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Department of Political Science

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**The Saudi Iranian Rapprochement: A Neoclassical
Realist Analysis.**

Master's thesis

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Study programme: Geopolitical Studies

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Year of the defence: 2024

Declaration

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2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

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References

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Abstract

This thesis studies the Saudi Iranian rapprochement of 2023 using Type III Neoclassical Realism (NCR) as a theoretical framework. The study is divided in two. First, the Islamic Republic of Iran is assessed. After analyzing the dependent, independent, and intervening variables, it is argued that systemic factors, such as the imminence of further US and Israeli presence in the Gulf and the opportunity that China is offering to Iran in a restrictive environment, are the primary determinants that guided Tehran's foreign policy to approach Saudi Arabia. Conversely, it is discussed that intervening variables cannot be deduced to have exercised a similar influence. Still, Iran's strategic culture is concluded to have further restricted the Islamic Republic's strategic environment, thus suggesting that both systemic and domestic factors can influence the level of clarity and nature of the strategic environment, not contemplated in the literature. As for Saudi Arabia, intervening variables, especially leader images, do constitute a main factor guiding Riyadh's foreign policy decision to reapproach Iran. Mohammed bin Salman's foreign policy has turned out to be characterized by pragmatism and initiatives. However, a study of the structural modifiers presents the kingdom's reliance on the oil and gas markets to sustain its economy, as well as signs of reluctance by the US to keep providing Saudi Arabia's with security. Amid this situation, China appears as the optimal opportunity for Saudi Arabia to diversify its economy and pursue the vision goals delimited by bin Salman.

Abstrakt

Tato práce studuje saúdsko-iránské sblížení v roce 2023 pomocí neoklasického realismu typu III jako teoretického rámce. Studium je rozděleno na dvě části. Nejprve je hodnocena Íránská islámská republika. Po analýze závislých, nezávislých a intervenujících proměnných se tvrdí, že systémové faktory, jako je bezprostřední blízkost další americké a izraelské přítomnosti v Perském zálivu a příležitost, kterou Čína nabízí Íránu v restriktivním prostředí, jsou primárními determinanty, které vedl zahraniční politiku Teheránu tak, aby se přiblížila Saúdské Arábii. Naopak se diskutuje o tom, že nelze odvodit, že intervenující proměnné měly podobný vliv. Přesto se dospělo k závěru, že strategická kultura Íránu dále omezila strategické prostředí Islámské republiky, což naznačuje, že jak systémové, tak domácí faktory mohou ovlivnit úroveň jasnosti a povahy strategického prostředí, o čemž se v literatuře neuvažuje. Co se týče Saúdské Arábie, intervenující proměnné, zejména představy

vůdců, představují hlavní faktor, který řídí zahraničněpolitické rozhodnutí Rijádu znovu se přiblížit k Íránu. Ukázalo se, že zahraniční politiku Mohammeda bin Salmána charakterizuje pragmatismus a iniciativa. Studie strukturálních modifikátorů však ukazuje závislost království na trzích s ropou a plynem, aby udržely svou ekonomiku, a také známky neochoty USA nadále poskytovat Saúdské Arábii bezpečnost. Uprostřed této situace se Čína jeví jako optimální příležitost pro Saúdskou Arábii, aby diverzifikovala svou ekonomiku a sledovala cíle vize vymezené bin Salmánem.

Keywords

Saudi Arabia, Iran, China, United States, Neoclassical Realism, threat, opportunity.

Klíčová slova

Saudská arábie, Írán, Čína, Spojené státy, Neoklasický realismus, ohrožení, příležitost.

Název práce

Saúdsko-iránské sblížení: Neoklasická realistická analýza.

Table of Contents

TABLE OF CONTENTS	1
1. INTRODUCTION	2
1.1 <i>Justification of the project</i>	<i>2</i>
1.2 <i>Research questions</i>	<i>6</i>
1.3 <i>Structure</i>	<i>7</i>
1.4 <i>Changes in the project.....</i>	<i>8</i>
2. METHODOLOGY	8
3. ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN.....	12
3.1 <i>Dependent Variables</i>	<i>12</i>
3.2 <i>Independent Variables.....</i>	<i>16</i>
3.2.1 <i>Structural modifiers.....</i>	<i>17</i>
3.2.2 <i>Clarity and Nature of the Strategic Environment.....</i>	<i>28</i>
3.3 <i>Intervening Variables</i>	<i>37</i>
3.3.1 <i>Strategic Culture.....</i>	<i>37</i>
3.3.2 <i>Leader Images</i>	<i>40</i>
3.4 <i>Partial Conclusions</i>	<i>44</i>
4. KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA	45
4.1 <i>Dependent Variables</i>	<i>45</i>
4.2 <i>Independent Variables.....</i>	<i>46</i>
4.2.1 <i>Structural modifiers.....</i>	<i>46</i>
4.2.2 <i>Clarity and Nature of the Strategic Environment.....</i>	<i>51</i>
4.3 <i>Intervening Variables</i>	<i>61</i>
4.3.1 <i>Leader Images</i>	<i>61</i>
4.3.2 <i>State-Society Relations and Domestic Institutions</i>	<i>63</i>
4.4 <i>Partial conclusions</i>	<i>65</i>
CONCLUSION.....	66
LIST OF REFERENCES.....	70
LIST OF APPENDICES.....	78

1. Introduction

1.1 Justification of the project

The rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran started in March 2023 constitutes a milestone in the Gulf's¹ history. By solely considering the impact that the region's geopolitics have on the global arena, on the one hand, and the role performed by China as a mediator in the Peace Deal, on the other, it can be deduced that the examination of such an event must surpass a mere superficial analysis.

It is widely known that Saudi Arabia and Iran have been entangled in complex relations since Riyadh broke diplomatic ties with Tehran back in January 2016.² The crisis meant but the upsurge of tensions that ended up with the involvement of both powers in proxy wars and the raising concerns of a potential direct conflict. These proxy confrontations acquired relevant magnitudes in Syria, and Yemen, for instance, leading Riyadh and Tehran to view the political balance of their proxies as a zero-sum-game.³ However, the Saudi Iranian competition for regional supremacy has not just been perceived through traditional geopolitical tools. Besides them, both states have been pursuing the mantle of Islam claiming to represent and embody its true form⁴, a factor that has led to two delimited and differentiated blocs: the Sunni and the Shi'ite realms. Thus, in Yemen, for example, the revolutionary Houthis that follow Zaydi Islam, which is a branch of Shi'ism, have been backed up by the Islamic Republic, whereas Saudi Arabia took some countermeasures against them, e.g., the blockade of Bab El Mandeb, or Operation Restoring Hope. As well, the Lebanese Hezbollah has also been supported by Iran on several occasions through

¹ The Persian/Arabian Gulf is subject to a naming dispute. For a more efficient and neutral use of the term, the document will hereinafter refer to it simply as "the Gulf", or "the Gulf region". It is nonetheless fundamental to point out that the concept will not solely refer to the coastal basin that extends from 22° and 30° north, and 48° and 56° east (see Yousef Alosairi, Jörg Imberger, and Roger A. Falconer, "Mixing and flushing in the Persian Gulf (Arabian Gulf)," *Journal of Geophysical Research* 166, C03029 (2011): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1029/2010jc006769>). In addition to it, considering that the nature of this thesis stems from Geopolitics, International Relations, and Political Science, the term will also encompass the states surrounding the water body, namely: Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq, and Iran (regardless of their membership in the Gulf Cooperation Council).

² Al Jazeera Staff, "Saudi Arabia cuts diplomatic ties with Iran", *Al Jazeera*, January 4, 2016; Martin Chulov, "Saudi Arabia cuts diplomatic ties with Iran after execution of cleric", *The Guardian*, January 4, 2016; Liz Sly, "Saudi Arabia breaks diplomatic ties with Iran as crisis intensifies", *The Washington Post*, January 3, 2016.

³ Mikael Hibernag Naghizadeh, "Rivalry Through Proxies", *St. Anthony's International Review*, 14, n. 2 (Feb 2019). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/27027741>

⁴ Ibid.

different means.⁵ The region has since suffered from the consequences of the consolidation of two blocs: the Sunni union led by Riyadh, and the Shi'ite bloc guided by Tehran. Now, this confrontation that further deteriorate after the 1979 Iranian Revolution is not how dynamic of the Gulf have always been constructed.

Traditional dynamics of the region do not show any structure of blocs whatsoever. Following its geographical features, the Gulf enjoys a rich maritime commercial tradition and therefore has sheltered heterogeneous communities of peoples coming from all around the Indian Ocean.⁶ Lawrence G. Potter presents some of the communities that arrived at the Gulf ports willing to commerce, such as Arabs, Persians, Indians, Baluchs, or Africans, among many others. Also, religiously mixed populations used to converge all over the littoral. Sunni Arabs were used to sailing to the Iranian Plateau, whereas the Shi'ite Persians travelled to the Arabian Peninsula.⁷ One such example is the city of Sohar, located in Oman, that served as a flourishing commercial port where Arabs and Persians gathered during the Abasi era.⁸ Likewise, the Sunni-Shi'a dichotomy was not as strong. For instance, the island of Hormuz, recognised as the greatest seaport in the Gulf history, was ruled by a Sunni king and a Shi'ite vizier, and accounted for a large population made up of Christians, Jews, and Hindus.⁹ What is more, the author declares it as an arena of mixed descents. The line between the Arab and the Persian was not clearly drawn.¹⁰ After such considerations, the picture of the Persian Gulf has not resembled any confrontation between blocs at all. Instead, it presented an array of cultures, ethnicities, religions, and societies.

This does not mean that the region has not suffered from frictions or confrontations, naturally. The metropolises of Busher or Qatif, by way of illustration, underwent severe tensions among the Shi'ite, Sunni, and Hindu traders. Still, the overall dynamics of the Gulf are characterised by cultural heterogeneity, dynamic borders, mutual acceptance, and coexistence. It was after the Arab and Safavid confrontations, and especially the beginning

⁵ Ante Lucic, "Hezbollah: An Iranian Project?", *National Security and the Future*, 1, 10, (2009).

⁶ Lawrence G. Potter, "Society in the Persian Gulf: Before and After Oil", *Center for International and Regional Studies, Georgetown University in Qatar*, 18 (2017): p. 2.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Rosemarie Said Zahlan, "The Making of the Modern Gulf States", *Routledge Library Editions: The Gulf*, 10 (2016): p. 3.

⁹ Lawrence G. Potter, "Society in the Persian Gulf: Before and After Oil", *Center for International and Regional Studies, Georgetown University in Qatar*, 18 (2017): p. 16.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 22

of the twentieth century that came along with nationalisms and the emerging oil industry¹¹, that the Middle East would show its modern features.

The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, and modernising leaders like Reza Shah or Ibn Sa'ud that set up nationalism as the dominant ideology, are factors that brought a new map to the region that led to the imposition of borders and human flows regulations. The single identity the Gulf had enjoyed over centuries waned as passports and identification cards became relevant and divided people into different sovereign states. Moreover, the discovery of oil liberated the ruling dynasties from their financial dependence on merchants due to the new source of income they possessed.¹² The role performed by merchants thus changed, and they started trading influence for economic success thanks to favourable governmental policies¹³, increasing the power of influential families to an even larger extent. This new prosperity came together with culture entitlement, since citizens and migrants, who were commonly workers, started to be differentiated. The formerly inclusive term “Khaliji”¹⁴ harboured all inhabitants of the Gulf and separated them from the inland populations.¹⁵ But this inclusion enjoyed more relevance in the past, for since the founding of the Gulf Cooperation Council in 1981, the political resonance of the “Khaliji” started encompassing solely the Arab states, becoming a “counter identity” that excluded Iran. This imaginary coincided chronologically with the Iranian Revolution that had exploded back in 1979, by which Iran adopted the regime that lasts until today. Khaliji stopped being an inclusive concept in order to embrace a dividing nature.

Parallely, sectarian tensions fomented the idea that identities are immutable, and Gulf states have prioritised the re-writing of their history. Large investments have been made in museums to obscure the past and stimulate an intended identity: the “urge to Arabize”. Shi'ite Islam has been tried to be erased from the official narrative of the Gulf monarchies, where, take for example, its believers are not permitted to serve in the security forces of

¹¹ Ibid, p. 10.

