

## THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION'S POLICY TOWARDS THE KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA 2021-2022

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### ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the question of the Biden administration's policy towards the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, with special regard to the reasons for the US decision to send strong signals of reassurance in 2022 after the initial deterioration in their relations. This paper's main hypothesis posits that the US overall implemented a hybrid strategy towards its Gulf partner, but there were different constellations of coercive and accommodative elements to it in different time frames. It draws on Jeffrey Taliaferro's theory of intra-alliance politics, which examines great power patrons' strategies towards allies and partners based on the administration's perception of the regional power distribution, the assessment of the threat level and time horizon for its actualization, as well as the presence of domestic constraints. In the case of this paper, it was contended that the Biden administration perceived a mostly unfavourable power distribution in the Middle East and that the initial perception of a long threat horizon was replaced by uncertainty, stemming from the indirect effects of the Russia-Ukraine war on the Persian Gulf. These variables, combined with the high domestic opposition of Congress to accommodating Saudi Arabia, can explain the resulting hybrid strategy. The method of congruence analysis was used in this paper to test the observable manifestations of the hypothesis.

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## Introduction

Ever since the American president Joseph R. Biden pledged to make the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia a “pariah”<sup>2</sup> during the campaign, there has been an expectation of a different policy towards the Gulf monarchy compared to previous administrations’, especially Donald Trump’s. According to Labott (2022), the “[d]emocratic foreign policy elite assuming power in Washington harbored a far more negative view toward Saudi Arabia than in the past”. They embraced Biden’s campaign’s negative stance towards the Kingdom as a necessity after Trump’s overly friendly relationship with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) (Labott 2022). Amidst such a political climate in Washington regarding the long-term Gulf partner and taking his prior critiques of the Saudis into consideration, Biden received media and public scrutiny over his presidential visit to the region in July of 2022 (e.g., Quinn 2022; Maksad 2022; McKernan 2022; Foster 2022; Da Silva and Smith 2022; US Department of State 2022d).

This diplomatic visit and attendance at the GCC+3 Summit, combined with statements confirming the US commitment to providing security in the Gulf, are rather strong signals of reassurance, raising the question of why the administration made this decision. Given the importance of the Persian Gulf, particularly Saudi Arabia, to the global energy landscape, there have been remarks that Biden’s visit was expected to lower the fossil fuel prices in the US, as well as an effort to balance the global energy markets (e.g., Madhani et al. 2022, Al-Atrush et al. 2022). Considering the Russian Federation has been one of the largest energy exporters in the world<sup>3</sup>, as well as the fact that most

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<sup>2</sup> Although Biden has used this designation when talking about other countries as well (e.g., Biden 2017, Biden 2022a), this particular instance was widely quoted, especially since his visit to Saudi Arabia in 2022.

<sup>3</sup> The global percentage of Russian oil exports amounted to 12.3% in 2021 (British Petroleum [BP] 2022a, 27), which is a substantial share of the global market. Russian crude oil was principally directed to Europe (138.7 million tonnes) and China (79.6 Mt) out of a total of 263.6 Mt (BP 2022a, 27). Russian exports of natural gas via pipelines to Europe amounted to 167 Bcm out of 201.7 (BP 2022a, 34). According to the International Energy Agency (IEA 2022), Russian exports to Europe, the US, Japan, and Korea have decreased by 2.2 million barrels a day as a direct effect of the war, but some of the losses are mitigated through exports to China, India, and Türkiye; however, the EU embargo on Russian crude oil and petroleum products will have been completely implemented by February 2023, resulting in a further decline in exports. Some authors, like Shagina (2022), argue that the Russian pivot to Asia regarding the diversification of energy exports is not going to be as easy, given that the Chinese-Russian oil trade has already surpassed the informal rule of importing no more than 15% from a single supplier (108), and that it would take much longer to build the necessary gas transport infrastructure to different parts of Asia, which is dependent on the technology under sanctions (107).

European countries depend on imports of Russian energy in high percentages<sup>4</sup>, the uncertainty and sanctions being imposed upon this country following the onset of the war have influenced price volatility<sup>5</sup>, adding further pressure on the already strained global energy system<sup>6</sup>. Certainly, US oil prices are affected by these events on a global scale. However, explaining signals of reassurance based solely on preconceived notions such as the US-Saudi “oil for security” deal<sup>7</sup> or petro-alignment (Kim 2019) would be insufficient and partially inconsistent with empirical evidence. Regarding US-Saudi relations, we adopt a stance that takes US energy abundance into account. With different US interests regarding domestic energy security in the Gulf, the primary rationale for the deals mentioned above is changing. As a result, we contend that the sudden change in Biden’s policy was not as much about oil as conventional wisdom might suggest.

The central hypothesis of this paper is that US policy towards Saudi Arabia assumed more accommodative elements in light of the Russia-Ukraine war because this conflict exacerbated the strategic competition globally, thus creating an indirect threat to US interests in the Persian Gulf. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to provide an explanation of Biden’s 2022 hybrid strategy towards Saudi Arabia based on Jeffrey Taliaferro’s (2019) theory of intra-alliance politics. This paper will proceed as follows: The first section of the paper is dedicated to the theoretical and methodological tenets on which the explanation is based; the second section of the paper entails the description of the US strategy towards Saudi Arabia. The regional power distribution and threat assessment as parts of the outcome explanation are addressed in the third section of this paper. The fourth section, on the other hand, deals with domestic constraints on the aforementioned outcome. Finally, the fifth section contains concluding remarks.

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<sup>4</sup> For an overview of European dependency on Russian natural gas and its implications see Ostrowski 2020; Stevanović 2020.

<sup>5</sup> The OPEC basket oil price started rising in January and reached \$128.27 on March 9; by August, it dropped to around \$ 100 (OPEC 2022a). US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude oil spot prices will average around \$ 99, and Brent spot prices will average around \$ 105, as Energy Information Administration (EIA 2022a) estimates.

<sup>6</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic had a severe impact on the global economy and energy system as demand fell while storage facilities were full, resulting in price drops (Seznec 2020, 244-245), but the energy landscape had started to recover prior to the Russia-Ukraine war, which has yet to be fully evaluated for its implications on the global energy system (BP 2022b, 20).

<sup>7</sup> On “oil for security deals” see (Colgan 2021).

## Theoretical Assumptions And Used Methodology

Before reviewing the theoretical assumptions this paper builds upon, an important caveat is in order. When referring to the countries in the Persian Gulf, there are different designations regarding their relations with the US: partnership (US Department of State 2022e), alliance (Taliaferro 2019, 2), alignment (Lawson 2020, 389), and client/protégé-patron relationship (Kim 2019). Since the subject of this paper encompasses alliance politics, it is essential to discern what instances the concept of alliance extends to, including what that means in the case of this paper. Some authors, like Mira Rapp-Hooper (2020, 82), adopt a stance on the fundamental difference between formal treaty allies and countries in the Middle East with which the US has security cooperation. Others, like Taliaferro (2019, 2), think that military alliances include “multilateral treaty alliances such as North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO); bilateral defense pacts with Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the Philippines; and non-treaty security partnerships with states such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Pakistan, and Israel”.

