Defense Diplomacy and Strategic Partnerships in the Middle East: A Survey

Abstract

This survey examines the strategic role of defense diplomacy in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, focusing on its impact on Middle East security and strategic partnerships. Since 2015, Saudi Arabia has adopted a more assertive foreign policy, leveraging defense diplomacy to navigate regional power dynamics and enhance its influence within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The survey systematically explores the integration of military capabilities with soft power, highlighting Saudi Arabia's efforts to maintain regional hegemony through religious and cultural diplomacy. It assesses the kingdom's strategic partnerships, particularly through Defense Cooperation Agreements (DCAs) with global powers like China and Russia, which bolster military readiness and diversify alliances beyond traditional allies such as the United States. The survey also delves into the challenges posed by non-state actors and the influence of external powers, underscoring the importance of strategic hedging in Saudi Arabia's geopolitical strategy. The findings suggest that Saudi Arabia's defense diplomacy effectively addresses regional security challenges, aligning with Vision 2030's objectives of economic diversification and technological advancement. Future research may explore public diplomacy's role in other regional contexts and the long-term implications of intra-GCC dynamics. By synthesizing these elements, the survey provides insights into the evolving dynamics of defense diplomacy in the Middle East, contributing to a nuanced understanding of Saudi Arabia's strategic objectives and regional security implications.

1 Introduction

1.1 Importance in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East

Defense diplomacy is crucial to Saudi Arabia's strategy for asserting influence and ensuring stability in the Middle East. Since 2015, the kingdom's foreign policy has shifted towards a more assertive regional stance, driven by ongoing conflicts and geopolitical challenges in the MENA region, necessitating a robust defense diplomacy approach [1]. This strategy not only addresses external threats but also aims to reinforce Saudi Arabia's leadership amid regional power struggles. Heibach highlights the significance of public diplomacy in this context, illustrating how Saudi Arabia navigates complex regional dynamics [2].

Moreover, the integration of religious diplomacy into the kingdom's foreign policy enhances its unique approach to defense diplomacy. By intertwining domestic and international politics with Islam as a central element, Saudi Arabia bolsters its soft power capabilities. This dual strategy, combining military strength with religious and cultural influence, is vital for maintaining regional hegemony [3]. Within the broader Middle East context, Saudi Arabia's defense diplomacy fosters strategic partnerships and alliances that address shared security challenges and advance geopolitical interests.
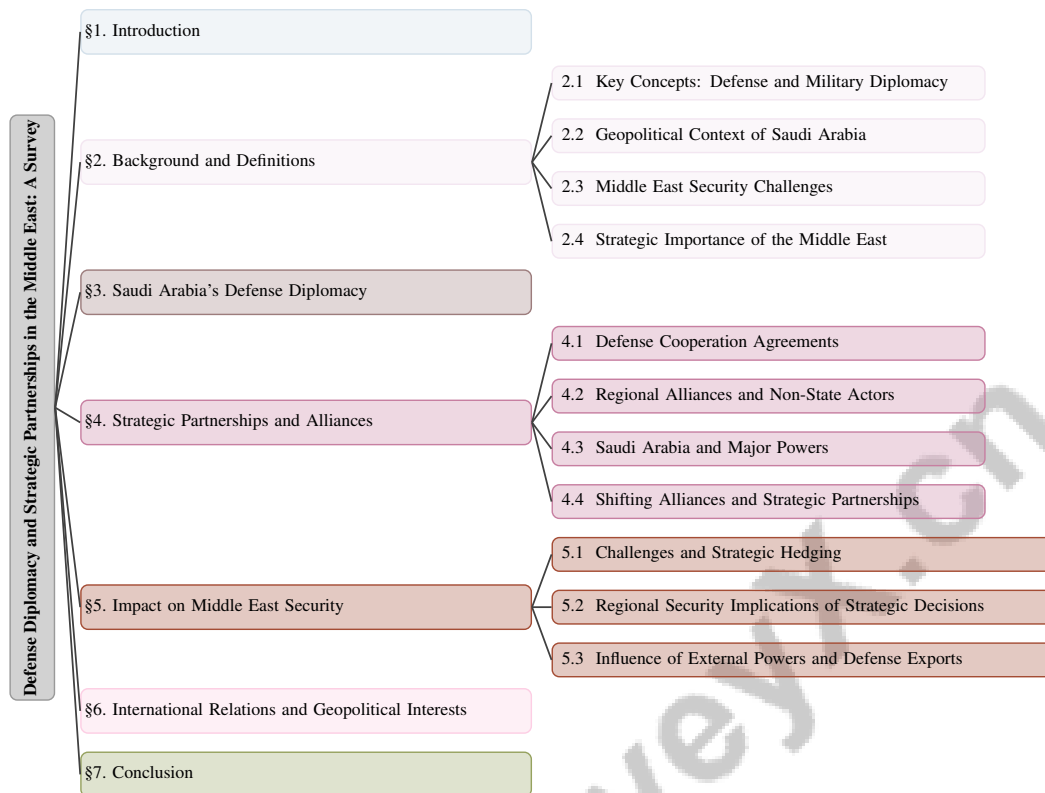
Figure 1: chapter structure

