

# **Shifting Dynamics in US-Saudi Relationship: A Comparative Analysis of the Trump & Biden Administrations (2017-2024)**

*Zaiba Sarwar & Asma Rashid*

## **Abstract**

This research is based on the evolving dynamics between Saudi Arabia and the United States under Presidents Donald Trump and Joe Biden. The study presents a comparative assessment of their foreign relations, highlighting implications for bilateral and regional relations, security, and energy policy. Trump's regime was transactional in its policy toward Saudi Arabia: it exported arms, invested in building economic ties, sought to contain Iran, and supported a strong alliance with the Kingdom. In contrast, the Biden administration sought to rebalance the relationship by expressing concern about human rights, speaking out against the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, and reconsidering US military aid to Saudi Arabia. Moreover, it identifies the issues and challenges that have shaped the changing US–Saudi relationship. This article also sheds light on how leadership changes in the United States can alter historical alliances and affect the political landscape of the Middle East. Despite these evolving dynamics, the US–Saudi relationship faces challenges due to Saudi Arabia's burgeoning ties with China and Russia. The expansion of these relationships introduces a complex layer to the traditional alliance between the US and Saudi Arabia, potentially influencing the trajectory of their diplomatic, economic, and strategic engagements. As this study delves into these multifaceted dynamics, it aims to unravel the intricate interplay of political forces, economic initiatives, and evolving global partnerships that define the US–Saudi relationship during this transformative period.

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Zaiba Sarwar is a PhD Scholar at Department of Politics & International Relations in International Islamic University Islamabad, Pakistan  
Asma Rashid is a Lecturer in International Relations  
Department of Politics & IR, International Islamic University Islamabad, Pakistan

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## Introduction

The US-Saudi relationship has been a pillar of US foreign policy in the Middle East for decades. Nevertheless, the past few years have witnessed this relationship being tested by multiple challenges in the changing dynamics of *Saudi-US relations* under the presidencies of Donald Trump and Joe Biden (2017-2024). This research is focused on exploring the changes in the relationship over time between these two countries, specifically regarding the actions taken by their governments in relation to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It was under President Trump that the United States pursued a policy closely aligned with Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, bolstered by Trump's close personal ties with MBS (Mohammed bin Salman). This connection was, however, not without problems, as most Americans expressed criticism over their country's dedicated support of the Kingdom despite the horrific killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Trump's Administration placed a much greater focus on economic and defense cooperation with Saudi Arabia, considered a key ally in restraining Iran. On the other hand, the Biden Administration has attempted to shift the Saudi-US relationship by imposing cuts in a persistent respect for human rights and promoting a more sophisticated approach towards military incursions in the Middle East. President Biden heightened tensions over human rights by withdrawing U.S. support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen, marking a significant foreign-policy reorientation.

However, this recalibration has not been without challenges, as the lack of personal rapport between Biden and MBS has contributed to a growing rift, driven by both geopolitical, and economic factors. How do leadership changes impact bilateral relations between traditional partners? What are the challenges faced by new leaders due to the shifting global dynamics? What are the goals of the US Administration in changing the priorities of the new Saudi leadership? How do these new challenges affect the overall stability of the region and American interests in the

Middle East? What are the strategic opportunities and risks available to both administrations? How did US domestic political imperatives influence policy toward Saudi Arabia during Trump (2017–2020) and Biden (2021–2024)? How important were personal diplomacy and leader-level relationships to decisions in US–Saudi relations in each administration? What decision-making structures account for the continuities and shifts in security and energy cooperation between the two governments? This research seeks to unravel the shifting dynamics in Saudi–US relations within the framework of the current state of global politics.

### **Literature Review**

The Saudi-US relationship has undergone significant evolution in all aspects in recent years, particularly under the Trump and Biden Administrations (2017-2024). This literature review focuses on enumerating key issues and observations from various sources to highlight significant challenges in their relationship. The focus of the study is to scrutinize the changing scenario of the Saudi-US relationship owing to shifting global dynamics, particularly Saudi Arabia's tilt toward new global partners in the energy sector.

The literature review below is divided into three parts. The first part comprises literature on the historical perspective of Saudi-US relations. The first part of the discussion depicts that Saudi relations have been influenced by countless factors, including geopolitics and economics. This connection began in 1933, when diplomatic relations were established, which also involved the Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement negotiated in 1951 (Jeff, 2021). This backdrop accounts for more of the current issues and opportunities that have ensued under other Presidents. The Biden Administration has approached the conflict differently from the Trump's Administration, placing a greater emphasis on human rights and diplomacy. The change has put a strain on the relationship between the two nations, with Saudi Arabia expressing discontent with the United States' attitude towards the crisis.