We follow Stephen Walt’s (1997, 157) definition of an alliance as “a formal or informal commitment for security cooperation between two or more states”. Although there are no formal alliance treaties with the Gulf states<sup>8</sup>, there has been extensive security cooperation, as well as other foreign policy activities that suggest security provisions. Emma Ashford (2017, 3-4) claims that including non-alliance security ties “better reflect reality”, mentioning examples of US-Israel and US-Saudi relationships that show “substantive security commitments even in the absence of formalized alliances”. According to Walt (1997, 157), formal and informal alliances are included in the alliance concept because formal treaties are not necessarily a guarantee of deep commitment. Taliaferro (2019, 18) also uses the term “frenemy”<sup>9</sup> for “a state located in a volatile region that has an ongoing bilateral security relationship with the United States, despite the existence of divergent security interests and political objectives between the parties” (Taliaferro 2019, 18).<sup>10</sup> The most relevant consequence

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<sup>8</sup> Notwithstanding the absence of a formal alliance treaty, there have been several bilateral agreements in the defense area between the US and Saudi Arabia (see: US Department of State 2020; US Department of State 2022a).

<sup>9</sup> Similarly, in Mark L. Haas’s view, “frenemy coalitions” refer to “security cooperation among ideological enemies when these rivals confront a common and pressing material threat” (Haas 2022, 30).

<sup>10</sup> Taliaferro (2019, 19) identifies four categories on the spectrum of bilateral asymmetric alliances depending on strategic convergence and ideologies (271): special relationship alliances; ambivalent alliances; frenemies, and alliances of convenience.

of such a standpoint is that the US has previously acted on behalf of the Saudis' defence on multiple occasions, providing them with a reason to expect security provisions, even in the absence of a formal treaty. Hence, US-Saudi relations are considered a form of an asymmetrical defence alliance, although Saudi Arabia will be referred to as a partner throughout the paper.

The Persian Gulf countries, and especially the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, have usually been grouped when explaining regional security dynamics (e.g., Sim and Fulton 2020, 3), as well as US policy towards them. However, the last decade witnessed some of these countries individually taking the initiative when it comes to foreign policy and security, changes in intraregional alignments, as well as certain disagreements culminating in the Qatar crisis (2017-2021) (e.g., Lawson 2020, 387-388; Bianco 2020, 93; Sim and Fulton 2020, 2; Darwich 2021, 641, 643).

In addition, although oil politics have been inseparable from regional security, there are specific differences between the GCC countries. According to Kim (2019, 15), there are four different types of alignment with an oil-producing country depending on their market power and geostrategic location, and each of them entails a different level of commitment.<sup>11</sup> In his opinion, however, Saudi Arabia is the only country to which the US provides security guarantees and therefore has the highest level of commitment out of all four types (Kim 2019, 19). We adopt the stance that the level of US commitment to the security of different Gulf states varies. This paper will only include US relations with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for two reasons. The "oil for security" deal has traditionally been the most obvious in the case of Saudi Arabia, considering its spare capacity, so the rival proposition about oil as a determinant of foreign policy change is easily testable in this case. Secondly, Saudi Arabia has been pursuing a more active foreign policy approach in the Gulf, thus standing out among the other GCC states.

The theoretical framework this paper builds upon is Taliaferro's theory, which explains the variation of US strategies towards allies (Taliaferro 2019). Taliaferro's theory contributes to alliance politics from a neoclassical realist approach, and it is embedded in a broader neoclassical realist theory that he formulated with Steven E. Lobell and Norrin M. Ripsman (Ripsman et al. 2016). Their rendition of neoclassical realist theory as a theory of foreign policy (Ripsman et al. 2016, 31) contends that a certain policy response is dependent on systemic stimuli, which are perceived by foreign policy executives, as well as domestic constraints that affect decision-making and

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<sup>11</sup> Those are in descending order: 1. security guarantee; 2. security alignment; 3. security favor; and 4. neglect (Kim 2019, 16). Such categorization of Saudi Arabia in Kim's opinion is based on the Kingdom's status as a "price stabilizer" combined with its geostrategic location (Kim 2019, 19).

implementation (Ripsman et al. 2016, 31). Although he examines US strategies towards allies in the context of their nuclear proliferation, Taliaferro (2019, 4) posits the theory for broader application, saying it is “relevant to other key challenges facing the United States and various allies” if they could potentially result in containment failure or access denial for the US. The issue addressed in this paper is the credibility crisis, because further deterioration in US-Saudi relations stemming from the decline in credibility could potentially result in containment failure.<sup>12</sup> Saudi Arabia’s been hedging between different options, i.e., enhancing economic and political ties with Russia and China, which could in theory lead to US containment failure, as well as having a more autonomous foreign policy that does not always align with US interests, thus contributing to the “secondary security dilemma”<sup>13</sup>. Perceived unfavourable power distribution and a sense of strategic competition in the region, increased by the Russia-Ukraine war, incentivize the administration to reassure the Gulf partner with the goal of preventing it from defecting. Even if there is no immediate direct threat, alternative options are becoming more prominent as the strategic competition increases. As Blankenship (2020, 3) argues, “patrons use reassurance proactively to offset allies’ fears of abandonment and discourage them from pursuing alternative options”.

Walt (1997, 165) argues that credibility can be a reason for preserving alliances, even when their value has diminished, to prevent others from perceiving it “as a sign of deteriorating resolve”. Similarly, Glenn Snyder (1984, 474) contends that “the incentives and disincentives for current strategy options will be affected by one’s own and others’ behavior in the recent past”. Taliaferro (2004, 27) posits that great powers are prone to risky interventions that seldom entail entrapment in the periphery to avert losses, including those in “reputation for resolve, the credibility of commitments, and prestige” (26).<sup>14</sup> In accordance

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<sup>12</sup> Containment failure entails not only “a rival great power actually occupying all or part of a region” but also military or political penetration (Taliaferro 2019, 8).

<sup>13</sup> According to Glenn Snyder (1984), the secondary security dilemma involves the risks of abandonment (realignment with the opponent, de-aligning, failing to fulfill commitments, failing “to provide support in contingencies where support is expected”) (466) or an entrapment (“being dragged into a conflict over an ally’s interests that one does not share, or shares only partially”) by an ally (467). Kim (2011, 355) differentiates between the concepts of entanglement as a “process whereby a state is compelled to aid an ally in a costly and unprofitable enterprise *because of the alliance*” and entrapment, which is “a form of undesirable entanglement in which the entangling state adopts a risky or offensive policy not specified in the alliance agreement”.