1.2 Structure of the Survey

This survey provides a comprehensive analysis of Saudi Arabia's defense diplomacy in the Middle East, focusing on strategic partnerships and their implications for regional security dynamics. It investigates the complexities of the kingdom's foreign policy as a resurgent regional power amid ongoing conflicts and competition for influence, highlighting the interplay of coercive and persuasive strategies in its public diplomacy efforts [1, 2]. The paper is organized as follows:

The introductory section establishes the importance of defense diplomacy in Saudi Arabia and the broader Middle East context, outlining the kingdom's strategic military and diplomatic efforts to enhance national security and stability amid regional challenges.

The second section presents background information and definitions, clarifying key concepts such as defense diplomacy, military diplomacy, and defense policy while exploring the geopolitical context of Saudi Arabia and its regional security challenges.

The third section analyzes Saudi Arabia's approach to defense diplomacy, focusing on the synergy between diplomatic and defense strategies. It discusses the transition from a reactive to a proactive foreign policy and the integration of military capabilities with soft power initiatives, which are essential for the kingdom's regional influence.

The fourth section evaluates strategic partnerships and alliances, assessing Saudi Arabia's defense cooperation agreements, regional alliances, and partnerships with major global powers, as well as the dynamics of shifting alliances and the role of non-state actors.

The fifth section examines the impact of Saudi Arabia's defense diplomacy and strategic partnerships on Middle East security, discussing challenges faced by the kingdom, the regional security implications of its strategic decisions, and the influence of external powers and defense exports.

The sixth section explores the broader implications of Saudi Arabia's defense diplomacy on international relations, analyzing dynamics within the GCC, intra-regional relations, and how public diplomacy aligns with geopolitical interests.

The conclusion summarizes the survey's key findings, reflecting on the effectiveness of defense diplomacy and strategic partnerships in enhancing security and stability in the Middle East. It identifies critical areas for future research and explores implications for policy-making, particularly regarding shifting power dynamics and regional leadership [4, 5, 2].The following sections are organized as shown in Figure 1.

2 Background and Definitions

2.1 Key Concepts: Defense and Military Diplomacy

Defense diplomacy, military diplomacy, and defense policy are integral to statecraft in the global arena. Defense diplomacy leverages military resources for diplomatic objectives, fostering international cooperation through a blend of coercion and persuasion, with public diplomacy as a moderating force [2]. Military diplomacy, a defense diplomacy subset, emphasizes military-to-military engagements like joint exercises and defense attachés to build trust and transparency. Defense policy, the strategic framework guiding these efforts, involves formulating national security strategies and developing military capabilities to protect national interests. The proliferation of Defense Cooperation Agreements (DCAs) post-Cold War highlights defense policy's role in international relations, despite challenges like mistrust and distributional conflicts [6].

Saudi Arabia exemplifies the integration of these concepts, redefining its global role through a mix of hard and soft power, promoting a narrative of moderate Islam [3]. This strategy addresses a geopolitical landscape marked by diminishing confidence in traditional alliances, such as with the United States, and the growing influence of China and Russia [7]. Through defense diplomacy, Saudi Arabia bolsters regional influence and addresses security challenges, aligning its defense policy with strategic Middle Eastern objectives.

2.2 Geopolitical Context of Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's geopolitical environment is influenced by regional instability, shifting alliances, and a nascent multipolar order. Historically under U.S. influence, the Middle East is evolving into a complex multipolar system with undefined norms and institutions [4]. The MENA region's persistent instability, marked by conflicts and non-state actors, complicates traditional power dynamics [1]. Saudi Arabia's strategy involves navigating this evolving order while maintaining leadership in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which reflects broader regional dynamics and faces internal political tensions [8]. The diplomatic rift with Qatar since June 2017 exemplifies the complex web of foreign policies and alliances [9].

Iran's shift from ideology-driven to pragmatic foreign policy approaches, influenced by regional and global dynamics, further complicates Saudi Arabia's security landscape [10]. Consequently, Saudi Arabia leverages defense diplomacy and strategic partnerships to assert influence, secure borders, and address multifaceted security threats from state and non-state actors.