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The second part covers literature that discusses the Trump Administration's focus on Deal-Making. As Donald Trump assumed the Presidency, his Administration engaged with Saudi Arabia in a manner that appeared to focus on areas of trade and military dealings. Trump Administration mostly seemed to ignore issues on human rights and, in effect, provided Saudi Arabia a "pass" on such a controversial act as the execution of journalist Jamal Khashoggi (Jackie, 2022). This pragmatism was due to a desire to make military relations deeper and secure beneficial arms sales. This was also consonant with Trump's slogan of "America First." Heightened criticism by the Administration's later support of *Saudi*-led initiatives, i.e., the war in Yemen, further deepened the alliance.

The third part of the literature review discusses the Biden Administration's new approach to human rights and accountability. This change is evidence of a broader campaign strategy aimed at establishing relationships with Middle Eastern allies and addressing moral concerns. Moreover, it has faced its own challenges, notably the complex scenario that arose following OPEC's reduction in oil production (Ajil, 2021). Biden Administration has trodden cautiously in reviewing US interests in this region. There is also an appreciation in this debate alongside the call to hold Saudi Arabia to account for the past that the Kingdom holds vital geopolitical significance in halting Iranian expansionism and stabilizing the region overall. This has complicated the diplomatic world as instances of conflict are of enormous contention (Lucey, 2022).

Nevertheless, the literature review shows a comparison of the two Administrations' policy approaches, showing a clear break in policy. While President Trump could build robust military and economic alliances, he accentuated transactional relations as opposed to the advancement of human rights. Biden's strategy, however, was a calibration envisioned to broaden the function of moral imperatives in foreign policy, which had a tougher impact on US-Saudi Arabia ties. This represents a major shift in logic, prompting analysts to reconsider the long-term implications for U.S. interests in the region, particularly as Saudi Arabia itself pursues broader ambitions on the global stage (Farouk, 2022).

The wider global security landscape is another significant factor that is shaping Saudi-US relations. Elgohari specifies that the Biden Administration's focus on multilateralism and diplomacy could lead to a more, collaborative relationship with Saudi Arabia regarding issues like counterterrorism, and regional security (Aleksashenko, 2022). This shift away from Trump's unilateral approach could lead to a more stable and predictable relationship between the two nations. Yemen, the Iran nuclear agreement, international energy markets, and security concerns around the world will all shape the future direction of the two nations' relationship. Additionally, and since Trump's last term in office, the Middle East has experienced major turmoil. It is difficult for Trump to simply go back to the regional policies that he followed during his first term due to Biden's management of the Israeli reaction to the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack on southern Israel, which led to the onset of a credible genocide in Gaza and war in Lebanon and other regions of the country (Middle East Council on Foreign Affairs, 2024).

### **Research Methodology**

This study employs a comparative qualitative approach, examining the Trump Administration (2017–2020) and the Biden Administration (2021–2024), which are analyzed using thematic analysis. In addition, the comparative study seeks to identify decision-making mechanisms and, through cross-case analysis, to examine differences and similarities in strategy, drivers, and outcomes. Both primary and secondary sources have been used in this study. Primary sources include U.S. foreign policy actions toward Saudi Arabia, such as trade, security cooperation, arms sales, human rights sanctions, and diplomacy. Secondary sources encompass key actors—Presidents, Secretaries of State and Defense, Saudi leaders, and foreign policy elites—as well as institutions such as the Pentagon and State Department, and significant events, for example, responses to the Khashoggi incident, energy cooperation, and Yemen policy. A thematic approach has been employed with a focus on the following strands:

1. Saudi-US Traditional Partnership
2. Trump's Transnationalism vs Biden's Values and Alliances terminology
3. Biden's Re-evaluation of the Saudi-US Partnership
4. Saudi Arabia's Tilt towards New Global Allies

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research draws on the theory of neoclassical realism. Neoclassical realism, presented by Gideon Rose in his review article "Neoclassical Realism Theory of International Politics," is a blend of classical realism and neorealism, and asserts that power is the most essential factor in international relations. Neoclassical realism contends that the balance of power among states can be disturbed by mistrust among them in the shape of imbalances in power politics. Neoclassical realism is the most suitable theory for this research, given the current international context and Saudi Arabia's growing inclination toward China and Russia as emerging global partners, which creates challenges for the Biden Administration in safeguarding U.S. national interests within global geopolitics (Rose, 1998).