<sup>14</sup> Blagden and Porter contend that American alliances *inter alia* serve the purpose of containing allies in a potential quest to challenge the US. However, such an endeavour creates a constant need for maintaining the reputation of a reliable security provider (Blagden and Porter 2021, 28).

with this, we adopt the stance that allies and partners observe how the US behaves in other alliances and partnerships and that US foreign policy executives calculate how the US is perceived by them when they make decisions.<sup>15</sup>

Two possible events could threaten the US in this context. First, as mentioned earlier, failing to provide security commitments to the partners in the Gulf could influence the US's reputation for resolve in other regions. Secondly, some Persian Gulf states may align with rival great powers "as the conflict in Ukraine reheats the competition between Moscow and Washington" (Bennett 2022). Castillo and Downes (2020, 4) examine the strategies of weaker partners in asymmetrical alliances when there is an external threat to the alliance and posit that they choose between loyalty (remaining in the alliance), hedging between the ally and the challenger, and exiting from the alliance (neutrality – without aligning with the challenger or defection – which includes aligning with the challenger) (7-8).<sup>16</sup>

According to Taliaferro (2019, 55), US strategy towards an ally depends on the current regional power distribution (which can be favourable or unfavourable to US interests) and the time horizon for threats to US interests (which can be short or long). In addition to these structural variables, Taliaferro (2019, 55) uses the level of domestic hurdles as an intervening variable<sup>17</sup> that affects the outcome. In the case of low domestic hurdles and unfavourable power distribution, the US will pursue an accommodative strategy for a short threat horizon, a hybrid strategy for a long threat horizon, or a coercive strategy if there is favourable power distribution (55). However, if the domestic hurdles are high, the outcome strategy will be hybrid in all scenarios except for the case of unfavourable regional power distribution in the short run, when the resulting strategy will be that of accommodation (55).

We argue that the overall strategy of the Biden administration towards Saudi Arabia was hybrid, but there were different constellations of coercive and

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<sup>15</sup> Ian D. Henry (2020, 48-49) juxtaposes the two existing camps in relation to reputation in international affairs – deterrence theorists and reputation sceptics – and offers a third approach that emphasises reliability instead of loyalty. According to Henry's alliance reliability theory, states value allies who share convergent particular interests and methods of achieving them (Henry 2020, 53).

<sup>16</sup> There are two ways in which an ally can become more independent in Blankenship's (2020, 4) opinion: an ally can try to provide security for itself through conventional weapons buildups and, if powerful enough, nuclear proliferation; or alternatively, an ally can turn to another great power for security guarantees or coalesce with non-great powers. For example, Vision 2030 in SA had a goal of increasing domestic defence procurement from 2 to 50% by 2030, and in 2021 it was 8% (The Military Balance 2022, 324).

<sup>17</sup> There are also other possibilities for choosing the intervening variables (Ripsman et al. 2016, Götz 2021).

accommodative elements to it in different time periods. A hybrid strategy has features of both coercive and accommodative strategies (Taliaferro 2019, 14) and entails using different foreign policy tools<sup>18</sup> either to diminish or augment an ally's military or economic capabilities. Accordingly, the Biden administration adopted more accommodative elements to their strategy in 2022, based on the uncertainty of the threat, which could have further jeopardised the power distribution in the Persian Gulf.

Since this paper is oriented to one spatially and temporally determined event, the goal is not to test nor develop a theory but instead to use it as a heuristic in explanation. Even though there is a difference in policy that could potentially be addressed with temporal comparison<sup>19</sup>, namely different constellations of coercive and accommodative elements in the strategy, we believe that methodology based on congruence analysis is more suitable in this case because it will provide a more comprehensive explanation of the outcome. Considering the subject of this paper, within-case methods are more appropriate, and the evidence used to prove the hypothesis is, subsequently, within-case and not cross-case. Still, since the scope does not allow for such in-depth causal mechanism analysis as in process tracing<sup>20</sup>, the methodology will be based on congruence analysis. Congruence analysis<sup>21</sup> as a method entails identifying “the observable implications of hypothesised causal relationships” – propositions – and assessing the (dis)confirming evidence to discern if they exist in a case of interest (Beach and Pedersen 2016, 272, 275). When this method is used to explain specific historic outcomes that cannot be defined as instances of a broader population, Beach and Pedersen (2016, 275) use the term “explaining outcome congruence analysis”. We will perform cluster congruence tests<sup>22</sup>, which

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<sup>18</sup> Taliaferro (2019, 14) mentions the following tools: “conventional arms transfers, the extension of explicit US security guarantees, long-term basing arrangements and troop deployments, economic assistance, export controls, and diplomatic support in international organizations”.

<sup>19</sup> King, Keohane, and Verba suggest artificially increasing the number of observations in qualitative, small-N research by dividing it temporally or into subunits (King et al. 1994, 234).

<sup>20</sup> For a detailed account of the process tracing method see (Beach and Pedersen 2013). According to Beach and Pedersen (2016, 270), process tracing provides an in-depth unpacking of the causal mechanism, whereas the understanding of the causal mechanism in congruence analysis is minimalistic (272).

<sup>21</sup> Blatter and Haverland (2012, 144) define congruence analysis as “a small-N research design in which the researcher uses case studies to provide empirical evidence for the explanatory relevance or relative strength of one theoretical approach in comparison to other theoretical approaches”.

<sup>22</sup> Cluster tests include testing several propositions of empirical evidence that are theoretically certain but not unique, although collectively they provide fairly strong confirmation (Beach and Pedersen 2016, 287). Singular tests consist of one proposition about empirical evidence being tested across multiple temporal or spatial settings (Beach and Pedersen 2016, 286).



translate into finding empirical evidence of the unfavourable regional power distribution, uncertainty about the threat horizon, and high domestic hurdles. Additionally, we will try to find empirical evidence from multiple settings for the same proposition, thus also performing the singular test of congruence.

## **US-Saudi Arabia Partnership During Biden's Presidency**

### ***Considerations of the "oil for security" argument***

Since the Obama administration's policy towards the Gulf partners during the Arab Spring, his attempt to redirect attention to East Asia, and his accommodative approach to Iran with the JCPOA, US regional allies have experienced an exacerbated fear of abandonment (Sim and Fulton 2020, 1-2; Bianco 2020; Rickli 2016, 5; U.S. Central Command 2022). The Trump administration's policy, barring his personal relations with MBS and the "maximum pressure campaign" towards Iran, was, in Gregory Gause's opinion, not much different from Obama's (Gause 2019, 12; see also Banerjee 2020, 225), and added to regional partners' fears regarding the US commitment to their security.<sup>23</sup> Finally, Biden's initial rhetoric towards the regional partner and especially his intent to "recalibrate" US-Saudi relations (Blanchard 2021, 2) contributed to the existing credibility crisis. According to Gause (2022), US-Saudi relations "have eroded during the last three U.S. presidencies".

According to Hassan-Yari (2020, 463), the nature of US-Saudi Arabia relations has changed qualitatively as a result of the US's diminished energy dependence on foreign oil<sup>24</sup>, and thus "[o]il for security' has given way to economic benefits for the United States". Akkas and Altiparmak (2021, 8) examined US-GCC relations from the standpoint of complex interdependence, with a particular focus on oil and arms trade between the two countries, and concluded that the interdependence has transitioned to unilateral dependency in the context of increasing US energy production. The empirical evidence Colgan (2021, 179) uses as an indicator of "oil for security" deals – "external states offer[ing] military

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<sup>23</sup> For instance, Trump decided not to act when Saudi oil infrastructure in Abqaiq was under attack (Banerjee 2020, 224); also, by ordering Soleimani's target killing, he aggravated Iran, which put the Saudis under pressure (225).