¹² Ibid, p. 21.

¹³ Jill Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

¹⁴ Khaliji, or Khaleeji (Arabic: خليجي). Meaning: “of the Gulf”, “belonging to the Gulf”, or a demonym for the Gulf.

¹⁵ Lawrence G. Potter, “Society in the Persian Gulf: Before and After Oil”, *Center for International and Regional Studies, Georgetown University in Qatar*, 18 (2017): p. 23.

Saudi Arabia or Bahrain.¹⁶ Eventually, after the fall of Saddam Hussein, the “Sunni wall”¹⁷ that contained the Shi’ite Islamic republic broke down, leading to a more empowered Iran and its Shi’ite allies at the expense of Sunni Arabs.¹⁸ The continuation of the story is the Gulf that has been described at the beginning of this chapter: the conformation of blocs, and the development of proxy wars. The Cold War of the Middle East became a reality, at least, it seems, until 2023.

The process for a ‘zero hegemony’ approach that some authors claimed to be the solution¹⁹ could have already been initiated. The twelve principles introduced by Abdulaziz Sager and Hossein Mousavian, which call for non-interference in internal affairs, rejecting sectarian divisions, conducting relations based on mutual respect, or even strengthening Islamic solidarity,²⁰ and that could help escaping the zero-sum struggle in their opinion, could be closer more than ever after People’s Republic of China’s role mediated a Peace Deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The rapprochement could not only bring stability to the region and territories in conflict, but also a greater perception of China in the public imaginary that could bring Beijing new projects in its Belt and Road Initiative, and even a potential shift of Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy to China.

The fact that two regional powers have put aside a confrontation worthy of being called a *Cold War* in order to restart a diplomatic rapprochement with cooperation perspectives deserves an in-depth analysis of the causes that have shifted these actors’ foreign policies to such an extent. Indeed, it could serve as a guide for future dynamics that take place in the International System. The purpose of this thesis is to provide the results of a study on the factors that have influenced and shaped Riyadh’s and Tehran’s foreign policy until they agreed on diplomatic rapprochement.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 26.

¹⁷ For the term, see Mikael Hibergh Naghizadeh, “Rivalry Through Proxies”, *St. Anthony’s International Review*, 14, n. 2 (Feb 2019). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/27027741>

¹⁸ Lawrence G. Potter, “Society in the Persian Gulf: Before and After Oil”, *Center for International and Regional Studies, Georgetown University in Qatar*, 18 (2017): p. 27.

¹⁹ Seyed Hossein Mousavian, “Iran-Saudi tensions: A new ‘zero hegemony’ approach is desperately needed”, *The Middle East Eye*, March 8, 2021.

²⁰ Abdulaziz Sager and Hossein Mousavian, “We can escape a zero-sum struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia -if we act now”, *The Guardian*, January 21, 2021.

1.2 Research questions

The topic to be discussed, namely the Saudi Iranian rapprochement, shows a rather unique nature: two confronted regional powers that were striving for regional hegemony have agreed on a peace deal mediated by a great power without the existence of any previous direct conflict. Saudi Arabia and Iran had been involved in strained episodes that included insubstantial diplomatic relations, proxy wars, and even nuclear tensions at some point. However, they have accepted the offer of China to commence a new diplomatic reconciliation that aims to stabilize the region. Yet, according to traditional balance of power realist theories both actors would have been expected to balance internally or externally, perpetuating the local status quo, or to bandwagon more strictly. A conflict that has been burdening the name of a Cold War appears to have reached the beginning of an end by seemingly unexpected means.

Steven Lobell, Norrin Ripsman, and Jeffrey Taliaferro²¹ understand such matter as a *research puzzle*, a term that distances itself from the traditional *research question*. A research puzzle focuses on empirical anomalies, i.e., outcomes that appear inconsistent with the predictions of existing theories. The central question of this thesis, hence, must be as follows:

Why did Saudi Arabia and Iran decide to reapproach diplomatically in March 2023?

There are now several factors that arise from it and provide a complete overview of the whole picture to be analysed: (1) what systemic factors that come out of the international system have led to Riyadh's and Tehran's foreign policy decisions; (2) what domestic aspects have played a relevant role in the foreign policy (also named in this thesis as FP) decision-making and, if so, to what extent; (3) how are the Saudi Iranian relations most likely to evolve; and (4) how is the region configured after the end of the Middle East *Cold War*. There are, thus, three main research questions that cover these concerns:

1. What structural, systemic, and domestic factors have contributed to the rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran?
2. What are the most likely scenarios for the future development of the new relations?

²¹ Paul D. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Relations* (Webcom: Oxford University Press, 2016), 101-104.

3. How is the new Middle East structured?

How these topics will be studied is explained in the following point, 2. Methodology.

1.3 Structure

In order to offer a clear and schematic analysis on the investigation topic, the thesis is divided into two main parts that respectively analyse each of the actors involved: the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The reason behind this decision is that *perception* is a key factor in any Neoclassical Realist analysis, which will constitute the theoretical framework. Hence, considering that each state is exposed to different realities due to geographic or internal elements, for instance, both the cases of Iran and Saudi Arabia will be examined separately, yet always coherently.

Each study will commence with an analysis of the dependent variable, i.e., the foreign policy decision to sign the Joint Trilateral Statement brokered by People's Republic of China to restore diplomatic ties. Afterwards, the investigation will thoroughly consider the role of the independent variable, meaning the systemic stimuli that have influenced Tehran to make such foreign policy decision. Because Neoclassical Realism (NCR) stems from Structural Realism, this variable will be given special consideration. For this reason, it will first gather an analysis of suggested structural modifiers, namely, geography, the rate of technological diffusion, and the offense-defence balance. Subsequently, systemic stimuli based on these structural modifiers will be examined to eventually conclude the level of clarity of such stimuli as well as the nature of the strategic environment. These conclusions will suggest determined clusters of intervening variables that are finally investigated. Brief partial conclusions for each unit of analysis will be provided at the end of each part. The same process will be developed for both actors. First, for the Islamic Republic of Iran. After that, for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Type III Neoclassical Realism is able to analyse wide temporal ranges in the dependent variable, ranging from the short to the long term: *crisis decision making*, *foreign policy*, *grand strategic adjustment*, *systemic outcomes*, and *structural change*. As this thesis addresses foreign policy decisions, the temporal scope in the majority of the study be reduced to a short-to-medium-term.

1.4 Changes in the project

After a thorough study of Neoclassical Realism, the scenario making theory that at first glance was intended to be used is being substituted by the awareness that Type III NCR can provide. This leaves the investigation with a more cohesive and coherent approach since a same framework is being applied all throughout the process of investigation.

Second, the historical overview of the Saudi Iranian relations that was intended to be included firstly will eventually not be incorporated. Instead, considering how important it is for a Neoclassical Realist investigation, historical overview will be comprised when analysing each of the variables.

2. Methodology

The thesis will use Neoclassical Realism as the framework to analyse the Saudi Iranian rapprochement.

The concept for Neoclassical Realism was coined by Gideon Rose in 1998 after Neorealism and its critics had been starring the main debate within the field of theory of international relations for two decades²². Its core idea argues that structural realism itself and its focus on systemic variables are unable to provide a solid explanation for the totality of the international phenomena. According to the new theory, domestic factors and leaders' perception intervene as well in the foreign policy decision-making process. Nevertheless, understanding Neoclassical Realism with such a vague definition would lead to an error in the same way that employing merely the terms Neorealism or Structural Realism would obviate the existence of different interpretations of the theory, such as offensive and defensive realism. NCR has evolved since its conception throughout three stages: types I, II²³, and III. This study will apply Type III Neoclassical Realism as a methodological

²² Rose, Gideon. "Neoclassical Realism and theories of foreign policy". *World politics* 5 1, no. 1 (1998): 144-172.

²³Type I NCR focuses on the main criticism against structural realism: that states occasionally respond inconsistently with systemic imperatives. It stresses that signals provided by the international system are clear, yet in some cases they are misunderstood or prevented to be answered accordingly as they often pass imperfect transmission belts of leader perceptions and domestic circumstances. Because of its nature, the model has been consistently criticized and defined simply as a "guide to explain anomalies". On the other hand, Type II aims at explaining a wider range of foreign policy choices and even grand strategic adjustments. According to this renewed perspective, systemic imperatives sometimes limit the choices that states can make. During these periods, domestic factors and leaders' prisms can only shape minor aspects of the policy to be implemented,

approach following *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*²⁴ by Steven Lobell, Norrin Ripsman, and Jeffrey Taliaferro (2016). Figure 1 graphically illustrates the main scheme to be followed.

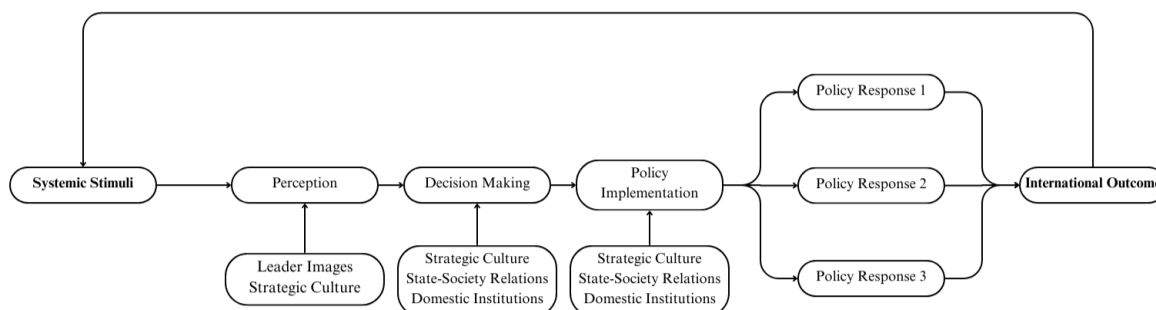


Figure 1. Type III NCR Model. Source: Own elaboration inspired by Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro (2016): p. 34.

Having clear the research puzzle, Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro suggest that the first step is to identify the Foreign Policy Executive (FPE) of the observed states, *id est*, the policymakers who truly perform in the decision-making and policy implementation²⁵. It is fundamental to genuinely establish a distinction between the FPE and the foreign, defence, and intelligence bureaucracy (FDIB). The former is composed by individuals who are responsible of making foreign policy choices, whereas the latter refers to bureaucratic organizations that are in charge of collecting foreign intelligence and submitting policy options for consideration of the FPE.²⁶ Even though the identification of a foreign policy executive concerns the early stages of the investigation process, the FPE will be presented in the point dedicated to explaining the Leader Images, i.e., as an intervening variable. The reason behind it lies on this thesis' author's own interpretation of Neoclassical Realism.

such as its style or timing. In other words, states behave as structural realists expect. Conversely, during more common times when the range of options and the capacity to bargain diverse policies is broader, the extent to which domestic circumstances or leaders' perceptions affect the decision-making process is larger. Now, these scopes are still limited. Neither Type I nor Type II NCR provide enough information on the nature of the causal systemic stimuli (independent variables) and the domestic political factors that affect the statal perception. As well, they do not foresee any consequential importance for broader interstate phenomena, e.g., international outcomes and structural change. See Paul D. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Relations* (Webcom: Oxford University Press, 2016): 25-32.

²⁴ Paul D. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Relations* (Webcom: Oxford University Press, 2016).

²⁵ Paul D. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Relations* (Webcom: Oxford University Press, 2016): 99-138.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

NCR uses structural realism as the main driver for the foreign policy analysis, a theory that establishes direct causal relationships between systemic stimuli and FP. However, it adds intervening variables such as leader images or strategic culture that can alter the perception of the system's signals, decision-making, and policy implementation processes, thus altering the FP and international outcomes. Hence, it is a theory that tries to discern to what extent the formers can be explained through a structural realist or a domestic scope. Introducing the foreign policy executive as the cluster of Leader Images follows the logic of its own nature as an actor inherently linked to the *perception* of systemic stimuli. After having defined the system's signals as a reality that can be perceived objectively without any obstacles, a study on the FPE/Leader Images could help discern to what extent this variable can explain the dependent variable, thus aiming at a more faithful Neoclassical Realist approach. For this reason, the foreign policy executive is named and studied in the point dedicated to Leaders Images.