2.3 Middle East Security Challenges

The Middle East's security challenges significantly impact regional stability, necessitating a multifaceted defense and diplomatic approach. A primary challenge is regional states' inability to balance emerging threats, including non-state actors and divergent global power interests [4]. The rise of non-state actors, such as terrorist organizations, complicates the security landscape, requiring coordinated military and diplomatic efforts [5]. China's expanding military presence in the Red Sea presents both opportunities and challenges for regional stability and U.S. strategic interests [11]. This dynamic necessitates Middle Eastern states to navigate the complex interplay of global powers seeking regional influence, exacerbated by internal political tensions.

The GCC region faces traditional threats like interstate conflicts and non-traditional risks, including cyber-attacks and environmental concerns [12]. Balancing relations with Iran, perceived as a regional threat, while ensuring national security and economic interests adds complexity [13]. Iran's foreign policy challenges, particularly reconciling ideological objectives with pragmatic necessities amid sanctions and shifting alliances, further complicate regional security [10]. These pressures highlight the difficulties of balancing internal factions and external threats while navigating international

sanctions and military pressures [14]. The regional defense industry faces challenges adapting to evolving warfare, underscoring the need for comprehensive research on its role in regional security dynamics [15]. Moreover, the challenge of representing and reasoning about multiple agents' mental states complicates effective security strategies [16], necessitating innovative approaches to intelligence gathering and decision-making for regional stability.

2.4 Strategic Importance of the Middle East

The Middle East's strategic significance in global geopolitics arises from its location, abundant natural resources, and cultural influence. As a critical junction for international trade and energy supply routes, the region attracts global powers seeking to secure economic and strategic interests. The geopolitical importance is underscored by major energy reserves, particularly in GCC countries, vital to the global energy market [12]. Saudi Arabia, as a leading nation, exemplifies the region's strategic importance, holding substantial oil reserves and serving as a custodian of Islam's holiest sites, enhancing its influence in shaping regional and global political dynamics [9]. This dual role enables Saudi Arabia to navigate complex relationships with regional neighbors and major global powers.

The strategic significance of the Middle East is further highlighted by external powers like China, expanding influence through military activities and arms sales. China's military presence in the Red Sea, through peacekeeping and anti-piracy operations, reflects its commitment to securing interests along the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and enhancing geopolitical influence [11]. The proliferation of Chinese Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicles (UCAVs) in the region serves as a strategic tool for China, filling gaps left by traditional arms suppliers and reinforcing its role in Middle Eastern security dynamics [17].

The evolution of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy reflects a significant transformation in its approach to international relations, particularly in the context of defense diplomacy. This shift is characterized by a strategic integration of military capabilities with diplomatic efforts, moving from a traditionally reactive stance to a more proactive engagement on the global stage. Figure 2 illustrates this defense diplomacy strategy, highlighting the synergy between diplomatic and defense approaches, as well as the incorporation of soft power initiatives aimed at enhancing regional influence and effectively addressing security challenges. Such a comprehensive strategy not only underscores the importance of military readiness but also emphasizes the role of diplomacy in fostering stability and cooperation within the region.

3 Saudi Arabia's Defense Diplomacy

3.1 Saudi Arabia's Diplomatic and Defense Synergy

Saudi Arabia's foreign policy intricately combines diplomatic and defense strategies to bolster regional influence and tackle security challenges. Recent leadership shifts have redefined its foreign policy, underscoring the interaction between domestic politics and international relations as the kingdom seeks to assert its Middle Eastern leadership [1]. This synergy is particularly significant in addressing the complex geopolitical dynamics of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), where a blend of traditional diplomacy and modern tactics, such as media manipulation and cyber warfare, is essential for maintaining leadership [8].

The kingdom's defense diplomacy is driven by the need for military cooperation to counter emerging threats from non-state actors and external powers, necessitating a robust defense strategy supported by diplomatic initiatives [5]. This dual approach facilitates effective responses to security challenges and fosters strategic partnerships that enhance Saudi Arabia's geopolitical stature. The kingdom's foreign policy pragmatically balances ideological goals with practical considerations, mirroring Iran's approach to international relations, by aligning military and diplomatic efforts with national interests [10].