<sup>24</sup> US hydrocarbon production also depends on the administration's energy policy, which in Biden's case is less inclined to incentivize shale oil and gas companies and is oriented towards green energy (Biden 2021a). However, in addition to the Strategic Petroleum Reserve (which Biden used [Biden 2021b; US Department of State 2022c]), there is a potential for increasing domestic production in case of contingency, which is why the US is not as vulnerable as it used to be.

protection to petrostates at pivotal moments” and “petrostates offering some kind of oil benefits to their protectors” – seems to be changing.<sup>25</sup> Even though threats to oil infrastructure and international maritime interests are recognised in numerous cross-border attacks from the Houthis to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the statement on US CENTCOM posture is clear that the US does not provide offensive military support (U.S. Central Command 2022). Secondly, Saudi Arabia, as the world’s biggest swing producer of oil<sup>26</sup> and a leading Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) country in the OPEC+ format, would have been expected to use the spare capacity to mitigate the war’s ramifications on oil prices. However, the overall planned production level is nearly the same for July, August, and September, with Saudi Arabia having the biggest production quota among the OPEC members and Russia among non-OPEC members (OPEC 2022b; OPEC 2022c; OPEC 2022d).

Still, some authors argue that there is a US interest in keeping the oil flow from the Persian Gulf to global markets steady because the US is dependent on the world market (Akkas and Altiparmak 2021, 12; Colgan 2021, 178). Others, like Blagden and Porter (2021, 30), believe this interest is also diminished.<sup>27</sup> Since the partnership with Saudi Arabia was formed around oil, it can be argued that the original reason for US security provision has changed, which opens the question of alliance endurance.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Notwithstanding his argument on the continuity of the international order in oil from the 1970s (Colgan 2021, 75), even Colgan admits to certain modifications in “oil for security” deals. As he put it, “[s]tructural changes in the twenty-first century have motivated both the United States and the petrostates to reconsider the OFS deals” (Colgan 2021, 177).

<sup>26</sup> According to the EIA (2022b, 5) report, only the OPEC(+) countries can have a surplus capacity (“maximum existing capacity that can be brought online within 30 days and sustained for at least 90 days” [EIA 2022c]), while other countries respond to the market. However, not only does the rise in oil prices benefit Saudi economic interests by mitigating the effects of the pandemic on their economy, but some data also suggest that their spare capacity is in decline. EIA (2022c) estimates that “OPEC surplus capacity declined to 3.0 million b/d by May 2022 from 5.4 million b/d in 2021”, while “non-OPEC countries had about 280,000 b/d of surplus production capacity”.

<sup>27</sup> The interest in preserving the constant supply of oil from the Persian Gulf is dependent on the US grand strategy, or the willingness to provide “public goods”. For example, according to Friedman (2022, 1299) the grand strategy of “deep engagement requires the United States to protect global commerce from widespread upheaval”, while liberal internationalism encompasses the expansion of free trade as well. Both grand strategies imply US engagement in the interest of preserving global trade.

<sup>28</sup> Alliance cohesion can be understood as alliance endurance, or the question of whether the alliance will disband or persevere when it goes up against a threat or “after their original rationale had faded” (Darwich 2021, 641-642). The fear of abandonment from the senior partner in weaker alliances may arise in cases “when it is no longer obvious that the alliance

As opposed to the belief that immediate threats, such as wars, cause a rise in alliance cohesion automatically, as Darwich (2021, 643) puts it, they also “can lead to different sources of threats as experienced by varying allies, which can lead to divisions”. This is especially true in the case of US relations with the Gulf states, given the distance, and the previous lack of credibility. In this context, the Gulf countries’ neutral response to the Russia-Ukraine war could have accelerated the US effort to improve relations with them.<sup>29</sup> The desire to have convergent interests with an ally goes both ways (Henry 2020, 53), so it can be inferred that the US wants the Gulf states to support American policy towards Russia during the war. In Wehrey’s opinion, the Gulf countries’ reaction to the war resulted from their “discontent with America’s supposed inattentiveness to their security needs rather than a full-throated embrace of Russia” (HFAC 2022a, 3). Hence, we contend that the reason for Biden’s visit to the Persian Gulf in July was to address the partners’ fears of abandonment and prevent them from siding with rival great powers in the ongoing war rather than to lower US fossil fuel prices. Even though it seems that US-Saudi relations might be evolving from the “oil for security” format, it does not necessarily mean engaging militarily in the region. The Biden administration repeatedly affirmed adherence to the US alliance system and security partnerships in different regions to mitigate the impact of heightened strategic competition (Saab 2021, 89).

### ***Biden’s hybrid strategy towards Saudi Arabia***

There are a few ways for the US to implement a more accommodative or coercive approach towards Saudi Arabia. They include conventional arms sales, troop and military asset deployment, security guarantees, and diplomatic support.<sup>30</sup> There is empirical evidence of coercive elements during the first year

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is in every member’s interest”, especially when there’s a geographical distance that alters the perception of threat for both sides, respectively (Walt 1997, 160). As DiGiuseppe and Shea (2021, 3) put it, the signals of commitment to an ally’s defence are “especially important when it is not clear if the original motivation for the alliance persists”.

<sup>29</sup> The Gulf countries apart from Iran voted in favour of the UN GA resolution demanding that Russia end military operations in Ukraine, as well as the resolution on humanitarian consequences (UN 2022a, UN 2022b; CGTN 2022), but none of them agreed to impose sanctions on Russia (Funakoshi et al. 2022). Michael Lind (2022) comments that most countries’ refusal to impose sanctions signifies the return of the “Non-Aligned bloc”. Saudi Arabia and the UAE also abstained from voting on the suspension of Russia’s participation in the UN Human Rights Council (Blanchard 2022, 5).

<sup>30</sup> Since Saudi Arabia has not been a recipient of US foreign assistance (Sharp et al. 2021, 9), we will not use this instrument of foreign policy. Saudi Arabia pays extensive sums of money for US military training and advice through Foreign Military Sales (Blanchard 2021, 26).

of the presidency, notwithstanding that they were usually balanced by certain concessions, which suggests that the strategy was hybrid. First, there was a suspension of certain arms sales, traditionally the most important form of security cooperation with the Gulf monarchy. At the start of Biden's term, the US "suspended all conflict-related military assistance and arms sales to Saudi Arabia" (The Military Balance 2022, 320). However, the arms sales suspension referred to offensive weapons, while the administration continued to approve defensive arms sales. In addition, the Biden administration halted two arms sales that had been negotiated under Trump (Manson and England 2021). There were three major arms trade deals in 2021 and early 2022 with Saudi Arabia.<sup>31</sup>