Therefore, the first part discussed is related to the dependent variable (DV), which flows directly from the research puzzle. Subsequently, the independent variable (IV) is defined and explained within the specification of balance-of-power theory as the structural realist baseline required for the assessment. This will help the investigation easily establish "how much of the variance in the dependent variable could a structural realist theory explain if the intervening variables posited by a neoclassical realist theory were not present"²⁷. The study of the independent variables will conclude whether the actors face either a permissive or restrictive international environment, as well as the degree of clarity of the systemic stimuli. Afterwards, domestic intervening variables (IVV) are chosen and justified after the logical implications rescued from the independent variable considerations, as illustrated below.

²⁷ Paul D. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Relations* (Webcom: Oxford University Press, 2016): 114.

		Degree of Systemic Clarity (High to Low)	
		High Clarity	Low Clarity
Nature of Strategic Environment (Restrictive to Permissive)	Restrictive Environment	<i>Leader Images and Strategic Culture</i>	<i>Leader Images and Strategic Culture</i>
	Permissive Environment	<i>Strategic Culture, Domestic Institutions, and State-Society Relations</i>	<i>Indeterminate - All four clusters could be relevant</i>

Table 1. *Intervening Variable Clusters by Degree of Systemic Clarity and Nature of Strategic Development. Source: Own elaboration retrieved from Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro (2016): 95.*

These three variables are expected to offer a fair and complete view of the Saudi Iranian rapprochement. Now, because Neoclassical Realism counterweights the systemic determinism idiosyncratic in structural realism by bringing the state and domestic variables back into the scene, it obviously follows that each unit of analysis, namely, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran, will show unique processes of perception, decision-making, and policy implementation. Due to that, this thesis will analyse both actors separately so as to better differentiate what variables intervene in the process. It will first cover the case of Iran and then, Saudi Arabia's. This is expected to make a final comparison aiming at concluding which of the actors have been influenced to a larger degree by systemic factors, and which by domestic elements.

Once the picture of the variables is completed, the study is expected to provide a fair view of what structural, systemic, and domestic factors have led the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran to agree on a Joint Trilateral Statement brokered by People's Republic of China. Bearing in mind the temporal scope of foreign policy decisions, the study will conclude what future potential scenarios are likely to happen.

3. Islamic Republic of Iran

3.1 Dependent Variables

The dependent variable encompasses both the state's foreign policy choices and international outcomes that conform the system's structure.²⁸ These "systemic outcomes" are defined as political phenomena that result from interactions of strategies pursued by two or more actors.²⁹ Now, because the timeframe that this investigation has adopted is short-to-medium-term, the dependent variable will strictly focus on the foreign policy decision of the analysed states.

The dependent variable for Iran's Islamic Republic is by an large the *Joint Trilateral Statement by the People's Republic of China, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the Islamic Republic of Iran* (hereinafter JTS) that was signed the 10th of March 2023.³⁰ The document's goal is to develop neighbourly relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, as an initiative by Xi Jinping. Both Gulf states thus agreed to attend talks hosted and sponsored by China between the 6th and 10th of March. Iran's delegation was headed by Admiral Ali Shamkhani, Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of the Islamic Republic of Iran (SNSC).

Iran agreed:³¹

1. To resume diplomatic relations and re-open their embassies and missions within a period not exceeding two months.
2. To respect the sovereignty of states and non-interference in internal affairs of states.
3. To hold meetings between their respective ministers of foreign affairs in order to implement the new agreements, arrange the return of ambassadors, and discuss means of enhancing bilateral relations.

²⁸ Paul D. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Relations* (Webcom: Oxford University Press, 2016): 80-98.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *Joint Trilateral Statement by the People's Republic of China, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the Islamic Republic of Iran*, March 10, 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/202303/t20230311_11039241.html#:~:text=The%20three%20countries%20announce%20that,and%20the%20agreement%20includes%20their

³¹ *Ibid.* However, the original document does not provide a numbered record of objectives to be achieved by the signatories. This thesis provides such a list to facilitate the analysis.

4. To implement the Security Cooperation Agreement between them, signed the 17th of April 2001.³²
5. To implement the General Agreement for Cooperation in the fields of Economy, Trade, Investment, Technology, Science, Culture, Sports, and Youth, signed on 27th of May 1998.³³

The first point was fulfilled, at least partially. As several media platforms reported, Iran certainly reopened its embassy in Riyadh in early June 2023, followed by a consulate in Jeddah and Tehran's representative office with the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).³⁴ Even though the inauguration did not meet the two months deadline stipulated in the agreement, it is likely that there was a symbolic and even pragmatic reason for it. Iranian foreign ministry spokesperson Nasser Kanani specifically mentioned during the announcement that the embassy was already operating to enable the pilgrimage for the Hajj, which in 2023 took place in the month of June. This would naturally resume and foster the migration flows since the very beginning, strengthening the image of harmony and stability in the region that China seems to be willing to achieve. Besides, Kanani's statement would come together with a sense of Islamic unity, leaving aside sectarian differences. Tehran named Alireza Enayati as the new ambassador to Saudi Arabia, who would eventually host Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian at the embassy. The latter travelled to the kingdom to meet Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) after he had welcomed his counterpart in Tehran in June 2023.³⁵ These meetings fulfil the third point of the Joint Trilateral Statement that exhorted the parts to hold meetings between their ambassadors.

The second point, which calls for sovereignty respect and non-interference in internal affairs, deserves more attention, however. As such, there are no records of direct confrontations between Saudi Arabia and Iran that have ended up becoming a violation of either state's sovereignty. There does not seem to be any public inferences in internal affairs either. *A priori* this point seems to be as well covered. Nevertheless, tensions between both states

³² 14/1/1422 according to the Islamic Hijri calendar.

³³ 2//2/1419 according to the Islamic Hijri calendar.

³⁴ Motamedi, M. "Iran's ambassador to Saudi Arabia to depart for Riyadh", *Al Jazeera*, September 3, 2023; Motamedi, M. "Iran to reopen embassy in Saudi Arabia after seven years", *Al Jazeera*, June 5, 2023; Benmansour, M. "Iran's Embassy reopens in Saudi Arabia for first time in seven years", *Reuters*, June 7, 2023.

³⁵ Motamedi, M. "Iran's ambassador to Saudi Arabia to depart for Riyadh", *Al Jazeera*, September 3, 2023.

come foremostly from proxy struggles, from which the Yemeni war has become the central one.

Whereas Iran backed Houthi rebels have conducted missile airstrikes on Saudi territory, Riyadh's led coalition of Gulf states has launched economic isolation campaigns and military operations, such as operations Decisive Storm and Restoring Hope.³⁶ According to the Council on Foreign Relations, the Saudi Iranian rapprochement brought hope and optimistic perspectives of a political settlement to end the conflict, yet hostilities still remain.³⁷ Interestingly, the Council on Foreign Relations concludes after conducted research on the Washington Institute for Near East Policy that Iranian influence on Houthis is moderate, in contrast to a stronger influence on Bahrain Al Ashtar Brigades, Iraq Hezbollah Harakat Al Nujaba, or Syrian Hezbollah, to provide but a few examples.³⁸ Still, Tehran's ties with the Yemeni rebels are a thing to be considered.

This bond that resulted from ideological affinity and geopolitical interests seems to prevail regardless of the Saudi Iranian rapprochement. The United States intercepted a shipment that carried military aid sent by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to the Houthis.³⁹ The U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) press release informed that USCGC Clarence Sutphin Jr seized two hundred packages containing medium range ballistic missile components, explosives, unmanned underwater and surface vehicles (UUV and USV, respectively) components, military-grade communication and network equipment, and anti-tank guided missile launcher assemblies.⁴⁰

The Houthis have on the other hand perpetrated several attacks over ships in the Red Sea after the Israel-Hamas war had started in October 2023.⁴¹ In fact, the IRGC overseas Quds Force and Lebanese Hezbollah allegedly helped directing and overseeing the Houthi attacks,

³⁶ Center for Preventive Action, "War in Yemen", *Council on Foreign Relations*, March 5, 2023. Retrieved from: <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/war-yemen>

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Robinson, K. "Iran's Support of the Houthis: What to Know." *Council on Foreign Relations*, March 1, 2023. Retrieved from: <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/irans-support-houthis-what-know#:~:text=Iran%20is%20the%20Houthis'%20primary,%2C%20training%2C%20and%20intelligence%20support.>

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ USCENTCOM, "CENTCOM Intercepts Iranian Weapons Shipment Intended for Houthis", *United States Central Command*, February 15, 2024.

⁴¹ Hamasaeed, S., "A Slippery Slope? U.S., U.K., Launch Strikes on Iran-Backed Houthis in Yemen," *United States Institute for Peace*, January 12, 2024.

providing personnel and tactical intelligence support.⁴² As well, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps have stationed missile and drone trainers and operators in Yemeni territory.⁴³ After the U.S. responses, the rebels have threatened retaliation. Further escalation could end up with more attacks directed toward Washington's allies in the region, such as the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.) and, in turn, Saudi Arabia.⁴⁴ In such a scenario, tensions between Riyadh and Tehran would again rise, and China would suffer from a symbolic loss.

It is concluded that Iran does indeed interfere in Yemen's internal affairs. It is consequently stated that Iran is not respecting the principle of non-interference in internal affairs of states that the JTS called for. But more importantly, Iran's continuing help to the Houthis together with the rebels' aggressive attacks on the Red Sea after the Israel Hamas war have the potential to end up in strikes over Saudi Arabia seen as an U.S. ally. It is too high of a risk that Tehran is undertaking. Conversely, this could be the reason why the IRGC overseas Quds Force is supervising and even directing the attacks: to make sure that the Houthis do not make an unpredictable attack on Saudi soil.

Following the dependent variable, the next key component regards the Security Cooperation Agreement of 2001. At first, the initial four clauses could suggest that the deal's foremost objective is to restore diplomatic relations. But far from it, this part of the JTS comes together with an important security dimension.

The agreement to be restored refers to the pact signed in Tehran by former Iranian Interior Minister Hojjatoleslam Abdolvahed Mousavi Lari, and his counterpart Prince Nayef bin Abdulaziz in 2001.⁴⁵ The main goals of such accord was to fight terrorism and combat drug smuggling.⁴⁶ An observer recalls the main points of the agreement: cooperate in training security personnel and sharing information; facilitating the movement of people between both countries while impeding illegal immigration and reinforcing their borders, cooperation in the field of maritime rescue; cooperation in the fields of terrorism, organized crime, drugs,

⁴² Solomon, J. "Iran's Revolutionary Guard Deployed in Yemen", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, January 15, 2024.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Hamasaeed, S., "A Slippery Slope? U.S., U.K., Launch Strikes on Iran-Backed Houthis in Yemen," *United States Institute for Peace*, January 12, 2024.

⁴⁵ Reza Ekhtiari Amiri, and Ku Hasnita Ku Samsu. "Security Cooperation of Iran and Saudi Arabia." *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, Vol. 2 No. 16 (September 2011).

⁴⁶ Al Saleh, K. Ma Aliatifaqiat Al Amniat 2001 Alati wa Qa'eatha Al Sau'eudat wa Iiran? (What is the 2001 Security Agreement signed by Saudi Arabia and Iran?). *Erem News*, April 6, 2023.

money laundering, crime monitoring and exchange of information; cooperation in terms of territorial waters surveillance; and finally, open channels for a more effective communication.⁴⁷ On the other hand, the General Agreement for Cooperation refers to the fields of Economy, Trade, Investment, Technology, Science, Culture, Sports, and Youth. These areas are named using broad concepts, meaning that the text does not specify which concrete sectors are being covered. By and large, the latter agreement expands the fields of cooperation in a way that can facilitate the understanding between both governments and, eventually, civil populations. Both agreements present two different yet complementary ways of stabilizing the region.

Finally, Iran acknowledged and expressed its gratitude towards the Republic of Iraq and the Sultanate of Oman, and their several attempts to bring both sides to the negotiation tables.