Through this strategic integration, as illustrated in Figure 3, Saudi Arabia aims to strengthen its regional influence and contribute to Middle Eastern stability. The figure highlights the kingdom's strategic approach to integrating diplomatic and defense efforts, emphasizing the importance of leadership shifts, defense diplomacy, and the overall framework of strategic integration.
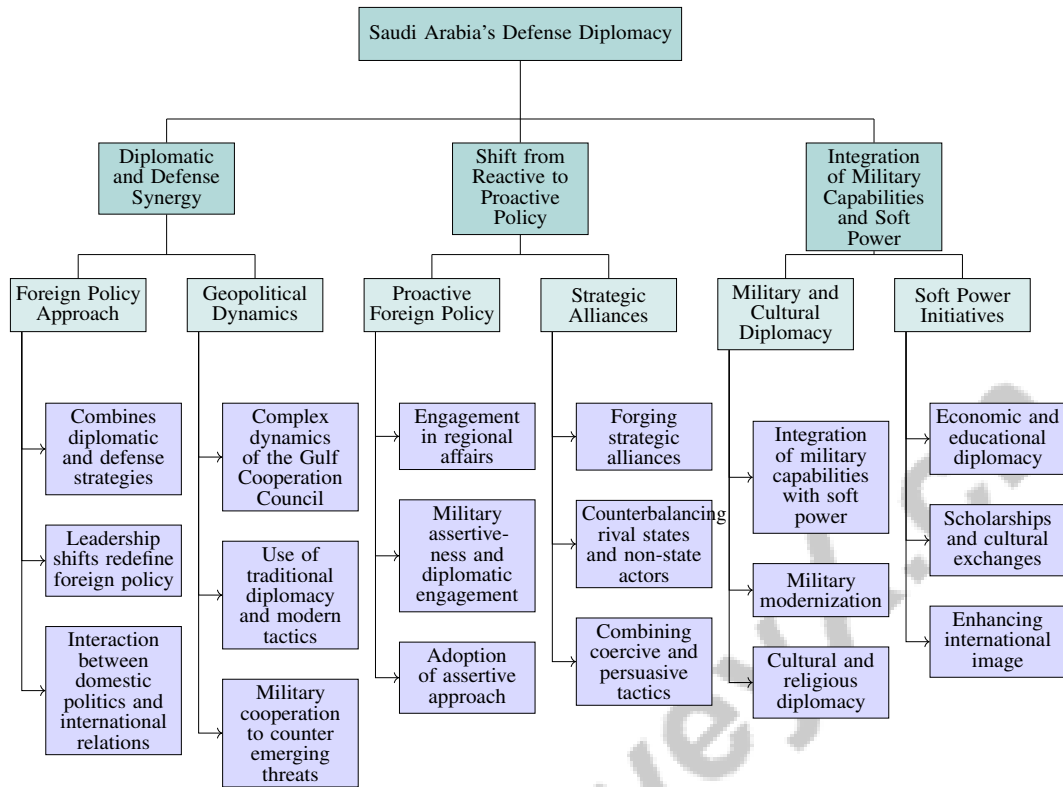
Figure 2: This figure illustrates Saudi Arabia's defense diplomacy strategy, highlighting the synergy between diplomatic and defense approaches, the shift from reactive to proactive foreign policy, and the integration of military capabilities with soft power initiatives to enhance regional influence and address security challenges.
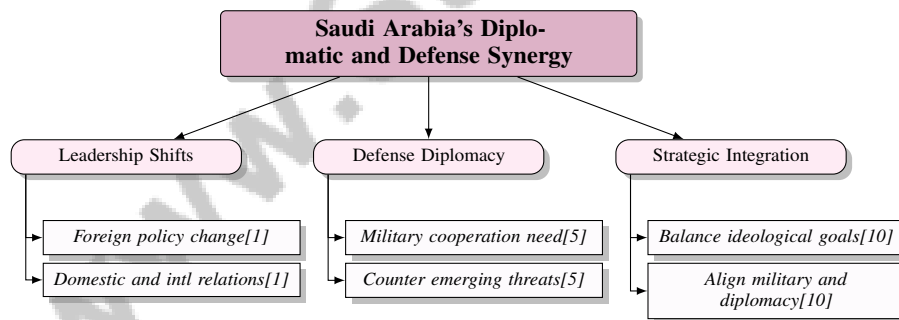

Figure 3: This figure illustrates Saudi Arabia's strategic approach to integrating diplomatic and defense efforts to enhance regional influence, highlighting leadership shifts, defense diplomacy, and strategic integration.

3.2 Shift from Reactive to Proactive Foreign Policy

Saudi Arabia has transitioned from a reactive to a proactive and assertive foreign policy, engaging more actively in regional affairs to assert its influence across the Middle East. This shift emphasizes military assertiveness and diplomatic engagement, projecting a moderate Islamic image while shaping regional dynamics [3]. Influenced by the evolving geopolitical landscape, and inspired by the United Arab Emirates' interventionist policies post-Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy has become more dynamic and interventionist [13].