Neoclassical realism accounts for differences between Trump and Biden by demonstrating how the same systemic pressures were differentially filtered by domestic politics and by each leader's perception of the regime and the costs/benefits of close relationships. Neoclassical realism emphasizes that variation in domestic coalitions, congressional engagement, and public salience of human-rights, concerns accounts for why similar external pressures yielded variant policy postures. Neoclassical realism explains the divergence between the Trump and Biden administrations (2017–2024) as a matter of policy translation: similar structural incentives—including countering Iran, maintaining oil stability, and navigating great-power rivalry—were converted into different policies because domestic politics and leaders' perception styles, particularly Trump's transactional approach versus Biden's emphasis on values and alliances, filtered these systemic pressures in distinct ways. The theory thus explains both the continuities—such as persistent security relations driven by structural imperatives—and the

discontinuities, including shifts in tone, certain policy constraints, and rhetorical changes between 2017 and 2024 (Ripsman, 2016).

### **Historical Background**

The United States' relationship with Saudi Arabia can be traced back to the 1930s, when US oil firms first started to explore and develop the Kingdom's enormous oil reserves. This formed the basis of a close economic and strategic alliance that has endured for decades. Throughout World War II, the US and Saudi Arabia cooperated to resist the threat from Nazi Germany and the Axis powers. The discovery of oil in Saudi Arabia during the 1930s also contributed significantly to enhancing relations between the two nations. During the decades after World War II, the US-Saudi relationship continued to flourish as the US supplied the Kingdom with military and security aid, while Saudi Arabia appeared as one of the principal allies of the US in the Middle East (Chughtai, 2017).

The relationship was strained in the 1970s and 80s, particularly in the wake of the 1973 oil embargo, and the Iranian revolution of 1979. On the other hand, tensions decreased in the 1990s after the Gulf War, when the US and Saudi Arabia cooperated to repel Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Under Trump's leadership, the United States and Saudi Arabia have been allies, with special emphasis placed on promoting US economic interests in the region. President Donald Trump (2017-2020) also attended the Riyadh Summit in 2017 on his first official visit to Saudi Arabia to further US-Saudi relations. In addition, on May 20, 2017, Trump signed a US\$350 billion arms agreement with the government of Saudi Arabia, offering full US support in the fight against extremism in the region (McFarland, 2019).

Furthermore, the Trump Administration was not in favour of a nuclear deal with Iran, which resulted in the US disengagement from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2018. Saudi Arabia also showed a vehement interest in evolving friendly relations with the US under the Trump Presidency by increasing arms deals and financial investments in return. Despite criticism over Yemen's human rights violations and the October 2018 murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi inside the Saudi consulate

in Istanbul, President Trump chose to continue supporting Saudi Arabia's military campaign in Yemen. However, Trump vetoed the congressional measure to impose sanctions on the Saudi arms sales to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 2019 (Kennedy, 2019). The US-Saudi partnership has come under scrutiny because of issues about human rights violations in Saudi Arabia. Notwithstanding these difficulties, the US and Saudi Arabia have still been cooperating on various matters such as counterterrorism, energy security, and regional stability in the Middle East (Pollack, 2002).

## **Discussion**

Saudi Arabia is a noteworthy US ally on a diverse array of regional security initiatives. The United States is cooperating with Saudi Arabia and other member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council to foster cooperation in the fields of border security, maritime safety, arms transfers, cybersecurity, and counterterrorism (US Department of State, 2021). The regimes of Trump and Biden have witnessed this relation evolve in quite substantial ways, aligning with their interests in foreign policy. The diplomatic approach toward Saudi Arabia, as exemplified by Presidents Biden and Trump, was shaped by domestic political considerations and broader trends in foreign relations.

### ***Trump's Strategy Towards Saudi Arabia***

Aligned with the 'America First' policy, Trump's approach to U.S. foreign relations—including with Saudi Arabia—have always focused on establishing a business-like affiliation with allies. He viewed the Saudi kingdom as one of the principal actors in the fight against Iran in the Middle East and in protecting US interests in the region (New York Center, 2024). Trump supported a persistent relationship with MBS and ensured to reduce his anxiety about matters like violations of human rights, including the assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. This approach was driven by commercial considerations, including arms sales and investments. The Trump administration also sought to expand the military relationship and attract Saudi capital into the U.S. economy—an initiative welcomed by his

political allies for its potential to support job creation and economic growth (Corina, 2021).