3.2 Independent Variables

The premise from which the Neoclassical Realist theory starts is that “the scope and ambition of a country’s foreign policy is driven first and foremost by its place in the international system and specifically by its relative material power capabilities”.⁴⁸ That is why, as Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro have argued, the theory stems from Structural Realism. After such assumption, NCR subsequently accepts two of Kenneth Waltz’s insights. First, that the structure of the system imposes constraints by delimiting a set of strategic responses, yet at the same time the system itself is not able to *dictate* the behaviour of the individual units.⁴⁹ Second, that the anarchic nature of the system generates “pervasive uncertainty” among the units, mainly states.⁵⁰ This ordering principle that “governs” the international system widens to cover its own totality. Thus, it is accepted that no state is exempt from such lack of guidance more than self-help, and therefore assumed that both Iran and Saudi Arabia are subjected to its logic.

In order to analyse the independent variables that have influenced Iran into reapproaching Saudi Arabia diplomatically, the study will first describe the role that *structural modifiers* have played in such decision.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Rose, Gideon. “Neoclassical Realism and theories of foreign policy”. *World politics* 5 1, no. 1 (1998): 146.

⁴⁹ Paul D. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Relations* (Webcom: Oxford University Press, 2016), 33-57.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

3.2.1 Structural modifiers

Glenn Snyder coined the term *structural modifier* to refer to systemic variables that “modify the effects of the more basic structural elements on the interaction process, but they are not interaction itself.”⁵¹ As the author puts it, the term *structural* designates the system-wide norms that are more prone to the structure than the internal state nature. Following the methodology of Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro that was presented in the previous section, this thesis will consider three main structural modifiers: geography, rates of technological diffusion, and the offense-defence balance in military technologies.⁵²

A geographical analysis must constitute the first step in the elaboration of a realist study, not to mention a Neoclassical Realist one. Taking into account that one of the main criticisms that NCR posed against Structural Realism is that systemic stimuli can lead to different foreign policy outcomes due to a problem of perception, it follows that geography, if understood as the position and reality from which units perceive or are perceived by the system’s actors, constitutes the first magnitude with the potential to shape or alter the foreign policy decisions of a state. It is thus imperative to pay close attention to it.

Geography

Iran’s location on the map is privileged. Its territory, which covers more than 1,648,000 square kilometres, extends between latitudes 25° and 40° North, and longitudes 44° and 63° East in the Gulf subregion of the Middle East.⁵³ This exceptional geostrategic spot has caught the attention of geographers, military strategists and governmental actors throughout history. Yet, the twentieth century gave birth to a theory that would place Iran and the Gulf at the centre of attention of great powers.

H. J. Mackinder presented three natural seats of power in the global map.⁵⁴ These were the famous pivotal area, and the outer and inner crescents. According to the British author, the balance of power would favour the pivot state, for the control of such a colossal landmass in Eurasia, would grant with extensive continental resources. Considering how this Heartland

⁵¹ Snyder, Glenn, “Process Variables in Neorealist Theory”. *Security Studies* (1996): p. 169.

⁵² Paul D. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Relations* (Webcom: Oxford University Press, 2016), 33-57.

⁵³ William Bayne Fisher, *The Cambridge History of Iran: Volume 1. The Land of Iran*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968): 3-110.

⁵⁴ Halford John Mackinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History”, *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 170, No. 4 (1904).

was as well protected from maritime attacks as well as land attacks thanks to its orography, Mackinder indicated that the region's sole vulnerability would come from Eastern Europe's plain lands. Hence, commanding this region would become key to control the pivotal area.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, Professor Nicholas Spykman disagreed with Mackinder. He stated that the control of the pivotal region stemmed from the domination of the inner crescent, a hybrid region with continental and maritime characteristics surrounding the Heartland.⁵⁶ This region would be renamed as the *Rimland*,⁵⁷ where Iran belongs to. This Rimland would emphasize sea power and become the main obstacle for the pivotal area. That is the reason why Spykman's theory was central in Washington's Contention Strategy during the Cold War and that will help explaining many of Tehran's perceptions. The main idea that can be retrieved here is, as Ahmad Naderi observes, that Iran and the Persian Gulf do represent the heart of the Rimland, and it thus exercises a crucial actor of the system and interests of great powers.⁵⁸

In this location, Iran's Islamic Republic borders to the north with Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkmenistan, and the Caspian Sea, to the east with Afghanistan and Pakistan, to the south with the Gulf of Oman the Persian/Arabian Gulf, and to the east by Turkey and Iraq. Iran is a crossroads positioned between South Asia, Central Asia, the Arab Middle East, and the Indian Ocean. In fact, one third of Iran's borders enjoy an access to the sea.⁵⁹ This access to the Caspian Sea and the Indian Ocean have proven to be an idiosyncratic feature of its history, since the former connects Europe and Asia, and the latter stands as a gateway to Eastern Asia, its peoples, commerce, and cultures, as related by Lawrence Potter.⁶⁰ The lines of communication that these features have permitted are core in Iran's history and foreign policy. The location of Iran on the map, together with its access to the sea have been closely observed by the People's Republic of China and its Belt and Road Initiative, as it can help the connection of the Asian dragon with the old Europe and the emerging Africa. Russia's interest in developing a transit corridor to reach the Indian Ocean places Iran too in an

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Halford John Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History", *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 170, No. 4 (1904).

⁵⁷ Observed by Ahmad Naderi, "*The Shia Rimland Theory, State Rationality and the Role of Iran as a Regional Power*", 2015; in Nicholas Spykman, "*The Geography of Peace*" (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Khosrow Mostofi, Peter William Avery, and Janet Afary, "Iran", *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2024).

⁶⁰ Lawrence G. Potter, "Society in the Persian Gulf: Before and After Oil", *Center for International and Regional Studies, Georgetown University in Qatar*, 18 (2017): p. 2.

interesting position. Thus, lines communications and infrastructure in Iran are essential for certain foreign powers.

But about 52% of Iranian territory is covered by mountains and deserts. In fact, 16% of its area has an altitude of more than 2,000 metres,⁶¹ the largest mountain chain being the Zagros, which runs first from north-west to the southern shores of the Gulf, and then eastwards to protect the Strait of Hormuz.⁶² Conversely, the Elburz mountains are a 900 Km long chain that rests on northern Iran.⁶³ The Kopet-Dag range follows north to reach the eastern flank. This is guarded by the Bashagard range and links Hormuz with the Baluchistan down south. All these eroded mountain chains rest upon a vigorous tectonic activity that make earthquakes and active volcanoes a daily reality.⁶⁴ As observed by Behrooz Tavakoli and Mohsen Ghafory-Ashtiany, the earthquakes data in Iran show that most activity is clustered along the Zagros, i.e., from the northwest to the southwest, whereas the central plateau and Eastern Iran experience less seismic activity.⁶⁵ This has profound implications on the construction of transport communications and infrastructure.

Now, as it could be observed, Iran's territory is surrounded by mountain chains, intriguingly making the core of the Rimland a rimmed land. These natural borders protect the well-known Iranian plateau. This central area is composed of several inland basins, yet, as William B. Fisher claims, Iran's "topography is still far from uniform."⁶⁶ The elevation of the terrain still oscillates from 300 to 1,000 metres above sea level and the northern and southern regions of the plateau are vastly covered by the deserts of Kavir and Lut. It is obvious that the Islamic Republic counts with a privileged physical geography that posits obstacle after obstacle to any intention of land or maritime attacks. Any strike on Iranian soil that employs conventional land and/or maritime means is unlikely, among other things, due to the high chance of low effectiveness and/or efficiency.

Following the study of Iran's geographic features, it would be logical to deduce that the Islamic Republic is not able to provide with a good system of infrastructures and transport

⁶¹ Iran National Committee of ICID. "Iran", International Commission on Irrigation & Drainage (n. d.).

⁶² Khosrow Mostofi, Peter William Avery, and Janet Afary, "Iran", *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2024).

⁶³ Hans Bobek, "Elburz Mountains", *Encyclopedia Britannica* (5 January 2024).

⁶⁴ Khosrow Mostofi, Peter William Avery, and Janet Afary, "Iran", *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2024).

⁶⁵ Behrooz Tavakoli and Mohsen Ghafory-Ashtiany, "Seismic hazard assessment of Iran", *International Institute of Earthquake Engineering and Seismology*, 42, 6 (1999).

⁶⁶ William Bayne Fisher, *The Cambridge History of Iran: Volume 1. The Land of Iran*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968): 90.

communications, yet it owns 14,078 Km of railway network.⁶⁷ It is obvious that the mountainous regions that surround the country, for instance, require from intense and vast works on tunnelling, bridging, and handling gradients. The deserts of Kavir and Lut are covered by shifting sands and unstable terrain, a factor that further difficulties the engineering works. Furthermore, the desert of Lut often experiences the one of the planet's highest land surface temperatures, that even managed to reach 70°C.⁶⁸ These temperatures deteriorate the materials employed in construction, especially metals used in railway connections. Despite all of this, the Islamic Republic of Iran Railways manages a broad gauge that connects with Pakistan's railways to Turkey and gates of Europe.

Iran's geography is, all in all, characterised by a strategic location between the Levant, the Arabian Peninsula, the Indian Ocean, and Central and South Asia that invites to invest in lines of communication; as well as an abrupt orography that serves as a natural barrier against attacks.

Rate of technological diffusion and the offense-defence balance

This study assumes that the offense-defence balance relates strictly to the balance of military technologies and, thus, to the intensity of the security dilemma that is idiosyncratic in groups or, in this case, pairs of units or states within geographic regions, and not the international system as a whole.⁶⁹ It must be previously stated, however, that carrying an exhaustive assessment and comparison of the military capabilities of Iran and main interacting powers is not feasible for this study, let alone the purpose it. For practical purposes, the investigation will be centred on the foremost factors that make up the rate of technological diffusion and offense-defence military balance.

A security dilemma has been present in the Gulf since the conception of the Islamic Republic back in 1979. The tensions that emanate from this spiral arose not only between Iran and Saudi Arabia. This is because the Gulf is geographically close to another subregion of the Middle East, namely the Levant, which harbours one of Tehran's declared enemies and that has conditioned the latter's foreign policy to a considerable extent: Israel. Among many

⁶⁷ Logistics Cluster, "Iran, Islamic Republic of. 2.4 Railway Assessment", *Logistics Cluster* (n. d.).

⁶⁸ United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, "Lut Desert", *UNESCO World Heritage Convention*, n. d.

⁶⁹ Paul D. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Relations* (Webcom: Oxford University Press, 2016), 33-57.

reasons, this is due to the advanced technological facilities that Tel Aviv counts with, especially in the military sector. It is crucial, hence, that the case of Israel is studied in this point.

Israel's military doctrine has two key pillars.⁷⁰ First, its conventional military power must be qualitatively superior to that of its rivals, individually or collectively. Second, its adversaries should be denied nuclear power. This second pillar has contributed exasperatedly to the development of the security dilemma between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Israel, of which the largest dimension is the nuclear question. This nuclear element in the security dilemma is key to understand the behaviour of both states. Israel does not figure as a signatory of the Treaty of Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).⁷¹ This means that it does not accept nor agree with the document, which among other points restricts the status of *nuclear weapon state* and thus the power to produce nuclear weapons to those who had manufactured atomic weaponry prior to 1967, when the treaty was first signed. These states are the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, i.e., the United States, the United Kingdom, France, China, and the Soviet Union/Russian Federation. However, even though Israel has not signed such treaty whatsoever, it is suspected with virtual certainty to be in possession of nuclear weapons. As an observer puts it, it is rather impossible to develop a precise assessment on Israel's nuclear activities, for it has never acknowledged the production of nuclear weapons and it has implemented a policy of ambiguity about it.⁷² The reasons are several.