The kingdom's proactive stance is evident in its involvement in regional conflicts and efforts to forge strategic alliances, thereby enhancing its geopolitical influence. By adopting this assertive approach,

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Saudi Arabia seeks to counterbalance rival states and non-state actors, reinforcing its leadership within the GCC and the broader Middle East. This strategy, combining coercive and persuasive tactics through public diplomacy, reflects a shift from cautious foreign policy to interventionism, addressing multifaceted challenges and promoting stability and security in a conflict-prone region [5, 1, 3, 2].

3.3 Integration of Military Capabilities and Soft Power

Saudi Arabia effectively integrates military capabilities with soft power initiatives to enhance its influence and address regional security challenges. This comprehensive strategy balances strength with cultural diplomacy, essential for maintaining regional hegemony and fostering international cooperation [3]. The kingdom's military modernization, characterized by investments in advanced weaponry and defense systems, complements its cultural and religious diplomacy efforts, thereby extending its soft power reach.

Saudi Arabia's position as a leader in the Islamic world and the international community is reinforced by its religious influence, stemming from its custodianship of Islam's two holiest sites. This position is strategically leveraged to enhance geopolitical standing and counter rival narratives [9]. Cultural initiatives promoting moderate Islam support this religious diplomacy, aligning with the kingdom's modernization and reform vision [3].

The kingdom's soft power strategy also involves economic and educational diplomacy, fostering long-term partnerships and goodwill among nations. Initiatives like scholarships for international students and global cultural exchanges enhance Saudi Arabia's international image and create diplomatic engagement opportunities. These efforts, in conjunction with military capabilities, ensure Saudi Arabia's pivotal role in regional and global security dynamics [2].

4 Strategic Partnerships and Alliances

The global defense landscape necessitates strategic partnerships and alliances, formalized through agreements that bolster defense capabilities and address shared security concerns. Defense Cooperation Agreements (DCAs) are pivotal in Saudi Arabia's strategy, enhancing defense capabilities and fostering international collaboration.

4.1 Defense Cooperation Agreements

DCAs are integral to Saudi Arabia's defense strategy, facilitating collaboration in joint military exercises, intelligence sharing, and defense technology transfers [6]. These agreements enhance military readiness and interoperability with allies, addressing regional security challenges effectively. The proliferation of DCAs reflects an international trend where states rely on bilateral agreements to manage security issues and build cooperative defense networks. For Saudi Arabia, DCAs not only strengthen its defense posture but also serve as strategic tools to reinforce geopolitical influence, reducing reliance on traditional allies like the United States and modernizing military capabilities [5, 13, 4, 6, 2].

As illustrated in Figure 4, Saudi Arabia's strategic focus on Defense Cooperation Agreements (DCAs) underscores their critical role in enhancing military readiness, expanding geopolitical influence, and aligning with the objectives of Vision 2030. This vision emphasizes the importance of a robust defense industry to support strategic goals, including localizing defense manufacturing and developing indigenous military capabilities through international collaborations [3]. DCAs thus promote economic diversification and technological advancement, aligning with the kingdom's long-term vision.

4.2 Regional Alliances and Non-State Actors

Saudi Arabia's regional alliances and engagement with non-state actors shape its defense diplomacy and influence. Within the GCC, complex alliances and rivalries, such as the conflict with Qatar, necessitate strategic diplomatic maneuvers [9]. Non-state actors, including multinational corporations and media organizations, significantly influence public diplomacy and defense strategies, facilitating dialogue, cooperation, and conflict resolution [2].
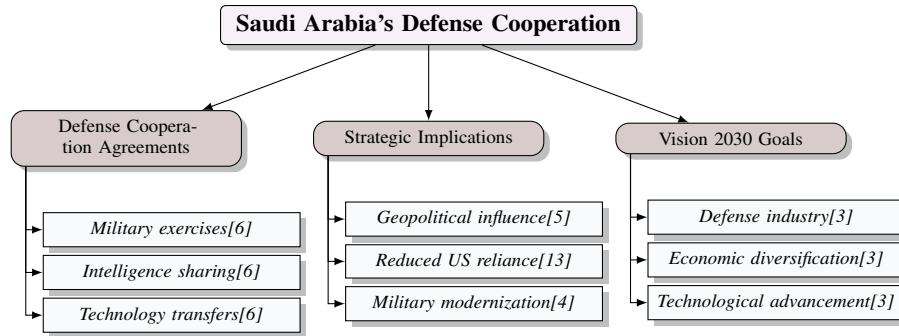
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Figure 4: This figure illustrates Saudi Arabia's strategic focus on Defense Cooperation Agreements (DCAs), highlighting their role in military readiness, geopolitical influence, and alignment with Vision 2030 goals.