***Biden's Strategy Towards Saudi Relations***

Nevertheless, Contrary to the earlier regimes, Joe Biden's Administration aimed at reorienting US-Saudi relations by emphasizing human rights and responsibility. As soon as he took office, Biden condemned Trump Administration's approach to the Khashoggi case and issued a report implicating MBS in the murder of Khashoggi as well. His administration further extended its outreach to Saudi Arabia while attempting to address human rights issues, reflecting a more diplomatic approach (Hassan, 2021). Biden's foreign policy slogan, 'America is Back,' reflects a turn toward multilateralism and the rebuilding of alliances. This has expanded the scope of U.S. engagement in the Middle East, encompassing initiatives for regional security and climate protection, while navigating the complexities of U.S.-Saudi relations. Biden also had to contend with existing Trump-era policies, which he did not openly criticize, while seeking to balance core strategic interests with human rights considerations (Ettinger, 2021).

***Influences of Domestic Politics***

Trump's foreign policy was driven by the imperative of securing support from his political base, which, among other considerations, valued stable national security and economic benefits derived from foreign engagement. His government's close ties with Saudi Arabia were framed in terms of bolstering American interests and pushing back at enemies like Iran (Toby, 2021). Biden's constituency was far more of the democratic kind, which is concerned with human rights and ethical grounding of foreign policy. He anticipated, for example, that Saudi Arabia would act more responsibly in the exercise of its power. The language used by his administration to monitor and influence Saudi actions further reflects this expectation (Giorno, 2022). The Trump and Biden administrations' approaches to Saudi Arabia illustrate contrasting foreign policy priorities. Whereas Trump emphasized transactional partnerships and

commercial relations, Biden has focused more on accountability, human rights, and garnering domestic political support. This contrast further underscores the complexities of U.S.–Saudi relations and the persistent need to balance pragmatism with ethical considerations.

### ***Trump's Foreign Policy Towards Saudi Arabia***

Conceivably, President Trump chose Saudi Arabia as the first stop of his official state visit, underscoring the importance his administration placed on U.S.–Saudi relations. Nonetheless, following that trip in May 2017, it became evident that Trump deviated from the traditional patterns of U.S.–Saudi diplomacy (Elmenshawy, 2018).

### ***Focus on Transnationalism***

Under his leadership, President Trump prioritized arms sales, global economic partnerships, and military transactions, often perceived as lacking moral commitment. To advance this business-oriented agenda, his close relationship with Saudi Arabia facilitated large-scale arms deals worth billions of dollars. It is further argued that the personal rapport between him and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman allowed critical issues—such as human rights violations and Saudi involvement in Yemen—to go largely unaddressed (Sabena, 2024).

### ***Seeking Other Regional Alliances***

Moreover, in its strategy, Trump Administration saw guiding the alliances in the direction of Sunni Arab nations as more advantageous to them, seeing Saudi Arabia as a prime arbiter of the Iranian threat in the region. As such, support of Saudi efforts and calls for the normalization of relations between Israel and other Arab nations are reflected in the Abraham Accords.

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### ***Restrained Criticism of Human Rights Issues***

Trump may, however, be criticized for his administration's lack of progress in promoting human rights, though he treated such concerns as a secondary priority in pursuit of broader global objectives. This approach allowed Saudi Arabia to assert its regional influence with minimal U.S. interference in its internal affairs (Tayyar, 2020).

### ***Biden's Foreign Policy to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia***

#### ***Reformation of Relations***

Conversely, the moment President Biden entered Oval Office, he attempted to frame American relations with the Kingdom based on a fundamental respect for human rights and democratic values. He openly condemned the Saudi government's poor human rights record and tried to hold it accountable for actions such as the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi (Hammer, 2022).

#### ***Determined Strategic Interests***

However, despite this, successive U.S. administrations never sought to diminish Saudi Arabia's role as a strategically tolerated actor within the global order. Studies of U.S. foreign policy toward Saudi Arabia over the decades reveal remarkable continuity (Paul Salem, 2021).