First, Israel's geographic exposures further aggravate the feeling of vulnerability that the state has been subjected to since the 1940s. The Israeli state lacks territorial depth, and it overconcentrates its population in a reduced number of cities, meaning that any conventional or non-conventional attack can end up threatening seriously Israel's survivability. In addition, the Arab states that had been hostile towards the Jewish state since the creation of the latter started acting following a sense of unity after Gamal Abdel Nasser's pan-Arabism had begun to change the post-Second World War Middle East. These Arab states enjoyed a higher qualitative military advantage than Israel, who could not defend its pre-1967 borders under conventional warfare. All of this increased the sense of vulnerability of the Israel,

⁷⁰ Gawdat Bahgat, "Israel and Nuclear Proliferation in the Middle East", *Middle East Policy*, 13, 2 (2006).

⁷¹ Treaty of Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, *United Nations*. 1 July, 1968.

⁷² Gawdat Bahgat, "Israel and Nuclear Proliferation in the Middle East", *Middle East Policy*, 13, 2 (2006).

leading to a decision to bet on a nuclear programme in order to improve its security.⁷³ For this reason, Tel Aviv started in the 1950s to collaborate with the French government and other states develop a nuclear programme by constructing a secret reactor to produce plutonium in the Negev Desert: Dimona.⁷⁴

Two observers conclude in a study that as of 2020 the Dimona reactor had managed to produce between 730 Kg and 930 Kg of plutonium.⁷⁵ If it is assumed that the totality of this plutonium has been directed towards the proliferation of nuclear weapons, on the one hand, and that a warhead precises 5 Kg of plutonium to be operative, on the other, a simple arithmetic operation shows that Israel could have produced up to 150-190 nuclear warheads, a number that indiscreetly exceeds the independent estimates of Tel Aviv's nuclear arsenal situated around 85 weapons.⁷⁶

Iran has on the contrary signed the NPT, yet its condition is disputed as well.⁷⁷ The European Union and the so-called P5+1, integrated by the US, France, the UK, Russia, China, and Germany, completed a nuclear agreement with Iran in 2015 after the latter had been investing in nuclear activities for more than a decade: the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).⁷⁸ From the underlying balance of power structural theory that this study stems from, this internal balancing would attempt to balance mainly against Israel and to increase its share of relative distribution of power within the Middle East and rest of the international community. The JCPOA was expected to cover between 10 and 15 years before Tehran could expand significantly its nuclear capabilities. Tehran would freeze the uranium enrichment and sanctions would conversely be lifted. However, the presidency of Donald Trump withdrew the United States from this nuclear deal, leading to increasing tensions between both states.⁷⁹ Soon after, September of 2020 witnessed how Israel signed a normalization treaty with two of Iran's neighbours: Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates.⁸⁰

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Alexander Glaser & Julien de Troullioud de Lanversin, "Plutonium and Tritium Production in Israel's Dimona Reactor, 1964-2020", *Science and Global Security*, 29:2, 90-107.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, "Worldwide Deployments of Nuclear Weapons," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 73 (2017): 289-297.

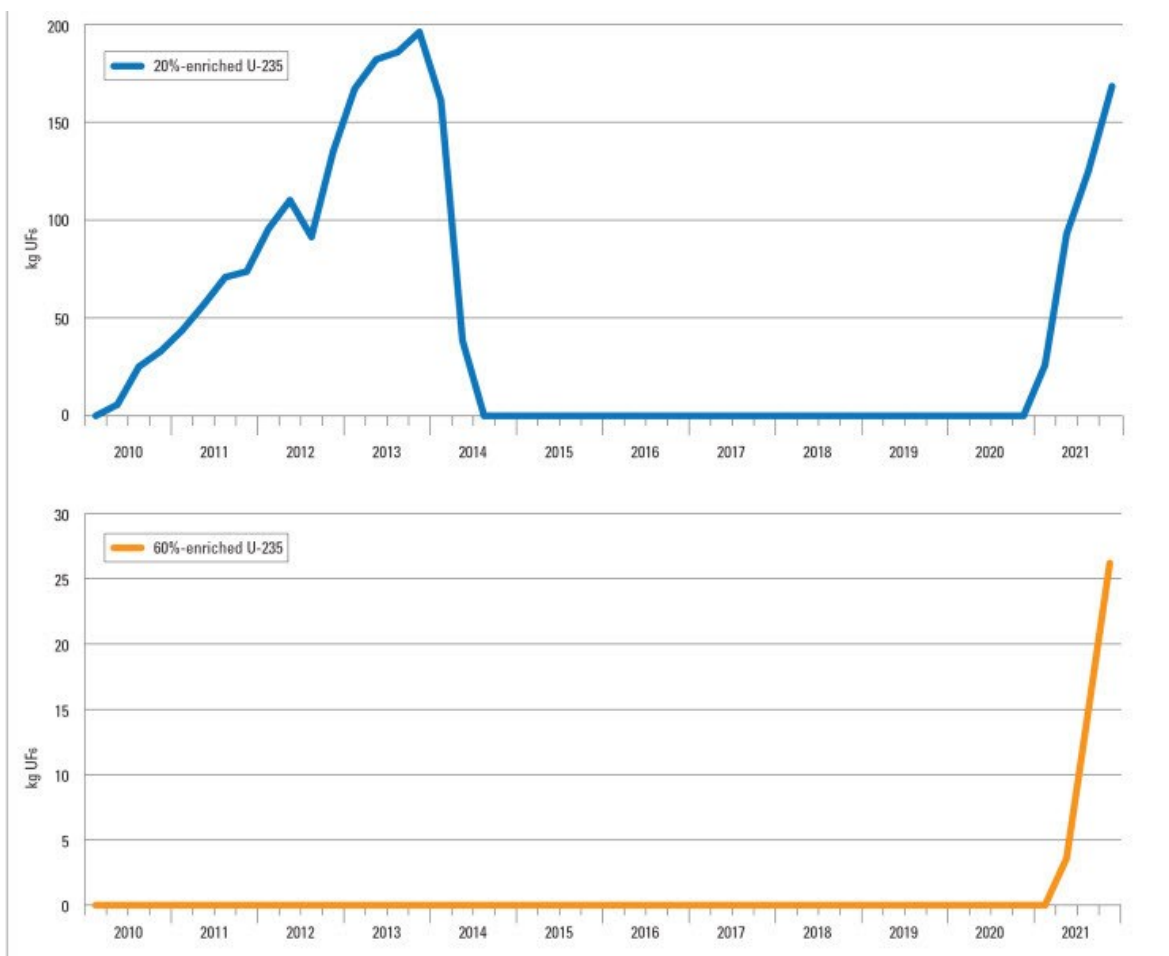
⁷⁷ Treaty of Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, *United Nations*. 1 July, 1968.

⁷⁸ Gary Samore *et al.* "The Iran Nuclear Deal: A Definitive Guide", *Belfer Centre of Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School*, 2015.

⁷⁹ Mohammed Cherkaoui, "Trump's Withdrawal from the Iran Nuclear Deal: Security or Economics." *Al Jazeera Centre for Studies*, 10, (2018).

⁸⁰ "Abraham Accords: Declaration of Peace, Cooperation, and Constructive Diplomatic and Friendly Relations. Announced by the State of Israel and the Kingdom of Bahrain on 15 September 2020." September 15, 2020;

The scope of these treaties went from cooperation in the sectors of tourism and communications, to those of energy and investment among many others. Furthermore, the cooperation between the signatories and the witness, *id est* the United States, included military collaboration, including an offer from Donald Trump to Abu Dhabi with the proposed sell of fifth generation jet fighters. Among its many consequences, especially for the Israeli Palestinian conflict, the Abraham Accords placed Iran as a *common enemy* for Israel and two Sunni Arab Gulf states. The Islamic Republic responded following the logic of the security dilemma as well, which resulted in the increase of the levels of enriched uranium in Iran as seen below.



Graph 1. Iran's stockpile of enriched uranium. Source: International Atomic Energy Agency; European Leadership Network. Retrieved from: IISS, "The status of negotiations over Iran's nuclear programme", 2022.

and "Abraham Accords: Declaration of Peace, Diplomatic Relations and Full Normalization between the United Arab Emirates and the State of Israel." September 15, 2020.

As the graph shows, enriched uranium levels in Iran increased again after the last quarter of 2020.⁸¹ Unsurprisingly, this moment coincides with the signature of the Abraham Accords in September 2020. It can be appreciated that Iran had been enriching uranium to 20% until 2014. One year later, the JCPOA would be signed and, apparently, nuclear activities in Iran would cease until 2020. But after the normalization treaties, Tehran resumed its processes not only to 20% but also to 60%. It has been reported that Iran actually managed to achieve 83% enriched uranium. This has transcendental implications.

Uranium is a common metal that constitutes a key ingredient in the production of nuclear energy.⁸² The metal commonly consists of two isotopes: Uranium-238 (U-238) and Uranium-235 (U-235). Uranium naturally contains 99.3% of U-238, while the rest is made up of U-235. This way, *enriching* uranium refers to the process by which the concentration of isotope U-235 is increased.⁸³ That is why the graph specifies that those levels correspond to Uranium-235. Iran had been enriching uranium to 20% before 2015 and after 2020. This *low enriched uranium* is commonly used for pacific purposes. However, the concentration of U-235 surpassing the threshold of 80% is labelled as *weapon grade uranium*, since it seems to be the minimum required to produce nuclear weaponry. Further information about the percentages and their use can be found in the following table.

Concept	Presence of U-235	Potential Use
Slightly Enriched Uranium	$0.9\% < \text{U-235} < 2\%$	Alternative to natural uranium. Same amount of energy and lower nuclear waste.
Low Enriched Uranium	$5\% < \text{U-235} < 20\%$	Research, naval propulsion...
High Enriched Uranium	$\text{U-235} > 40\%$	Powering up submarines, naval propulsion...
Weapon Grade Uranium	$\text{U-235} > 80\%$	Nuclear weapons, advanced naval propulsion...

Table 2. *Uranium Enrichment (U-235 Percentages)*. Source: Own elaboration with information retrieved from Younas et al., 2018.

⁸¹ International Institute of Strategic Studies, “The status of negotiations over Iran’s nuclear programme”, *International Institute of Strategic Studies*, Volume 28, Comment 02 (2022).

⁸² Tanzila Younas et al. “Enrichment of Uranium”, *IEEE 5th International Conference on Engineering Technologies and Applied Sciences (ICETAS)*: 1-4 (2018).

⁸³ *Ibid*: p. 1.

The fact that Iran started producing High Enriched Uranium and even Weapon Grade Uranium is a significant contribution to the security dilemma. It threatens not only regional actors, but the international system. But then, Snyder claimed that nuclear weapons “inhibit aggression and ameliorate the security dilemma”.⁸⁴ His argument was that they can modify the anarchic structure of the international system because superpowers assume, quoting the author, a pseudogoverning function. Following Snyder’s logic, it could be argued that beyond that point a security dilemma can therefore only be stimulated quantitatively and not qualitatively, assuming that no disrupting technologies in the sector of weapons of mass destruction are discovered. Now, Snyder talks about a security dilemma between two nuclear powers, and it does not refer to a nuclear power-seeking actor. From a critical point of view, Iran’s internal balancing to pursue nuclear weapons constitutes a way to acquire the same qualitative capabilities as Israel and thus equilibrate the offense-defence balance. This means in turn that a security dilemma can still exist because an actor A, in this case Iran, pursues the nuclear status that a state B, or Israel, holds. Interestingly, this resembles Robert Gilpin’s concept of *hegemonic war*, where a rising power challenges the dominant one. To conclude, Iran currently has the power not to ameliorate but rather stimulate the security dilemma by investing and acquiring nuclear weapons, increasing its share in the relative distribution of power, and consequently incrementing its status to a nuclear power.

Now, the production of warheads by Israel *eo ipso* does not constitute the sole threat. The rate of technological diffusion and the offense-defence military balance are characterised by what could be considered as a disruptive technology: the deployment of thermonuclear weaponry using fifth generation jets fighters.