Secondly, some significant military assets were withdrawn from Saudi Arabia, while others were left. During Biden's first year of incumbency, one THAAD and four Patriot missile-defence batteries were removed from Saudi Arabia (The Military Balance 2022, 320). As stated in US Department of State deputy assistant secretary Resnick's testimony, "A key part of arms transfer decisions is our efforts to ensure US-origin equipment is not used to perpetrate human rights violations and to minimise the risk of civilian casualties by our partners" (SFRC 2021b). Thirdly, the signals of reassurance directed towards Saudi Arabia were highly ambiguous. There were some DoS officials' visits to Saudi Arabia (Biden 2021c), but the President had not been to the Persian Gulf before July 2022.<sup>32</sup> As for the statements of support, the DoS repeatedly issued statements of condemnation of the Houthi attacks against Saudi Arabia (see US Department of State n.d.), and there were senior officials' statements on the US commitment to Saudi security (e.g., Biden 2021d; Biden 2021e), but the President's statements on Saudi security were scarce.<sup>33</sup>

Fourthly, the Biden administration's emphasis on "democratic values" (The White House 2021, 9) resulted in a number of critiques directed at Saudi

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<sup>31</sup> Continuation of Maintenance Support Services in September 2021 (Defense Security Cooperation Agency 2022a); Advanced Medium Range Air-To-Air Missiles in November 2021 (Defense Security Cooperation Agency 2022b); and Multifunctional Information Distribution System-Low Volume Terminals in February 2022 (Defense Security Cooperation Agency 2022c). As reported in the SIPRI Arms Transfers Database (concluding with August 4, 2022), the majority of arms transfers during Biden's first year of the presidency were negotiated prior to 2021 (SIPRI 2022).

<sup>32</sup> There were also visits by the US Special Envoy for Yemen, Tim Lenderking. However, they served a different purpose.

<sup>33</sup> There are different forms of reassurance, such as statements, troop deployment, diplomatic visits (Blankenship 2020, 2), weapons deployment, and joint military exercises (DiGiuseppe and Shea 2021, 4). In his public statements in 2021, Biden personally expressed his commitment to assisting Saudi defence only once (Biden 2021c).

Arabia's domestic and foreign policies.<sup>34</sup> As stated during the campaign, one of the goals of Biden's Gulf policy was to "review the U.S. relationship with the government of Saudi Arabia and end support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen" (Biden 2020). With regard to the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, the Biden administration submitted an unclassified report to Congress in February 2021, and Secretary Blinken introduced "the Khashoggi ban" visa restriction (US Department of State 2021b). The Middle East and Africa are at the end of the list of partnerships in the Interim National Security Strategy Guidance<sup>35</sup>, naming only Israel in particular (The White House 2021, 11). Not only were the Gulf monarchies left out of this document, but they were also reminded that the Biden administration would not give them "a blank check to pursue policies at odds with American interests and values" (The White House 2021, 11). In addition, Biden initially refused to communicate with the Crown Prince and reopened negotiations with Iran (Gause 2022).

Three of the above-mentioned empirical indicators changed in 2022. First, there was a strong signal of reassurance to Saudi Arabia in the form of a presidential visit and the following statements. Also, Biden met with MBS during this visit. There was a "Joint Statement Between the United States of America and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia" which reaffirmed the "strategic partnership" and continuation of security cooperation between the two countries, including the defence of strategic chokepoints and the protection of the uninterrupted global flow of oil (The White House 2022). The Joint Statement explicitly stated the US commitment to the security and defence of Saudi Arabia (The White House 2022). Biden (2022f) articulated five principles on which US-Gulf relations would be built: adherence to the "rules-based international order", freedom of navigation, threat deterrence and de-escalation of conflicts, promoting ties between US partners, and human rights.

Secondly, major arms sales to both the UAE and Saudi Arabia were announced in the aftermath of Biden's visit. This military asset sale refers to the same type of platform the US had previously withdrawn from Saudi Arabia.<sup>36</sup> There are some

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<sup>34</sup> There have been reports on human rights in Saudi Arabia (US Department of State 2022f), as well as press releases that expressed "disappointment" with due process in Saudi Arabia (US Department of State 2021a).

<sup>35</sup> The Biden administration has yet to release a National Security Strategy, and in the meantime, its national security and foreign policy goals are sublimed in the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance (The White House 2021).

<sup>36</sup> On August 2, 2022, the State Department issued a decision of approval for the UAE to buy "Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) System Missiles, THAAD Fire Control and Communication Stations, and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$2.245 billion" (Defense Security Cooperation Agency 2022d). This decision is justified in the statement as a

reports of a possible change in US arms trade policy when it comes to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, where claims were made about the lifting of Biden's ban on offensive arms sales to these countries (Spetalnick et al. 2022), but the State Department has not confirmed them. Thirdly, although the administration declared that it continues with the previous stance on human rights, the rhetoric around those and similar issues has either taken a milder tone or Biden has avoided answering the questions (e.g., Biden 2022b). While restating his views on human rights and freedoms, he gave primacy to preserving national security and deterring threats, which he emphasised would be best accomplished by cooperation "with countries that can impact those outcomes", such as Saudi Arabia (Biden 2022e). This constellation points to a more accommodative approach but the strategy nonetheless remains hybrid, since the end of support for the Saudi war in Yemen still stands, as does the ban on offensive weapons sales, and the US military has not redeployed any major assets to Saudi Arabia.

### **Persian Gulf Power Distribution and Threat Assessment Regarding US Interests During Biden's Presidency**

Regional power distribution "refers to the distribution of military and economic capabilities among the actors operating within a region", including the power balance between allies and their adversaries and the involvement of extra-regional great powers (Taliaferro 2019, 38). Therefore, assessment of the regional power distribution vis-à-vis American interests includes disconfirming or confirming empirical evidence that there are a) "shifts in conventional military and economic capabilities between an ally (or allies) and its local adversary (or adversaries)", b) "an increase or a decrease in a rival's great power economic, political, or military penetration of that region", and c) "the acquisition or the defection of an ally or client [...] if it involves the gain or loss of forward basing rights; access to critical resources and sea lanes of communication" (Taliaferro 2019, 40-41). Although the US has long been a preponderant power in the Middle East, as mentioned earlier, the region has been going through changes. Some authors like Sim and Fulton (2020, 1) think that there have been significant changes in "regional orders that have been shaped and sustained by US preponderance" due to the systemic changes from

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way of improving US national security through an increase in the security of an "important regional partner", which will subsequently be less dependent on US forces (Defense Security Cooperation Agency 2022d). On the same day, a possible sale of "Patriot Mim-104e Guidance Enhanced Missile-Tactical Ballistic Missiles (GEM-T)" to Saudi Arabia was announced as a way for improving the security of the "force for political stability and economic progress in the Gulf region" (Defense Security Cooperation Agency 2022e).

a unipolar to a multipolar world. This transition and the fact that foreign policy executives assess the power distribution in accordance with their perceptions make it more difficult.

According to the theory, the propositions to be tested refer to: 1. the balance of power between the GCC and Iran (primarily military power and economy); 2. military (including bases), political, and economic relations of the Persian Gulf countries with Russia and China.