The GCC crisis highlights potential shifts in regional alliances, with non-state actors affecting these dynamics [8]. Saudi Arabia's defense diplomacy includes multinational military exercises with countries like Pakistan, China, and Turkey, enhancing counterterrorism capabilities and military interoperability, while engaging non-state actors in collaborative security initiatives [5].

4.3 Saudi Arabia and Major Powers

Saudi Arabia's partnerships with major powers are central to its foreign policy, balancing traditional alliances with emerging opportunities. Historically allied with the United States for military support and regional security, Saudi Arabia now diversifies its partnerships, engaging with China and Russia to enhance geopolitical influence and economic prospects [7].

Saudi Arabia's engagement with China reflects deepening ties between Gulf states and Asia, aligned with Vision 2030 goals of economic diversification and technological advancement [11]. Chinese military technology, including UCAVs, exemplifies growing defense cooperation, bolstering Saudi military capabilities and reinforcing China's influence in Middle Eastern security dynamics [17]. Russia's partnership with Saudi Arabia spans energy cooperation through OPEC+ and defense diplomacy, exploring military cooperation and arms sales, further diversifying defense relationships and reducing reliance on Western suppliers [4].

4.4 Shifting Alliances and Strategic Partnerships

Middle Eastern alliances are shaped by geopolitical, economic, and security factors amid inter-state conflicts, non-state actors, and regional dominance competition. Post-2010 Arab regime collapses prompted disorder and fragmentation, leading nations like Saudi Arabia to adopt assertive foreign policies. This dynamic requires understanding how regional powers navigate leadership struggles through coercive and persuasive strategies, with public diplomacy balancing these approaches [1, 2].

Saudi Arabia's strategy acknowledges network influences in fostering cooperation and trust among states, indicating that while regional conflicts and global power shifts stimulate DCA demand, network influences dictate their supply [6]. Diversifying partnerships beyond traditional allies like the United States mitigates dependency and leverages opportunities with emerging powers such as China and Russia, enhancing Saudi geopolitical influence and creating economic collaboration and technological innovation opportunities, aligning with Vision 2030 objectives [1, 9, 4, 3, 2].

Adopting a flexible approach to alliances is essential amid evolving regional dynamics, characterized by non-state actors and external powers' influence, particularly in the MENA region. This flexibility is crucial for established leaders like Saudi Arabia navigating inter-state conflict and geopolitical competition, as well as for aspiring states balancing coercive and persuasive strategies. Public diplomacy and DCAs are pivotal in fostering stability and addressing shared security challenges, underscoring the need for adaptive diplomatic strategies in a complex regional environment [1, 11, 5, 6, 2]. Saudi Arabia's defense diplomacy incorporates multilateral engagements and regional cooperation initiatives, fostering partnerships that address transnational security threats and promote regional stability.

5 Impact on Middle East Security

5.1 Challenges and Strategic Hedging

Saudi Arabia faces considerable challenges in maintaining its geopolitical influence amid the Middle East's evolving power dynamics, marked by intense competition and insecurity that complicate regional dominance [1]. The region's opacity and lack of accountability among states hinder conflict resolution and escalate tensions [8]. To navigate this environment, Saudi Arabia employs strategic hedging, diversifying alliances and engaging in both cooperative and competitive relations with global and regional powers. The UAE's hedging strategy, balancing relations with Iran while avoiding direct conflict, serves as a model for Saudi Arabia [13].

As illustrated in Figure 5, which depicts the primary challenges and strategic approaches of Saudi Arabia in maintaining geopolitical influence, the nation employs strategic hedging while addressing security challenges within the Middle East. Network analysis offers insights into enhancing defense cooperation and overcoming mistrust through established connections [6]. Leveraging such networks allows Saudi Arabia to reduce informational barriers and build trust, strengthening strategic partnerships essential for addressing regional security challenges. However, the effectiveness of these models depends on the relevance of selected indicators, which may not fully capture the region's security dynamics [12].