The F-35 Lightning II is a fifth-generation jet fighter which is jointly developed by a team and led by an organ of the Pentagon, the F-35 Joint Programme, and whose partners conform the states leading the aerospace industry.⁸⁵ These are: the United Kingdom, Italy, Netherlands, Canada, Australia, Denmark, and Norway. As well, the Joint Programme Office has signed foreign military sales with several US allies, such as Japan, South Korea, Belgium, Poland, Singapore, Finland, Switzerland, Germany, the Czech Republic, and Israel. The fact that Israel owns two squadrons of F-35 is a matter of importance *per se* due

⁸⁴ Observed by Paul D. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Relations* (Webcom: Oxford University Press, 2016), 33-57 in Glenn Snyder “Process Variables in Neorealist Theory.” *Security Studies*, 5, 3 (1996): 167-192. DOI: 10.1080/09636419608429279

⁸⁵ F-35 Lightning II Joint Programme. “International Participation”, *Joint Programme*, n. d.

to two reasons. First, it meets the first mentioned point of the military doctrine. The F-35 is a fifth-generation jet fighter, meaning that it possesses qualitative superior capabilities than its predecessors of the fourth generation. In fact, Grant Rumley confirms that the airplane's characteristics are not matched by any other aircraft so far, since its versatility surpasses that of the F-22 *Raptor*.⁸⁶ To illustrate the point, the aircraft has three models: the standard F-35A for conventional warfare; the F-35B, equipped with vertical landing technology; and the F-35C, available for its use in aircraft carriers.⁸⁷ Even though the F-35 is not able to reach the maximum speed of an F-16 or an F-15 situated around Mach 2, its stabilisers, larger than those of other fighter jets, permit a superb manoeuvrability at high velocities. One of its most attractive technologies rests upon the aircraft's supreme ability to evade radars thanks to a system of sensors enabled to vanish the location of the F-35.⁸⁸ If it was not enough, Israel implemented several modifications in the aircraft, thus giving birth to the model F-35I *Adir*.⁸⁹ Second, the F-35 has a special feature, and this is where both pillars of the Israeli military doctrine converge: the aircraft is equipped with technology that enables the F-35 to deploy a B61-12, a thermonuclear bomb.⁹⁰

The Abraham Accords included the offer by Donald Trump to sell fifty F-35 units to Abu Dhabi.⁹¹ Of course, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is not recognised as a nuclear weapon state, and thus the modified F-35 with such ability would not be sold. Nevertheless, Israel's neighbouring states do not own fifth generation fighter jets, for its first pillar of military doctrine must be met.⁹² The Iranian air force owns MiG-29, F-7, and interestingly the F-14, all of which refer to fourth-generation fighters whose avionics and technical capabilities are absolutely eclipsed by those of the F-35. Reviewing the qualitative advantage that follows

⁸⁶ Grant Rumley, "Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*. Policy Analysis, PolicyWatch 3578, 15th February 2022.

⁸⁷ Chris Wiegand, *et al.* "F-35 Air Vehicle Technological Overview", *2018 Aviation Technology, Integration, and Operations Conference*, p. 3368, 2018.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Adir*, in Hebrew: מִיָּדִיר. Meaning: powerful, mighty.

⁹⁰ Hans. M. Kristensen, "B16-12: The New Guided Standoff Nuclear Bomb", *Federation of American Scientists*, 2015.

⁹¹ Reuters. "UAE confirms it inked \$23 billion deal to buy F-35 jets, drones from U.S.". *Reuters*, 22 January, 2021. [https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-emirates-f35/uae-confirms-it-inked-23-billion-deal-to-buy-f-35-jets-drones-from-u-s-idUSKBN29R238/#:~:text=WASHINGTON%20\(Reuters\)%20%2D%20The%20United,a%20deal%20worth%20%2423%20billion.](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-emirates-f35/uae-confirms-it-inked-23-billion-deal-to-buy-f-35-jets-drones-from-u-s-idUSKBN29R238/#:~:text=WASHINGTON%20(Reuters)%20%2D%20The%20United,a%20deal%20worth%20%2423%20billion.)

⁹² IISS, "The Military Balance 2022", *International Institute of Strategic Studies*, 2022.

the Israeli military doctrine is a good indicator to study the rate of technological diffusion and offense-defence balance in the Middle East.

The implementation of nuclear weaponry in fifth generation fighters is not the only variable to be analysed in the nuclear dimension of the security dilemma. In a parallel way, nuclear weapons have been experiencing considerable progress during the last years. The two main elements to be strictly considered not only by Iran as a pursuer of nuclear energy and weaponry but by the whole humankind are two: artificial intelligence (AI) and autonomy.⁹³

It is assumed that “AI and autonomy technology will continue to be embraced by global militaries.”⁹⁴ As a result, it is logically assumed too that these disrupting technologies will be implemented in the different areas of the military, including nuclear arsenals. James Johnson warned in 2020, a moment when Iran had incremented its levels of enriched uranium to 60%, that the effect of artificial intelligence and autonomy would be lead to a “decrease [in] nuclear stability and an increase [in] the tendency for escalation to nuclear use, thereby undermining deterrence.”⁹⁵ The reasons are several.

To give but some examples, relying on a digitalized nuclear deterrence could incur in an increase in cyberattacks, with the ability of both statal and non-statal third party hackers to enjoy the ability to sabotage nuclear control.⁹⁶ As well, psychological biases do not exist in automatised nuclear deterrence, thus the overestimation of damages and fatalities could not refrain an AI nuclear system to launch a pre-emptive attack. On the other hand, classical nuclear deterrence is based on the idea of a second retaliatory strike, i.e., the mutually assured destruction (MAD), and counts with a psychological, a political, and a technical dimension. Hence, with the implementation of AI and autonomy in a certain degree, the psychological and political domains would be eclipsed by the technical realm. Artificial intelligence and autonomy technologies are so far not developed enough to entrust them the proper existence of humankind. Still, the question might not be *whether* such technologies are going to be implemented, but rather *when*.

⁹³ James Johnson, “Deterrence in the age of artificial intelligence & autonomy: a paradigm shift in nuclear deterrence theory and practice?”, *Defence & Security Analysis*, 36(4), 422-448 (2020).

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 422.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*.

Finally, one month after the Abraham Accords had been signed the UN issued an arms embargo on Iran that prevented the theocracy from buying modern weapons systems.⁹⁷ The Islamic Republic relies on its ability to deploy missiles and wage asymmetric war, yet this reliance calls for a modernization of its air force and modern armour.

As it was explained, the role of structural modifiers in this study designates a norm prone to the idiosyncrasy of the system itself. They hence do not constitute an interaction state-to-state, but rather system-to-state. They play a significant role in explaining the nature of international outcomes. These structural modifiers serve as the board over which the Islamic Republic of Iran's accepted a diplomatic rapprochement with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The next step in this study presents an analysis of the clarity of systemic stimuli and nature of Iran's strategic environment, as perceived by Tehran.

3.2.2 Clarity and Nature of the Strategic Environment

Clarity, understood as the “clarity of signals and information the international system presents to states” is a key variable in a Neoclassical Realist analysis.⁹⁸ It has three components: the degree to which threats and opportunities are readily discernible; whether the system provides information on the time horizons of threats and opportunities; and whether optimal policy options stand out or not.⁹⁹ As for the first component, both clear threats and opportunities can be perceived by states. *Clear threats* possess three elements: revisionism or expressed hostility to harm the state's territorial integrity or core interests; economic and military capability to inflict harm on the state, which in turn depends on geography and technology; and the sense of imminence.¹⁰⁰ *Clear opportunities*, on the other hand, demand an evidence of a state's improving balance of capabilities vis-à-vis other states, meaning that it would acquire a specific advantage.¹⁰¹ They possess three attributes: an evidence that the relative capabilities do favour the state in question; an evidence that other consequential parties lack the political resolve to resist the state's moves in the theatre

⁹⁷ IISS, “The Military Balance 2022”, *International Institute of Strategic Studies*, 2022.

⁹⁸ Paul D. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Relations* (Webcom: Oxford University Press, 2016), 33-57.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Observed by Paul D. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Relations* (Webcom: Oxford University Press, 2016), 33-57 in Jogn Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (1992).

¹⁰¹ Paul D. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Relations* (Webcom: Oxford University Press, 2016), 33-57.

in question; and an evidence that a favourable balance of capabilities and resolve will not persist indefinitely, making it important to act as soon as possible. The times horizon, i.e., the second component of clarity, is difficult to perceive since the state in question must have a fair view of the intentions and capabilities of the adversary. Finally, the clarity of options tries to seek the optimal policy response at a given situation, and thus it is rare.

Conversely, the nature of a state's strategic environment can be either permissive or restrictive.¹⁰² The difference between them both relates to the imminence and magnitudes of the threats and opportunities. Under a *ceteris paribus*¹⁰³ assumption, the more imminent a threat or opportunity is, and the more dangerous a threat or attractive an opportunity, the more restrictive the strategic environment will be. On the contrary, remote and non-intense systemic stimuli provide states with a permissive strategic environment. For practical purposes, clarity and nature of the strategic environment will be defined as either *high* or *low*, either *permissive* or *restrictive*.

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 put an end to the Twin Pillars policy. By such, the United States urged Saudi Arabia and the monarchic Iran to defend the Gulf region by cooperating in the security sector in exchange of American weaponry.¹⁰⁴ This is but one ingredient in the containment strategy that the United States had applied against the Soviet Union during the Cold War. As it has been explained, Iran is strategically located in the Rimland or Inner Crescent that constituted the spinal cord to surround the pivotal state, as N. Spykman had suggested in the 1940s. This containment strategy was part of what Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver coined as the United States' Cold War *macrosecuritization*, which is defined as a securitization process where the referent object, that is, a threatened object or ideal that need to be protected,¹⁰⁵ is higher than the standard middle level of analysis that traditionally has been constituted by the state.¹⁰⁶ In a macrosecuritization, instead, the referent object to be securitized rather concerns to the entirety of humankind. This leaves the securitizing actor with the power to justify the implementation of extraordinary policies practically all around

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ All things being equal.

¹⁰⁴ L. Carl Brown. *Diplomacy in the Middle East. The International Relations of Outside Powers*. New York: Tauris, 2003.

¹⁰⁵ Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, & Jaap de Wilde. *Security. A New Framework for Analysis*. United States of America: Lynne Rienner Publishers (1998).

¹⁰⁶ Barry Buzan & Ole Wæver, "Macrosecuritization and Security Costellations: Reconsidering Scale in Securitization Theory." *Review of International Studies*, 35(2), 253-276 (2009).

the globe. In the case of the Cold War, two blocks were respectively securitizing liberal democracy and communism.¹⁰⁷ But when the USSR was dissolved, even though Washington commanded the sole superpower of the system and as such had the ability to dictate most of the rules of the game, its ability to implement extraordinary measures decreased, and thus a new macrosecuritization had to be developed to exercise a *justified* global influence. The Global War on Terror (GWOt) constituted the following macrosecuritization led by the US, and it contributed to forge the Gulf as it is known today. As Esra Çavuşoğlu puts it, “the 9/11 attacks granted the US a lasting opportunity that fulfilled its significant need of defining a new threat or justification effectively to consolidate its hegemony by advancing its military expansion in the post-Cold War period,” leading the US to implement its “most powerful macrosecuritization.”¹⁰⁸ It is important because it helps understanding the perception of systemic stimuli by Tehran.

The terrorist threat was inclusively universal to be able to call for a global-level-approval that could convince states regardless of their ideology.¹⁰⁹ The US’s objectives became a matter of global-level security issue. Under this framework, the United States invaded Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001 and 2003, claiming the need to fight terror and protect freedom, and that Saddam Hussein owned weapons of mass destruction.¹¹⁰

Since 1984, Washington has designated the Islamic Republic of Iran as a sponsor of terrorism, the main argument being Iran’s external operations, including backing proxy terrorist and Shia militia groups.¹¹¹ Iran has so far been accused of supporting the Taliban, the Houthis in Yemen, and training Afghan refugees to combat in Syria. The regime of Tehran was consequently included in the “Axis of Evil” together with Iraq and North Korea.¹¹²

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Esra Çavuşoğlu, “The Securitization of the Persian Gulf and its Changing Dynamics”, *Uluslararası İlişkiler ve Politika Dergisi*, 3(2): p. 147

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Muqarrab Akbar & Mahdi Zahraa. “War against Terrorism: Legality of the US Invasion of Afghanistan”, *Pakistan Horizon*, 68(3/4), 81-103 (2015).