Regarding the first proposition, both Iranian and Saudi Arabian economies depend on oil exports, with an important difference: Iran has faced significant export constraints since the US sanctions were reimposed. Also, based on the GDP as an indicator of economic power, Saudi Arabia is in a better position than Iran (CIA World Factbook 2022a; 2022b). Even though Saudi Arabia spent most on defence in the MENA region in 2021, with 27.2%, defence spending has been lowered in the 2017-2021 period (The Military Balance 2022, 326).<sup>37</sup> Despite Saudi Arabia's comparative advantage over Iran in equipment, the country has a comparative weakness in the number of military personnel, their training, and their capabilities (The Military Balance 2022, 341; 366). The most concerning aspect of Iranian military power for the Saudis does not stem from conventional weaponry but from the possibility of Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon. Considering that the indirect negotiations in Vienna have not produced any kind of deal and that the enrichment of some amounts of uranium has reached 60% (Gambrell 2022), Iran is getting closer to acquiring a nuclear weapon, which would significantly alter the power distribution.

When it comes to military power in the Persian Gulf, it creates a lot of leverage considering that local states do not yet possess sufficient capabilities to defend themselves in the event of a large-scale conflict. There are several indicators that the US is still preponderant, but there is also evidence of retrenchment and other great powers' advances in the region. The US still has a significant number of military personnel in the Persian Gulf and has several bases throughout the region that are essential for power projection.<sup>38</sup> Based

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<sup>37</sup> UAE 14.6%, Iran 11.2%, Iraq 5.6%, Kuwait 4.3%, Qatar 3.7%, and Bahrain 0.8% (The Military Balance 2022, 324).

<sup>38</sup> According to the Military Balance (2022, 61-63), the US has the following numbers of troops deployed in the Persian Gulf under the US Central Command area of responsibility: Bahrain has 4,700 (it also hosts the Fifth Fleet headquarters; 3,000 military personnel assigned to the Fifth Fleet in the Persian Gulf), Iraq has 2,000 (Operation Inherent Resolve), Kuwait 10,000, Qatar 10,000, Saudi Arabia 1,800, and the UAE 5,000. Biden's reports to Congress on troop deployments slightly differ in comparison to the Military Balance when it comes to Saudi Arabia, based on different time frames in which they were created, but nevertheless they are consistent with the hypothesis of first reducing the numbers and later increasing them (2,742 in June 2021, 2,120 in December 2021, and 2,733 in June 2022 [Biden 2021f; 2021g; 2022c]).

on forward troop and military asset deployment, the US has an advantage in comparison to both Russia and China in the Persian Gulf. As Silaev (2022, 611) puts it, “In its Middle Eastern alliances, Russia acts as an extra-regional partner of regional powers, possessing unique military capabilities that most states in the region do not have, but which cannot be used outside the framework of an alliance or partnership with one or several regional players”, meaning that Russia cannot act unilaterally (Silaev 2022, 612, see also Issaev 2021, 428). Even so, the Russian military footprint has been expanding in the Middle East in the last decade. Russia is militarily engaged in Syria with 4,000 troops and certain military assets (The Military Balance 2022, 208). More importantly, it holds a base in Latakia and a naval facility at Tartus (208).<sup>39</sup> China projects less military power in the Middle East, although it has a base in Djibouti with 240 personnel (The Military Balance 2022, 264). Isaac B. Kardon and Wendy Leutert (2022) also contend that Chinese economic advancement, particularly the use of commercial ports for military purposes, is important for their power projection.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, the US military posture in the region of the Greater Middle East has changed after the “conclusion of active combat operations in Afghanistan” (U.S. Central Command 2022).<sup>41</sup> There was a withdrawal of US “air- and missile-defense assets in the Middle East, reducing its overall footprint in the region by about two-thirds” in 2021 (The Military Balance 2022, 30).

In terms of trade, China has exhibited growing leverage over the past decade as trade with the Gulf countries gradually increased, eventually leading to China surpassing the US as a trading partner.<sup>42</sup> In comparison to Russia, China represents more of a challenge to US economic relations with the Gulf countries.<sup>43</sup> China is an extremely valuable trade partner for the oil-exporting

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<sup>39</sup> Great powers establish bases in distant regions to improve their own defence and prevent “an adversary from attacking closer to home”, which is considered a forward defence (Rapp-Hooper 2020, 48). On the other hand, by dissuading attacks on their allies, great powers are using extended deterrence, which serves the purpose of not only defending their allies but also deterring “wars that might otherwise have involved them” (Rapp-Hooper 2020, 52). Troop deployments as a foreign policy tool serve more as a “liquid asset”, while bases are more fixed (Allen et al. 2021, 3).

<sup>40</sup> For a different view on China’s approach to the region based on strategic hedging see: (Garlick and Havlova 2020, Fulton 2020).

<sup>41</sup> Although Afghanistan is not in the Middle East region, it is deemed significant because it is adjacent to the region.

<sup>42</sup> Chinese trade with MENA countries in 2021 amounted to 284.3 billion dollars, while American trade was worth 98.4 billion dollars (SFRC 2022a).

<sup>43</sup> According to Issaev (2021, 428), Russian “trade share with MENA countries remains minimal”. In 2021, the top five countries Saudi Arabia imported goods and services from were China (20%), the US (11%), the UAE (8.2%), India (5.3%), and Germany (4.9%), while Russia



countries in the Persian Gulf.<sup>44</sup> The US energy revolution has brought a decrease in oil imports from the region, which has forced the Gulf countries to direct their exports to Asia. Chinese oil imports have doubled in the last decade, and a great deal of imported oil comes from the Middle East, led by Saudi Arabia.<sup>45</sup> In addition to trade, there have been high-level official visits and meetings, the 2016 Memorandum of Understanding between China and several Gulf countries (Sheng 2022), and financial support through the Chinese Construction Bank (Minghui 2022). Saudi Arabia is also an important part of the Belt and Road Initiative (Fulton 2020, 492), which is connected to the Saudi development plan – Vision 2030 (Xiujun 2022, 308). The arms sales between China and Saudi Arabia also increased (The Military Balance 2022, 322). In addition, Saudi Arabia continues the cooperation on energy production with the Russian Federation, and there have been some reports of Saudi Arabia considering yuan for oil exports to China (Said and Kalin 2022; US Department of State 2022g).<sup>46</sup>

Therefore, the empirical evidence strongly suggests that there is military, economic, and political penetration of the region by other great powers, although the US is still prevalent in military power in the Persian Gulf. However, we will additionally look for evidence that the Biden administration perceives the regional power distribution as unfavourable to US interests.

In accordance with the neoclassical realist theory, it is important to address regional power distribution, threat level, and time frame as filtered through the perceptions of foreign policy executives. When it comes to the time horizon of threats, if foreign policy executives face more uncertainty, they would be less inclined to pursue a coercive strategy (Taliaferro 2019, 44). Clarity of threat is an important systemic variable in Ripsman et al.'s neoclassical realist theory<sup>47</sup>, and considering that the implications of the Russia-Ukraine war in the Persian

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accounted for 0.95% of imports (Trading Economics 2022a). Saudi Arabia's exports in 2021 were directed to the UAE (13%), China (9.6%), India (8%), Egypt (6.8%), the US (4.3%), and Singapore (4.1%) (Trading Economics 2022b). However, Russian exports to and imports from Saudi Arabia had significant growth from January 2021 to January 2022, resulting in a positive trade balance for Russia (OEC 2022).