#### ***Challenges to Policy Enactment***

The policy that prevailed during the Biden Administration came with challenges such as reconciling respect for human rights with the geopolitical aims. He also never fully disentangled American interests from the long-standing alliance with Saudi Arabia, which resulted in a relatively cautious approach that retained several elements of Trump's policies (Madhani, 2022).

### ***Strategic Interests Above Human Rights***

Trump primarily disregarded human rights matters in place of military and trade alliances, yet Biden strove to put these matters at the forefront. Both administrations have, in the end, remained engaged on strategic goals notwithstanding their varying rhetoric, which shows that by and large, US foreign policy has remained consistent (Cleveland, 2021).

### ***A Comparison of Trump and Biden Policies***

#### ***Economic Collaboration***

While both presidents were equally aware of the importance of economic relations, particularly arms sales, their approaches differed. Trump pursued a more directly transactional policy, whereas Biden attempted to restrict these sales on human rights grounds, albeit with limited success (Stevanovic, 2023).

#### ***Regional Permanency***

The two governments viewed Saudi Arabia as a key nation in maintaining security within the region, particularly against Iran. This illustrates the significant shift in course they have pursued regarding U.S. involvement in the Middle East, moderating it as part of a more nuanced and comprehensive reengagement policy (BBC News, 2024)). The relationship between the US and Saudi Arabia is most clearly illustrated by the Trump and Biden administrations' highlighting the complexities of international engagement, where pragmatic considerations often take precedence over ideology. Although Biden advocates a shift toward a values-based approach, Saudi Arabia's enduring influence within U.S. foreign policy continues to shape this pivotal alliance.

#### ***Human Rights Issues***

Certainly, the most significant issue for the Biden administration was the promotion of human rights. Initially, there was hostility towards Saudis following the killing of journalist Jamal

Khashoggi. This contrasted sharply with Trump's comparatively more sanguine stance, which prioritized economic interests and arms deals. On multiple occasions—such as in the aftermath of Khashoggi's murder—interventions were largely overridden, as arms sales continued despite Congressional objections related to the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen.

### ***Economic Features***

The second major issue for the Biden Administration was when Saudi Arabia declined US appeals to manage rising oil prices by increasing oil production. Such refusal, on the other hand, reflected the complexities of energy security concerns and shifting complexities of global oil trade, which had begun to become more prominent in US-Saudi relations (The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2022).

### ***Geopolitical Swings***

The policy adopted by the Biden Administration toward Middle East affairs, focused on reassessing U.S. policy toward Iran and managing military activities more cautiously, has, in turn, altered the U.S.–Saudi relationship.

### ***Security Assistance***

Additionally, despite a degree of cynicism present in both administrations, there was recognition of the necessity for economic and security cooperation. The Trump administration emphasized arms sales and military collaboration, viewed as essential for countering Iranian threats and maintaining regional stability. This approach aligned with Saudi Arabia's objectives of strengthening its defense capabilities (David, 2024).

### ***Re-engagement Initiatives***

Despite setbacks, Biden Administration made consistent efforts to remain connected with Saudi Arabia on a wider strategy that encompassed, amongst other aims, counterterrorism strategy, economic co-operation, and energy partnership. The Jeddah

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Communiqué, released during Biden's Saudi Arabia Tour of 2022, emphasized a commitment to address a variety of issues, demonstrating openness to seek agreement, in comparison to previous tensions (Sambidge, 2022).

### ***Cooperative Projects***

Both governments have recognized the need for balance in the Gulf region. Trump's government aimed to make calls for peace agreements between Israel and Arab states that would be conducive to the strategic interests of Saudi Arabia. The Biden administration also engaged in discussions on security frameworks involving Saudi Arabia, reflecting their shared goals of combating extremism and promoting regional stability. The U.S.–Saudi relationship has faced significant challenges under both the Trump and Biden administrations, particularly regarding human rights, oil production, and geopolitical realignments. Nonetheless, opportunities remain for bilateral cooperation in economic and security matters. Both administrations have navigated these challenges while simultaneously managing intense domestic political pressures and the strategic imperative of maintaining strong ties with Saudi Arabia.

### ***The US and Saudi Arabia had shared interests.***

Indeed, the US and Saudi Arabia hold dear their common interests, which include preserving stability in the oil market, combating terrorism, opposing Iranian expansionism in the area by pursuing US insistence that the Kingdom adhere to moderate Islamic values and norms, pursuing peace between Israel and the Palestinians, and negotiating with Iran to include them in the nuclear talks.