¹¹¹ Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence of the Committee on Homeland Security. “House of Representatives. “State sponsors of terrorism: an examination of Iran’s global terrorism network.” *House of Representatives*. Serial No. 115-19, 17 April 2018.

¹¹² Esra Çavuşoğlu, “The Securitization of the Persian Gulf and its Changing Dynamics”, *Uluslararası İlişkiler ve Politika Dergisi*, 3(2): 139-159.

The most plausible and well-known measures that Washington has imposed on Iran are the economic sanctions. These responses to Iranian nuclear activities pretend to weaken Iran’s economy by punishing the government and impeding its access to global financial markets.¹¹³ The US Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control has issued several executive orders by which varied economic sectors are targeted through means of economic sanctions.¹¹⁴ The critical sectors affected are, to mention but a few, those of iron, steel, copper, and aluminium; migration and peoples; finance and financial institutions; and petroleum resources. An observer claims that Iran indeed was forced to reduce the activity of its nuclear plants.¹¹⁵ Second, the United States has deployed troops and built military bases and facilities in the Gulf and Levant that are located mainly in Sunni monarchies. The map below illustrates the location and nature of such facilities.



Figure 2. US Main Military Facilities in the Gulf and Levant. Source: Own elaboration with information retrieved from Mathieu Wallin (2018) & Reuters (2024). Google My Maps.

¹¹³ Morteza Ghomi, “Who is afraid of sanctions? The macroeconomic and distributional effects of the sanctions against Iran.” *Economics & Politics*, 34(3), 395-428 (2022).

¹¹⁴ Office of Foreign Assets Control, “Iran Sanctions. Legal Framework for Iran Sanctions: Executive Orders,” *US Department of the Treasury* (n. d.). Retrieved from: <https://ofac.treasury.gov/sanctions-programs-and-country-information/iran-sanctions>

¹¹⁵ Saeed Ghasseminejad & Mohammad R. Jahan-Parvar. “The impact of financial sanctions: The case of Iran”, *Journal of Policy Modeling*, 43(3), 601-621 (2021).

As it can be seen, the US owns or has agreements to use outposts, air bases, navy and radar facilities in all the Gulf Sunni monarchies. The rivalry between these states and Iran is multidimensional. First and foremost, the tensions arise from the hierarchical structure of the region, where the Gulf monarchies belong to the group of pro-*status quo* states, whereas Iran is considered to be a revisionist or counter-hegemonic actor.¹¹⁶ The only exception is Qatar, which has been taking a stance that not always followed Riyadh's desire, this leading to 2017 total blockade of the Doha regime. Furthermore, its view of Wahabism is laxer than the Saudi's, permitting the exercise of some civil liberties that the allies of the Saud family do not contemplate.¹¹⁷ Still, American military presence in the Gulf is wide. It has three principal air bases and two naval facilities at its disposition in the Western regions of Saudi Arabia. Together with the naval base in Djibouti, the United States is present in the Red Sea and Bab Al Mandeb Strait. This is a crucial geostrategic location to fight the Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen. Additionally, the US has deployed its 5th fleet in Bahrain,¹¹⁸ around 230 Km away from Iranian soil. It is as well present in the Emirati Fujairah Naval Base, which grants a logistical land link to the Gulf in case Iran decides to close Hormuz.¹¹⁹

In addition to that, the US has managed to deploy its troops in non-Sunni monarchies. Oman counts with four air bases and two navy facilities; Iraq has two air bases and an outpost that keeps US presence in the Green Line; and even Syria, the US owns an outpost in Al Tanf with the purpose of defending the area from Jihadists and pro-Iran claims.¹²⁰ Further information on the US military facilities can be consulted in the following table.

¹¹⁶ Mehran Kamrava. "Hierarchy and Instability in the Middle East Regional Order", *International Studies Journal*, 14(4): 1-35 (2018).

¹¹⁷ Ignacio Álvarez-Ossorio & Ignacio Gutiérrez de Terán. *Qatar. La perla del Golfo*. Barcelona: Península Odiseas (2022).

¹¹⁸ Note that Bahrain theoretically has mostly Sunni population, as its government in Manama claims, yet it is commonly thought to gather a larger Shia population.

¹¹⁹ Mathieu Wallin. "U.S. Military Bases and Facilities in the Middle East," *American Security Project*, June 2018.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

Location	Estimated US Troops	Facilities
Bahrain	4,700	Muharraq Air Base, Naval Support Activity Bahrain, Shaikh Isa Air Base
Djibouti	4,000	Camp Lemonnier
Iraq	2,000	Erbil Air Base, Balad Air Base, Al Asad Air Base, FOB Union III
Israel	N/A	Mashabim Air Base, Bisl'a Aerial Defence School
Jordan	3,000	Muwaffaq Salti Air Base
Kuwait	10,000	Camp Buehring, Ali Al Salem Air Base, Kuwait Navy Base/Camp Patriot
Saudi Arabia	2,000	King Faisal Air Base, Yanbu Commercial Port, King Fahd Industrial Port, Prince Sultan Air Base, King Fahd Air Base
Syria	900	Al Tanf
Turkey	1,000	Incirlik Air Base, Izmir Air Station
Oman	0	RAFO Musannah, Muscat International Airport, Masirah Air Base, Port of Duqm, RAFO Thumrait Air Base, Salalah Port
Qatar	10,000	Camp As Sayliyah, Al Udeid Air Base
UAE	5,000	Fujairah Naval Base, Port of Jebel Ali, Al Dhafra Air Base

Table 3. US Main Military Facilities in the Gulf and Levant. Source: Own elaboration with information retrieved from Mathieu Wallin (2018), Reuters (2024) & Nicole Robinson (2024).

Considering the aforementioned and the fact that the air bases in Erbil and Balad, as well as Camp Buehring in Kuwait are barely 100 Km away from the Iranian border, the US is perceived as a *clear threat* by Iran not only because the American alleged imperialism and liberal model go against the Islamic revolutionary principles of Iran, but also because it meets the theoretical standards mentioned at the beginning of this point. First, there is an expressed visual hostility towards Iran, as the map clearly suggests. Second, the US and its agreements with Iran's neighbouring countries possess capabilities to inflict harm to the Islamic Republic from a geographical and technological perspective. Third, the sense of imminence is virtually perpetual, as it is logical in security dilemmas. However, this has been the *status quo* of the Gulf for the last decade, and hence it does not explain why Iran decided to reapproach diplomatically to Saudi Arabia specifically in 2023. The reason has to be with the *times horizon* of the threat and the *optimal policy* option that Iran could choose.

Clarity of an even larger threat increased in the late months of 2020, when Israel signed the Abraham Accords with two Sunni Arab monarchies: Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates. The fact that Israel was overcoming its historical enmity with the Arab world posed an even

larger threat to Iran. The most feared situation by Tehran would be the presence of Israeli military in the Gulf, either in the American 5th Fleet located in Bahrain or the gates of Hormuz guarded the UAE. Placing its F-35I *Adir* 150 Km away from the Zagros would grant Tel Aviv even more options to strike Iranian soil. Persian orography has historically diffculted attacks directed to its territory, but air strikes can overcome that advantage, especially considering the stealth capabilities of Israeli fifth generation fighters, which could strike Iran's nuclear facilities. However, clarity does not only come from this point. After the US had witnessed the Abraham Accords, the international community started becoming expectant towards Saudi Arabia. Were Riyadh to sign a normalization agreement with Tel Aviv, Iran could struggle to balance against them. It is true that Saudi Arabia acts as the centre of Islam and it currently constitutes the largest Arab power, and as such the Palestinians rely morally on the Sunni kingdom. But ironically both Israel and Saudi Arabia belong to the *status quo* powers of the Middle East, as Mehran Kamrava suggests.¹²¹ The friendship between Iran's largest rivals and enemies, namely, the United States, Israel, and the Gulf monarchies including Saudi Arabia could leave Iran hopeless. Any attempt to balance would turn desperate. Hence, having reached this point, the *times horizon* for a Saudi-Israel deal was uncertain, yet possible and feasibly imminent. That is why internal balancing was not enough for Iran. The situation required from further options, options that Iran could not afford without external balancing.

Since the 1990s the polarity of the system has been changing. Multipolarity has come with the rise of non-Western actors, where China performs a central role that challenges the United States' position as first global power. Even though China's relation with the Gulf states was hostile during the Cold War due their ties with Western powers, nowadays reality is rather different.¹²² The Belt and Road Initiative defines the Chinese-Gulf relations since 2013. After the Abraham Accords, Iran bet on external balancing by signing a 25-years strategic partnership with China. Under these new relations, China kept buying Iranian oil while the theocratic regime was still suffering the United States' sanctions. This helped the Persian economy in its efforts to diversify its clients. Furthermore, this purchase was charged with a huge symbolism. As representative of the Sino-Iranian strategic partnership Ali

¹²¹ Mehran Kamrava. "Hierarchy and Instability in the Middle East Regional Order", *International Studies Journal*, 14(4): 1-35 (2018).

¹²² Maryam Nawaz, Asif Amin, & Muhammad Faizan Asghar. "Iran-Saudi Arabia Rapprochement: A perspective of Neoclassical Realism," *Global International Relations Review*, VI (2023).

Shamkhani put it, Chinese diplomacy includes major efforts to build a sense of community, an idea that interestingly resembles Samuel Huntington's hypothesis of close Confucian-Islamic relations.¹²³

China is focused on developing its Belt and Road Initiative and the Gulf is located between East Asia and Europe, thus serving as a land and maritime connection with the old continent. It is obvious that Beijing necessitates a certain degree of stability so that connections and transactions can be made effectively. Investors could perceive less risk and help fostering the regional economic growth.¹²⁴ For example, the Houthi attacks perpetrated on Saudi and Emirati energy infrastructure in 2020 deteriorated the safety of maritime trade routes in Hormuz, Aden, Bab Al Mandeb, and the Red Sea, which constitute cornerstones in sea connections. This could explain the inclusion of the Security Cooperation Agreement of 2001 in the Saudi Iranian Peace Deal (the dependent variable), as it includes cooperation in the fields of maritime rescue, organized crime, drugs, money laundering, crime monitoring, exchange of information, and cooperation in territorial waters surveillance. It could be as well coherent to think that China did make a non-public demand in the peace deal, that no Iranian-backed Houthi attack should be perpetrated on Saudi or Emirati soil. As it will be remembered from the dependent variable analysis, IRGC officials have been supervising the latest rebel strikes in the Red Sea. It is suggested that the purpose of this is, among others, that Saudi Arabia and the UAE do not receive any attack. Keeping an eye on the relevance of the oil market, China would as well be interested in a higher coordination of oil prices,¹²⁵ a sector where a Saudi Iranian cooperation would turn beneficial. Also, considering that one of Iran's biggest concerns is the diversification of production methods and technology in its oil exploitation, a peace deal and potential coordination with Riyadh could help acquiring these goods in a future, as well as diminishing the risk of having its oil facilities getting attacked by its woes. China also supports Moscow's plan to develop a transit corridor that would help Russia get to the Indian Ocean, and consequently reaching global markets.¹²⁶

¹²³ Samuel P. Huntington. "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs, Summer, Vol. 72, No. 3*, pp. 22-49 (1993).

¹²⁴ Maryam Nawaz, Asif Amin, & Muhammad Faizan Asghar. "Iran-Saudi Arabia Rapprochement: A perspective of Neoclassical Realism," *Global International Relations Review, VI* (2023)..