<sup>44</sup> Oil and natural gas trade accounts for nearly half of all trade (SFRC 2022a).

<sup>45</sup> In 2021, China imported 87.6 million tonnes of crude oil from Saudi Arabia, 54.1 from Iraq, 31.9 from the UAE, 30.2 from Kuwait, and 53.9 from other countries in the Middle East collectively (BP 2022a, 27).

<sup>46</sup> That being said, Saudi Arabia has made some concessions to the US, most apparently in the case of the cease-fire in Yemen, as well as taking some steps towards normalization with Israel (The White House 2022); nevertheless, those concessions were not related to oil politics.

<sup>47</sup> Clarity depends on "(1) the degree to which threats and opportunities are readily discernible; (2) whether the system provides information on the time horizons of threats and opportunities; and (3) whether optimal policy options stand out or not" (Ripsman et al. 2016, 46).

Gulf are not fully grasped yet and the time horizons are not easily estimated (US Central Command 2022), US foreign policy executives are facing more uncertainty.

The Biden administration did not designate the Persian Gulf or the Middle East as vitally important regions for US foreign policy at the beginning of the term (The White House 2021, 10). However, considering the gradually increasing influence of other great powers discussed previously, there is a possibility of a threat perception being exacerbated by the Russia-Ukraine war. As Ross and Jeffrey (2022) put it, the war in Ukraine “fundamentally altered the way the Biden administration views geopolitical realities internationally”, thus rendering a “transformation of Washington’s approach to the region”.

The proposition considered in this section encompasses empirical evidence of the increased threat in the Middle East stemming from the war in Ukraine. Since this involves perceptions of foreign policy executives, we will look for empirical evidence in public documents pertaining to the President, the administration’s officials, the intelligence community<sup>48</sup>, and the US Central Command. In the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, we expect to find evidence of perceived unfavourable power distribution and an initial long-term threat horizon that is becoming more uncertain.

Former US CENTCOM commander General McKenzie contended in 2021 that in the short to medium term, Chinese influence in the region would revolve around the economy, even though there were other interests (House Armed Services Committee Hearing 2021, 43). The 2022 General McKenzie’s statement on the US global posture identifies both Russia and China as a disruptive influence on US interests in the region, with special regard to US alliances, and also draws attention to the consequences of the war in Ukraine for the region (US Central Command 2022).<sup>49</sup> According to the statement, Russia, with its enduring military presence in Syria, already has a certain military posture in the region, which is accompanied by its participation in OPEC+ and subsequent potential for influencing the energy markets (US Central Command 2022).

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<sup>48</sup> As Lockhart and Moran (2022) argue, based on his history, Biden approaches the intelligence community with trust, as a reliable source of information, unlike his predecessor. For instance, before his trip to the Gulf, Biden (2022a) pointed out that his decision to pursue “urgent and intensive diplomacy” towards the region resulted from intelligence and military reports that the Middle East “was dangerously pressurized”.

<sup>49</sup> The principal threats identified in the CENTCOM statement include, first and foremost, Iran; secondly, “violent extremist organizations”, and thirdly, strategic competition with Russia and China (US Central Command 2022). Both the 2021 and 2022 ATA reports identify the actions of four states as threatening to US interests: Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea (ATA 2021; 2022).

Besides extensive economic penetration of the region, China is perceived to be increasing military influence, with arms sales, multilateral military exercises, and the PLA Navy operating in peacetime (US Central Command 2022).

Even though the Annual threat assessment by the intelligence community was issued in February 2022, prior to the war, it still identified China as a near-peer competitor that challenges the US globally (ATA 2022, 4) by trying to “undercut US influence, [and] drive wedges between Washington and its partners”.<sup>50</sup> However, when it comes to the MENA region, only Russia is mentioned in this report as trying “to increase its clout, undercut US leadership, present itself as an indispensable mediator, and gain military access rights and economic opportunities” (ATA 2022, 10). Additionally, although acting individually, China and Russia still have limited power, but in the case of a Sino-Russian alignment (ATA 2021, 9; Silaev 2022, 610), the US power preponderance could be upended.

We find evidence of the US’s renewed interest in the Middle East in light of the reputation argument in Barbara Leaf’s<sup>51</sup> testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in August 2022: the United States “must continue to deliver on the promise of American leadership and demonstrate that we remain an engaged, reliable partner” (SFRC 2022b). Also, the statement perceived a threat from the Chinese using their ties with the Gulf states to coerce UN voting on different issues, including the war in Ukraine (SFRC 2022b). Assistant Secretary of State Jessica Lewis stated that the US must either maintain the security assistance network or allow China and Russia to fill the vacuum (SFRC 2022a). According to Hanna Notte’s opinion expressed in her testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and Global Counterterrorism (HFAC 2022b, 1), there have been fears of the region turning “into an additional arena for Russia’s heightened competition with the West”. In her opinion, the war in Ukraine “has exacerbated concerns among U.S. allies and partners about an accelerated U.S. withdrawal from the region” (HFAC 2022b, 5).

Most importantly, there is confirming evidence of Biden’s perspective on Middle East policy based on the considerations presented in this paper. In an exchange with reporters before his trip to the Persian Gulf, Biden (2022e) stated:

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<sup>50</sup> The strategy of wedging refers to “a state’s attempt to prevent, break up, or weaken a threatening or blocking alliance at an acceptable cost” as defined by Timothy Crawford in his article “Preventing Enemy Coalitions: How Wedge Strategies Shape Power Politics,” (cited in Izumikawa 2013, 499). As Izumikawa (2013, 507) argues, a state can use a counterstrategy (a “binding strategy”) to prevent a divider from implementing reward or coercive wedging to its ally.

<sup>51</sup> Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.

“the reason I’m going to Saudi Arabia, though, is much broader. It’s to promote U.S. interests, promote U.S. interests in a way that I think we have an opportunity to reassert what I think we made a mistake of walking away from: our influence in the Middle East”. Subsequently, he said that the US “can continue to lead in the region and not create a vacuum, a vacuum that is filled by China and/or Russia, against the interests of both Israel and the United States and many other countries” (Biden 2022d). However, during the GCC+3 Summit in Jeddah, Biden (2022b) conditioned US security provision on adherence to the “rules-based international order” and commended the Gulf states for voting in the UN GA regarding Ukraine.

### **Domestic Constraints For US Strategy Towards Saudi Arabia**

Domestic hurdles can take the form of pending legislation and committee hearings, as well as private correspondence between members of the legislative and executive branches (Taliaferro 2019, 51). During Biden’s first year of presidency, the coercive elements of a strategy towards Saudi Arabia were pretty much in alignment with the proposed legislation in Congress, but there was resistance to the accommodative elements. For instance, Biden’s administration opposed the joint resolution that prohibited proposed U.S. foreign military sales of certain defence articles to Saudi Arabia (Biden 2021d). In 2021, there were several proposed bills related to Saudi Arabia, and the majority were directed at reducing US support on the grounds of alleged human rights violations (H. Res 175, S. 2142, H.R. 2506/S. 1146, H.R. 1464, H.R. 1392, H.R. 4373 [Blanchard 2022, 4-6]).