### ***Recent Developments After Trump's Return to US Presidency***

Trump's meeting with Yasir Al-Rumayyan, Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund chairperson, is an example of how the two countries remain in communication. These meetings will drive contemplation regarding investments and business

partnerships, further solidifying the relationship. Saudi Arabia, however, is hopeful about Trump's candidacy because it perceives the campaign as a significant opportunity to increase regional strategy and enhance US-Saudi relations. Additionally, since President Donald Trump's return to office, Saudi-US ties have grown quickly through huge economic and defense agreements, a sign of reviving the close partnership during his first term. Riyadh committed approximately \$600 billion in trade and investment with America over four years, as Washington inked a record \$142 billion defense deal with the Kingdom, boosting security collaboration. Top-level visits and direct Trump–MBS diplomacy have bolstered shared interests in energy, technology, and infrastructure. Nevertheless, issues persist over oil pricing, US pressure on OPEC+, and Trump's new hardline approach to Iran, potentially complicating Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 diversification plans and regional stabilization ambitions. Generally, the relationship is characterized by high economic aspirations and strategic congruence, but also by intrinsic risks related to energy policy, regional stability, and balancing relationships with other rising global powers such as China (Omran, 2025).

### ***Strategic Implications for Saudi-US Relations***

The relations between the US and Saudi Arabia from 2017 to 2024 have witnessed deep-seated changes rooted in the differences between the Trump and Biden Administrations. Nonetheless, this relationship could benefit from deliberate policy choices and the formal guidelines established within those policies.

***Security Arrangements:*** The two governments have already recognized the necessity of security cooperation and its applicability. A bilateral defense agreement would enhance Saudi Arabia's defense against potential external regional threats such as Iran. The agreement will also establish the behavior of mutual military exercises, intelligence sharing, and antiterrorism efforts, hence further intensifying the security relationship.

**Regional Integration:** The US needs to emphasize unifying the Gulf nations to ease the extent of tension that has been observed against Iran. However, Initiatives regarding creating economic integration and managing dissent should help reduce the tensions in the region. This could require engaging states such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in security and economic dialogues.

**Steps to resolve Human Rights Problems:** The United States must support the growth of human rights while maintaining strategic relations with Saudi Arabia. Attempts include, but are not limited to, Human Rights Issues conditioned with US Aid or the Sale of Indonesian Arms, where American aid is made dependent on improvement in human rights. Discussing reforms would support the US in gradually improving its norms as well as its strategic interests. Funding civil society development programs represents a viable strategy for the U.S. to empower the local population and support democratic governance in Saudi Arabia. In addition, investing in education, women's rights, and providing platforms for community voices can further these goals. Collectively, these initiatives could foster a more cohesive and resilient society, while potentially advancing U.S. interests in the region.

**Consolidation of Economic Connections:** It would be in the best interest of the US to encourage Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030; a progressive initiative aimed at shifting the Kingdom away from being an oil-based economy. This can be finalized through funding in technology, renewable energy, and infrastructure areas. US companies can play a key role in facilitating this as well as developing economic ties with fewer connections to oil.

**Energy Assistance:** Logically, as the global energy landscape evolves, the U.S. and Saudi Arabia must evaluate available options to ensure energy security and promote sustainable growth. Moreover, supporting renewable energy projects together would also contribute to energy security while focusing on climate change. The two nations can also collaborate to lead and guide the world's energy transition.

**Adjusting to Political Vicissitudes:** There is a pressing need to address political factions to solidify the US-Saudi relationship; as such, the two nations must collaborate on an approach that involves bipartisan issues in Washington. Focusing on various political factions minimizes risks involved with foreign policy shifts that arise due to election cycles. President Joe Biden's administration was supposed to support Saudi Arabia in conflicts involving the region, such as the Yemen crisis. Instead of adding more hostility, Saudi Arabia could work through diplomatic channels and support humanitarian activities, which would improve Saudi Arabia's reputation and strengthen relations with the US.

### **Conclusion**

This comparative study of Saudi–U.S. relations during the Trump and Biden administrations (2017–2024) has highlighted the complex interplay of strategic interests, ethical considerations, and global affairs. It has illustrated that while the Trump administration was characterized by a strong emphasis on military and economic ties, often at the expense of addressing human rights concerns, Biden administration foregrounded the latter.