Saudi Arabia's assertive foreign policy, aimed at increasing its influence, has sometimes backfired, damaging its international reputation and inciting internal dissent [3]. A more balanced approach that harmonizes assertiveness with diplomacy is crucial to ensure strategic hedging aligns with long-term geopolitical goals.
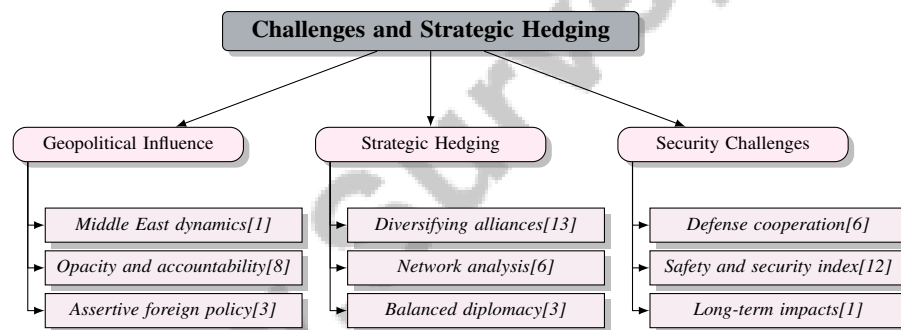

Figure 5: This figure illustrates the primary challenges and strategic approaches of Saudi Arabia in maintaining geopolitical influence, employing strategic hedging, and addressing security challenges within the Middle East.

5.2 Regional Security Implications of Strategic Decisions

Saudi Arabia's strategic decisions significantly impact Middle Eastern security, reshaping the region's geopolitical landscape. The kingdom's shift from reactive to proactive foreign policy measures has redefined its regional role, combining military assertiveness with diplomatic engagement to project a moderate Islamic image while influencing regional dynamics [13].

The effectiveness of Saudi Arabia's strategic hedging is evident in its ability to maximize political and economic returns while mitigating security risks. By diversifying alliances and engaging in cooperative and competitive interactions, Saudi Arabia seeks to manage uncertainties and bolster geopolitical influence [13]. This strategy is vital for addressing security challenges posed by non-state actors and the increasing presence of external powers.

Saudi Arabia's diplomatic maneuvers, such as severing relations with Qatar in 2017, illustrate its role in shaping power dynamics within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the broader Middle East. These actions reflect its ambition to assert regional leadership, maintain Gulf stability, and counter Shiite Islam's rising influence, affecting the region's geopolitical landscape and security architecture [9, 1, 2]. Additionally, Saudi Arabia's strategic partnerships with global powers like China and Russia

embody a nuanced approach to international relations, balancing traditional alliances with emerging opportunities to enhance its geopolitical standing and align with Vision 2030 objectives.

5.3 Influence of External Powers and Defense Exports

External powers significantly influence Middle Eastern security dynamics, with Saudi Arabia playing a crucial role in navigating these interactions. As global powers such as the United States, China, and Russia vie for influence, Saudi Arabia strategically leverages these relationships for security and economic benefits. Historically, the United States has been a key ally, providing military support and acting as a regional security guarantor. However, recent geopolitical shifts have prompted Saudi Arabia to diversify its partnerships, increasingly engaging with China and Russia [7].

China's expanding military presence and economic investments, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), underscore its strategic interests in the Middle East. The acquisition of Chinese military technology, notably Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicles (UCAVs), highlights the strengthening defense partnership between Saudi Arabia and China, enhancing Saudi Arabia's military capabilities in response to regional challenges while bolstering China's influence in the region [17, 6, 11, 1]. This partnership aligns with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, emphasizing economic diversification and technological advancement.

Similarly, the partnership with Russia encompasses energy cooperation and defense diplomacy, extending to joint efforts in stabilizing global oil markets and exploring military cooperation avenues, diversifying Saudi Arabia's defense partnerships and reducing reliance on Western suppliers [4].

Defense exports are integral to Saudi Arabia's international relations, serving as a mechanism for building strategic alliances and enhancing geopolitical influence. By engaging in defense trade with a wide range of international partners, Saudi Arabia not only improves its military capabilities but also establishes robust frameworks for bilateral defense relations. This engagement facilitates joint military exercises, arms procurement, and classified information exchange, fostering interoperability with allied forces and effectively addressing shared security threats in an increasingly complex global environment [1, 5, 6, 3, 2]. This strategy is essential for addressing regional security challenges and reinforcing the kingdom's leadership role in the Middle East.

6 International Relations and Geopolitical Interests

6.1 GCC Dynamics and Intra-Regional Relations

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), comprising Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, is pivotal in shaping the Middle East's geopolitical landscape, with Saudi Arabia playing a key role in influencing intra-regional dynamics. Established to foster political and economic cooperation, the GCC's internal relations oscillate between collaboration and conflict, significantly shaped by external powers like the United States [8]. The U.S. has historically influenced GCC dynamics through security assurances and economic ties, though shifts in its policies have introduced varying degrees of alignment and discord among member states, creating a complex network of alliances and rivalries. Saudi Arabia frequently spearheads efforts to sustain GCC unity while asserting its leadership [8].

