25-year comprehensive agreement with Tehran. In summary, the Saudi-China military relationship has certainly grown in recent years. With distrust of the United States intensifying, China has strategic value as Saudi Arabia enhances diplomatic relations with non-U.S. powers and explores new security strategies. At the same time, however, the military relationship is constrained by the U.S. presence and the evolving Iran-China relationship.



The Saudi crown prince welcoming President Xi in Riyadh, December 8, 2022 (AFP/Jiji)

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