- Nonetheless, while Trump's policy strengthened the close relationship driven by the shared goal of countering the Iranian threat and securing lucrative arms contracts, the Biden administration has sought to reassess this relationship, placing greater emphasis on human rights and accountability. Although these efforts have faced challenges, factors such as the lack of personal rapport between Biden and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, rising oil tensions, and regional disagreements have all influenced U.S.–Saudi relations.
- Biden administration's pullout of assistance for the Saudi-led war in Yemen and its lukewarm intervention policy have given rise to questions regarding where the United States and Saudi Arabia's relations would be heading in the future. It would thus seem that, as both

governments strive to fulfill their foreign policy objectives, the moment is opportune for re-evaluating the US-Saudi relationship.

- The future will be charted by the two nations engaging in fulfilling specific duties that previously dominated the character of their relations, while simultaneously being sensitive enough to adapt to existing realities. From here on, it is evident that a more pragmatic paradigm highlighting strategic cooperation and respect for human rights will be vital for a firm relationship.
- Additionally, the evolving patterns of the US-Saudi relations will continue to shape the larger Middle East geopolitics and the regional security connected to global peace and security trends.
- The trajectory of US-Saudi relations will depend on whether transactional or values-based approaches dominate future Administrations. Notably, Trump's return to the presidency and his visit to Saudi Arabia on May 13, 2025, demonstrated that his transactional approach remains effective in advancing Saudi Arabia's leadership interests. During this visit, the Trump administration signed a \$600 billion agreement with Saudi Arabia covering the defense, energy, technology, and infrastructure sectors. Additionally, Trump and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman agreed on a comprehensive military partnership aimed at enhancing regional and global security for both nations.

### **Key Discoveries**

Under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi leadership is focused on realizing Vision 2030 and addressing major mid-century global energy transition challenges, underscoring the Kingdom's pivotal role in international decision-making. Muhammad Bin Salman will retain this role until 2060, when the country aims to reach net-zero emissions.

- The broader global transformation is expected to unfold over the course of MBS's lifetime, meaning that Saudi

Arabia will continue to rely on oil sales and export revenues to sustain its significant influence in international affairs.

- US-Saudi relations are transactional and do not have shared geopolitical interests or other objectives, including oil for security. Moreover, to produce an agreeable and viable solution for both nations, they should come together and negotiate compromises.
- Saudi Arabia is shifting its dependence away from the US towards China as a long-term energy partner to achieve its 2030 vision.
- Biden Administration was confronted by challenges of power tussles and geopolitical competition that affect regional and international political and security dynamics. Saudi Arabia was recalibrating its energy partnerships, increasingly favoring China over the United States as a long-term strategic partner.
- There is an urgent need to comprehend the subtleties of the US-Saudi relationship to successfully manage and navigate the intricacies of the Middle East region. Through an understanding of these dynamics and an effort to resolve common interests and concerns, the US and Saudi Arabia can continue to develop a solid and mutually advantageous relationship in the years to come.
- The evolving dynamics of the US-Saudi relationship under the Trump and Biden Administrations lay bare the intricacies of balancing strategic interests against ethical considerations.
- However, both governments viewed Saudi Arabia mainly as a strategic security and arms ally; high-ticket arms sales and defense ties were at the core of relations throughout both eras. Specifically, Trump's 2017 high-profile stress on arms deals and defense deals; SIPRI Military Expenditure Database figures indicate that Saudi Arabia is highlighted as a leading recipient of US arms from 2020 to 2024.
- Saudi moves to diversify partners, particularly economic and security cooperation with Beijing and Russia, created incentives for Washington to re-engage

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pragmatically; by 2024-25, this generated resurgent large-scale defense cooperation and investment talks, demonstrating Saudi leverage in countering Washington and Beijing.

- The concentration of decision-making within Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's office, coupled with his readiness to exercise regional power, has made the U.S.–Saudi bilateral relationship more of an elite-driven negotiation and less of an institutionalized, predictable practice. This has posed reputational challenges for Washington.
- Conversely, over this period, the US–Saudi relationship evolved incrementally, reflecting shifts in priorities such as public human rights rhetoric, limited sanctions, and the resumption of arms negotiations, while maintaining strategic continuity in defense, intelligence, energy, and investment cooperation. Major ruptures, however, did not occur, as structural security interests, regional threats, and economic ties provided strong incentives for continued collaboration.
- Finally, Trump's return to the Presidency provides an opportunity for more engaged and fruitful US–Saudi relations in the fields of international politics, economic cooperation, and security.

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