Intra-regional relations are further complicated by the diverse political ideologies and foreign policy goals of GCC states. The 2017 diplomatic rift between Saudi Arabia and Qatar exemplifies the challenges in formulating a cohesive regional strategy, highlighting the probabilistic nature of these relations where states navigate differing beliefs using strategic calculus informed by probabilistic epistemic logic [16]. Saudi Arabia's strategy involves diplomatic engagement and strategic hedging, promoting both bilateral and multilateral cooperation to enhance regional stability and address shared security threats, guided by a sophisticated understanding of probabilistic interactions among states [16].

6.2 Saudi Arabia's Public Diplomacy and Geopolitical Interests

Saudi Arabia employs public diplomacy as a strategic instrument to align its geopolitical interests with broader foreign policy goals, navigating regional leadership contests and building alliances with both regional and global actors [2]. This strategy is crucial for garnering external support, vital

for Saudi Arabia's ambition to assert its leadership in the Middle East. A key component of this diplomacy is religious diplomacy, through which Saudi Arabia enhances its image as a leader in the Islamic world by leveraging its role as the custodian of Islam's two holiest sites [3]. This religious influence bolsters the kingdom's soft power, countering extremist ideologies and promoting regional stability.

Theoretical frameworks like cooperation theory and network analysis elucidate how Saudi Arabia's public diplomacy facilitates cooperation through information exchange and network influences [6]. By engaging in public diplomacy, Saudi Arabia strengthens its ability to exchange information and foster cooperation among states, aligning its geopolitical interests with broader regional and international objectives, particularly in defense diplomacy.

6.3 Strategic Balancing and Religious Diplomacy

Saudi Arabia's strategy of strategic balancing and religious diplomacy enables it to adeptly navigate the Middle East's complex geopolitical landscape. This approach, aligned with strategic hedging theory [13], allows the kingdom to maintain flexibility in foreign policy, adapting to shifting power dynamics while aligning strategic objectives with regional and global developments. Religious diplomacy is a cornerstone of these efforts, as Saudi Arabia leverages its religious authority to enhance its soft power and influence within the Islamic world, countering extremist ideologies and promoting moderate Islam [10]. By integrating religious diplomacy into its foreign policy, Saudi Arabia projects stability and moderation, aligning its geopolitical interests with cultural and religious responsibilities.

The interplay between strategic balancing and religious diplomacy is shaped by both internal and external factors impacting regional geopolitics. Saudi Arabia's adept navigation of these dynamics is crucial for maintaining its leadership role and addressing multifaceted security challenges [10]. The emphasis on non-coercive measures and soft power initiatives underscores its commitment to achieving strategic objectives through diplomacy and cultural engagement rather than traditional deterrence [5]. Future research could explore the implications of defense strategies on international relations, particularly within service-oriented models in the defense sector [15], and extend the framework to multi-agent decision-making scenarios, offering deeper insights into the complexities of strategic balancing in the region [16].

7 Conclusion

Saudi Arabia's defense diplomacy and strategic partnerships are integral to its efforts to enhance security and stability across the Middle East. The kingdom's strategy, which combines military capabilities with soft power, plays a crucial role in addressing regional security challenges and expanding its influence both within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and on a global scale. By aligning its foreign policy with broader geopolitical objectives, Saudi Arabia skillfully manages a complex array of traditional and emerging alliances, including significant partnerships with major global powers like China and Russia.

The success of Saudi Arabia's defense diplomacy is evident in its ability to establish strategic alliances through Defense Cooperation Agreements (DCAs) and engage with non-state actors, thereby strengthening its regional influence and military preparedness. The kingdom's shift from a reactive to a more assertive foreign policy approach allows it to navigate uncertainties and achieve favorable political and economic outcomes through strategic hedging. This approach effectively addresses security threats from non-state actors and external powers while supporting the goals of Vision 2030, which focuses on economic diversification and technological progress.

Future research should explore the role of public diplomacy in various regional settings and how different leaders leverage it to achieve their objectives. Additionally, the long-term impact of diplomatic tensions on GCC cohesion and the broader Middle East warrants further investigation. Moreover, examining the integration of Saudi Arabia's hard power strategies with its soft power initiatives could provide insights into creating a more balanced and effective foreign policy. Such studies could offer valuable perspectives on the evolving nature of defense diplomacy and strategic partnerships in the Middle East, guiding future policy-making and contributing to regional security and stability.

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