Therefore, when Biden decided to reassure Saudi Arabia of the US’s continued security commitment, since there was no significant change in Congress, this became an issue for the administration. Most importantly, the National Defense Authorization Act of Fiscal Year 2022 (NDAA 2022), which passed the House, included some of the legislative proposals mentioned previously. First of all, Section 1334 prohibits support or military participation against the Houthis, which encompasses logistical support and sharing intelligence for the purposes of offensive strikes (NDAA 2022). Secondly, Section 1335 entails the cessation of foreign military sales of certain defence articles and services if Saudi Arabia engages in offensive strikes in Yemen (NDAA 2022). Thirdly, this act contains sections that require the imposition of sanctions or the cessation of providing defence in relation to Khashoggi’s murder and “intimidation and harassment directed at individuals in the United States” (NDAA 2022).

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 (NDAA 2023) entails an investigation of the use of US defence weapons in Yemen, as well as

“the protection of Saudi dissidents”. There was also a bipartisan House resolution “Directing the removal of United States Armed Forces from hostilities in the Republic of Yemen that have not been authorized by Congress” invoking the War Powers resolution (H.J.Res. 87). The issue of the Yemeni civil war has been an important one for the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress. In addition to the proposed legislation, there was a hearing on the matter (SFRC 2021a). The proposed bills refer not only to offensive but also possible defensive weapons procurement prohibitions. These are all still pending. Nevertheless, they portray a potential hindrance to the administration in pursuing accommodation of Saudi Arabia concerning arms sales and other forms of military assistance.

There were hearings regarding US security cooperation with the countries in the Middle East (e.g., SFRC 2021b, SFRC 2022b) in the context of major events such as the Afghanistan withdrawal and the war in Ukraine. The war in Ukraine has also prompted several House Foreign Affairs Committee hearings, entailing both expert testimonies (e.g., HFAC 2022a; 2022b) and administration members’ testimonies (HFAC 2022c). Similarly, the CRS considered “partners’ support for U.S. policy toward the Russia-Ukraine war” (Blanchard 2022, 20) and stated that different responses of regional partners to the Biden administration’s “diplomatic and energy markets support”, as well as their alignment with other countries can be taken into account when Congress decides on the “Administration’s proposal for foreign assistance, defense aid and arms sales” (Blanchard 2022, summary).

However, besides the domestic hurdles emanating from the legislative branch, we believe Biden is facing other domestic constraints. In our opinion, one of the obstacles for the Biden administration to engage with Saudi Arabia was Biden’s initial resolve to hold MBS accountable for the Khashoggi murder and other reported human rights violations. As Jervis (2017, 129) points out, adopting values or goals acts like a constraint in decision-making because it impedes potential trade-offs, and Biden insisted on upholding “democratic values”. The administration’s rhetoric, specifically Biden’s, and some decisions were portrayed almost as a punishment for Saudi Arabia. The discrepancy that emanated from the latter embrace of the partnership with the Saudis invoked not only a sense of cognitive inconsistency but also an affective aspect connected to it (Jervis 2017, 121). Human rights continue to be a hurdle for the US-Saudi partnership (US Department of State 2022b, US State Department 2022c). This is also a question of public credibility, which could be hampered if there is a perceived inconsistency of communicated messages (Jervis 2017, 122-123) because people are inclined to perceive balance (125). Further engagement with the country he once so adamantly rejected could result in Biden’s public disapproval. In this context, there is less support for Biden’s renewed interest in the Persian Gulf, which could affect his future decisions.<sup>52</sup>

### Concluding Remarks

This paper addressed US policy towards Saudi Arabia in the first year and a half of the Biden administration. There was a certain change in this policy stemming from increased signals of reassurance in 2022 in comparison to Biden's initial rhetoric and several decisions that led to the deterioration of already impaired relations. We contend in this paper that the Biden administration has used a hybrid strategy, which encompasses both coercive and accommodative elements, based on the perception of unfavourable power distribution, threat horizon uncertainty, and high domestic obstacles for accommodation. Additionally, the accommodative elements of the strategy assumed a more prominent role in the context of the increased sense of strategic competition during the war in Ukraine. These circumstances led to the decline in credibility becoming more important, resulting in US efforts to prevent partners from seeking alternative options.

There are several pieces of empirical evidence in favour of these propositions, which together confirm the hypothesis. We also reviewed the evidence of the rival explanation based on the "oil for security" relations, and found disconfirming evidence, such as diminished military engagement of the US in defence of oil-producing states and fewer, if any, concessions of the oil-exporting countries to the US. First, with respect to the power distribution, we looked for evidence of the propositions emanating from the theory and found that they are predominantly confirming the hypothesis. Even though evidence points to US military power preponderance, there is significant rival great powers' penetration of the region in military, political, and economic areas, which renders the power distribution unfavourable. Second, we examined the propositions on the perceptions of the President and other foreign policy executives in the US regarding the power distribution, threat level and threat horizon, and found several statements which support the explanation we posited. The empirical record suggests that US foreign policy executives perceived an unfavourable power distribution and a higher threat level in the context of the war in Ukraine. Finally, pending legislative proposals confirm the proposition of a high domestic hurdle.

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**ПОЛИТИКА БАЈДЕНОВЕ АДМИНИСТРАЦИЈЕ  
ПРЕМА КРАЉЕВИНИ САУДИЈСКОЈ АРАБИЈИ 2021–2022.**

*Апстракт:* Основно питање којим се овај рад бави тиче се политике администрације Џозефа Бајдена према Краљевини Саудијској Арабији, а посебно разлога његове одлуке о уверавању да ће САД остати посвећене одбрани ове државе током 2022. године, која представља промену у односу на приступ према овој заливској монархији на почетку Бајденовог мандата. У овом раду се претпоставља да је свеукупна америчка стратегија према партнеру у Персијском заливу била хибридна, али да је у различитим временским оквирима имала преовлађујуће елементе принуде или акомодације. У раду се користи теорија Џефрија Таљафера која се бави стратегијама великих сила према савезницима или партнерима у зависности од распореда моћи у одређеном региону, процене нивоа претње и временског периода у коме ће се претња реализовати, као и присуства домаћих ограничења. Главна претпоставка овог рада је да се елементи акомодације у хибридној стратегији Бајденове администрације према Саудијској Арабији могу објаснити перцепираним неповољним распоредом моћи на Блиском истоку, као и несигурношћу у вези са периодом у коме се претња може остварити, која је погоршана индиректним утицајем рата у Украјини. Ови чиниоци, у комбинацији са високим нивоом противљења Конгреса акомодацији Саудијске Арабије, могу објаснити примену хибридне стратегије. У раду се користи анализа слагања како би се тестирале емпиријске манифестације хипотезе.

*Кључне речи:* САД; Саудијска Арабија; америчко-саудијско партнерство; Персијски залив; Џозеф Бајден.