¹²⁵ *Ibid*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

As well, China has been mediating several conflicts during the past decade. Xi Jinping's Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence include the policy of non-interference, and China states that peace must be accepted from the inside, and not imposed from the outside.¹²⁷ For this reason, for instance, it has claimed that the Afghan conflict must be "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned".¹²⁸ Still, Beijing knows that US's presence worldwide stems from hard power, with a big economic sanctions and military component. This characteristic becomes even more relevant in the Gulf as it has been seen in this thesis. For this reason, establishing a non-military foreign presence in a region where imperialism has been a reality could foster the civil opinion towards China. Some few examples are the attempts to soften the political transitions of Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, or Yemen, as well as maintaining mediatory talks with North Korea and the JCPOA as a member of the P5+1. The fact that the US appeared as a witness and possibly as a conflict mediator after the Abraham Accords could have awakened in Beijing the urge to achieve a similar triumph. The same way Washington managed to bring together the seemingly irreconcilable ties existing between Israel and some Arab states, China aimed at the other greatest confrontation in the region: Iran and Saudi Arabia. A diplomatic rapprochement between two states that had been fighting over regional hegemony through proxy wars and where sectarianism played a considerable role could level Washington's achievement. China could claim a diplomatic victory in the Global South.¹²⁹

In conclusion, China came as the plausibly sole alternative to Iran not to be asphyxiated by the US, Israel and Gulf monarchies ties. Whereas the US and Israel offer a *clear threat*, China appears as a *clear opportunity* as it meets the mentioned theoretical requirements. First, there is an evidenced improvement in Iran's capabilities, i.e., to be able to balance externally. Second, the Abraham bloc lacks political resolve to prevent China and Saudi Arabia to make the move. Third, a favourable balance of capabilities for Iran would not persist with just internal balancing. Besides appearing as a *clear opportunity*, approaching Saudi Arabia with the help of China basically constitutes the optimal policy. This is highly influenced by the strategic culture of the Islamic Republic, as it will be seen. Finally, the *times horizon* seemed imminent after the 2020 Abraham Accords, with the potential diplomatic rapprochement between Riyadh and Tel Aviv. Due to these three factors, it is

¹²⁷ Dale Aluf. "China as a Conflict Mediator: Interests, Influence, and Implications for the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," *Sino-Israel Global Network & Academic Leadership*, 2023.

¹²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 21.

¹²⁹ Maryam Nawaz, Asif Amin, & Muhammad Faizan Asghar. "Iran-Saudi Arabia Rapprochement: A perspective of Neoclassical Realism," *Global International Relations Review*, VI (2023).

concluded that the level of clarity for Iran is *high*. On the other hand, the nature of the strategic environment is concluded to be *restrictive*, as the imminence of the threat (a short-term times horizon) and its strength (the suffocation by American-Israeli-Arab intensified ties) are high too. However, this study argues that the restriction of the strategic environment is also delimited by the intervening variables.

Attending to the chart presented in the methodology section, the perception of systemic stimuli with a high level of clarity and a restrictive strategic environment usually grants more importance to Leader Images and Strategic Culture as intervening variables in the foreign policy decision making process.

3.3 Intervening Variables

3.3.1 Strategic Culture

Strategic culture is an intervening variable that influences the perception of systemic stimuli as well as the decision-making and policy implementation processes.¹³⁰ There are two main notions of strategic culture: organizational culture, such as the military as a bureaucratic organization; and entrenched beliefs, for example worldviews and shared expectations of society. Because the military is considered in the following point dedicated to *leader images*, this point will focus on the entrenched beliefs, moral, norms, and societal assumptions, paying close attention to the role of dominant ideologies and degrees of nationalism which clearly have a central position in Iran.

Iran constitutes an interesting actor to analyse its strategic culture and the shared expectations of society. This is obviously because its Islamic Republic holds a heavy ideological nature. When Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini started leading the new Iran, there were several principles that would govern both the reason to be and the foreign policy of the theocracy.

Stephen Jones proposes some principles that constitute Iran's dominant ideology in matter of foreign policy. These go aligned with the proper nature of the Islamic Republic. He argues that the first pillar is Iran's *historical experience*.¹³¹ If there is a quest that the Iranian society

¹³⁰ Paul D. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Relations* (Webcom: Oxford University Press, 2016), 58-79.

¹³¹ Stephen Jones. The Islamic Republic of Iran: An introduction. *Economic indicators*, 3(09), 2009.

has been focused on, that is autonomy and independence. It has modelled Iran's FP for years and even centuries. The Arab and Ottoman conquests of Iranian lands in the seventh and sixteenth centuries, both coming with the arrival of Sunni faith, largely shaped the feeling of Persian identity and independence.¹³² This could explain the resilience that Mehran Kamrava claims so much characterises the Iranian society.¹³³ This historical experience led to a strong feeling of *Persian nationalism* as a way of response.¹³⁴

Persian nationalism is thus not exactly a revolutionary value, but it so much represents the Iranian society that the clerical elite deemed it was necessary to foster unity in the post-revolutionary Iran. This Persian nationalism is therefore traditionally opposed to Arab and Ottoman/Turkish nationalism, and so it explains Kamrava's hierarchy of the Middle East, mentioned in the independent variable. This part of the strategic culture is linked to the independent variables and perception of systemic stimuli. Persian nationalism delimits the clarity of the threat, in so that it constitutes the prism from which the confrontation with Arab states and Israel, especially after the Abraham Accords, is perceived. However, the rivalry with Saudi Arabia and Israel as well has to be with their ties with Washington. The next pillar of Iran's strategic culture is *anti-imperialism*.

The Islamic Republic envisioned the world under a dichotomic perspective: oppressed and oppressors.¹³⁵ In fact, Iran referred to Saudi Arabia and Israel as examples to condemn Western imperialism and its regional client monarchies in the Middle East. This anti-imperialist perspective, again, further shapes the perception of clear threat of Israel, the US, and Saudi Arabia, which is even more coherent with the perception of threat after the establishment of American military facilities and bases, as well as the presence of Israel in the Gulf subsequent to the normalization ties with Bahrain and the UAE. This anti-imperialism was followed by *non-alignment*.

Let it be remembered that the Islamic Republic was born in the last stage of the Cold War, when the global system *a priori* supported either liberal democracy or communism. Nevertheless, Tehran implemented a policy of "neither East, nor West, but Islamic

¹³² Rouhollah Karegar Ramazani. "Iran's Foreign Policy: Independence, freedom and the Islamic Republic," *Ehteshami, A.; Zweiri, M., Iran's Foreign Policy: From Khatami to Ahmadinejad*, 1-16.

¹³³ Mehran Kamrava. *Righteous Politics. Politics and Resilience in Iran*. Cambridge University Press, 2013.

¹³⁴ Stephen Jones. The Islamic Republic of Iran: An introduction. *Economic indicators*, 3(09), 2009.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

Republic.”¹³⁶ This has turned into a “more East than West,” especially after the signature of the strategic partnership with China the year 2021. Contrary to what many authors could claim, non-alignment and anti-imperialism are not mutually exclusive, let alone contradictory. Non-alignment is perfectly coherent with an imperialist understanding of the Cold War superpower’s presence in the globe. A non-aligned FP designates that the state in question does not share any of the values that are confronted. Khomeini wanted to avoid the ideological vacuum existing between East and West, with the reminder that Islam was above any ideology and belonged to all humankind. The effect of this pillar is interesting. A non-alignment could *prima facie* permit a more restricted strategic environment. However, Iran’s shift to the East boosted as well by the socialist shades of the Islamic Republic do indeed restrict Iran’s lines of action and consequently its strategic environment. The fact that China offers a theoretically non-imperialist foreign power in the Gulf, contrary to Washington’s imperialist presence in the region, has further helped to forge a new strategic culture that shifts “more East than West.”¹³⁷

Strategic culture, thus, shapes the Iranian perception of the strategic environment. This is an important statement, for one of Neoclassical Realism’s goals is to understand to what extent independent and intervening variables shape a state’s foreign policy. In this case, it could be affirmed that the intervening variable of strategic culture in Iran is a primary modifier in its perception of the nature of the strategic environment, since the Islamic Republic’s strong worldviews delimit the range of options that Tehran disposes of, and thus the imminence and strength of threats and opportunities. The consequence is a more restricted strategic environment. But, if systemic stimuli delimit which intervening variables have more weight in the FP decision-making, and strategic culture as an intervening variable does shape the level of restriction of the systemic stimuli, the relation with between systemic and intervening variables is bidirectional: from one to another and vice versa.

Revolutionary Islam is the last pillar of Iran’s strategic culture.¹³⁸ Tehran was keen to pursue “Islamic objectives” in its foreign policy, paying close attention to the mentioned oppressed vs. oppressor dichotomic view of the world. Here, the Palestinian conflict represented the key question, leading Tehran to establish ties with Lebanese Hezbollah and Hamas, for

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ Richard W. Bulliet. “Iran between East and West.” *Journal of International Affairs*, 1-14 (2007).

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

instance, even though they do not share the same vision on Islam. Hamas follows Sunnism. Here again, strategic culture shaped Iran's external balancing: having Israel as a common enemy helped forging ties between Iran and Hamas, since Islamic objectives overcome the sectarian differences within religion. Still, understanding Iran, Hamas, and Hezbollah as revisionist actors on the one hand, and Israel as a *status quo* defender on the other, claim the primacy of systemic stimuli in the FP decision-making. Because one of the purposes of Neoclassical Realism is to conclude to what extent do the independent and intermediary variables influence the foreign policy decision-making, further study is suggested to understand to what extent Iran's enmity with Israel and ties with Hamas depend on systemic or intervening factors, regional hegemony or Islamic revolutionary principles.

All in all, Iran's strategic culture is guided by a set of pillars that, regardless of the mentioned change in non-alignment, are constant in the Islamic Republic. Persian nationalism, anti-imperialism, and revolutionary Islam further strengthen the reasons why Tehran perceives high levels of clarity and restrictiveness in the international arena, especially from the US-Israel-Saudi *threat*. On the other hand, anti-imperialism and the non-alignment strategy transformed in a "more East than West" worldview limit the range of foreign policy options for Tehran, subsequently restricting its strategic environment. It goes along with the China *opportunity*. This suggests that the correlation with perception of clarity and levels of restrictiveness is not unidirectional, but rather bidirectional: both the independent and intervening variables shape it. This is a critique to neorealism's structural determinism and reinforces NCR theory that intervening variables have the power to interpret systemic stimuli and guide the foreign policy.

3.3.2 Leader Images

Even though Iran's Islamic Republic has strong values, Tehran has shown a pragmatic behaviour in many moments, especially after the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). In the middle of the confrontation against Saddam Hussein, and just when Washington condemned Iran's ties with terrorist and Shia militia groups, Iran bought weapons and arsenal to the US using Israeli channels.¹³⁹ The event known as the Iran Contra Affair clearly delimited the ability

¹³⁹ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. *Iran-Contra Affair*. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Iran-Contra-Affair> (8 May 2024)

of Iran to act pragmatically while taking distance from the revolutionary principles if required, hence reinforcing structural realist ideas.

In this respect, *leader images* turn important. These refer to the set of intervening variables that “concern the beliefs or images or individual decision makers who sit at the helm of the state.”¹⁴⁰ These leaders constitute the foreign policy executive (FPE). The FPE usually possesses private information and holds the monopoly of intelligence, and it constitutes a critical actor in the FP decision making because it is the one *perceiving* systemic stimuli. As a result, personal values, beliefs, experience, and even personality can ultimately influence in the foreign policy decision-making process.

The foremost member of the Iranian FPE is, logically, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Among its many powers, Art. 110 of the Iranian constitution defines the following: determining the political direction of the government, declaring war and peace, assuming the command of the armed forces.¹⁴¹ It possesses the ultimate word in state matters, including FP. The Iranian Supreme Leader follows its predecessor Ruhollah Khomeini’s stance opposing the Western world, and any kind of rapprochement is perceived with doubt.¹⁴² Its core values consist of the Islamic principles of the 1979 revolution, among which anti-imperialism and negative conceptions of the West had a wide presence. As a matter of fact, Khamenei blamed the US on being an international agent of Zionism and creating Sunni extremist groups.¹⁴³ Of course, the Islamic Republic refused since the very first moment to recognise the Israeli state. In some way, Morten Køster suggests that the Ayatollah sought to export its Islamic governing principles to the neighbouring countries. This perfectly matches Kamrava’s decision to label Iran as a counter-hegemonic actor,¹⁴⁴ for it possess a threat to Saudi Arabia’s *status quo* realm.

Nevertheless, Khamenei has shown pragmatic stances, especially in the multilateral nuclear deal with the JCPOA. His speeches affirmed Iran’s compromise to meet the agreements,¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁰ Paul D. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Relations* (Webcom: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 58.

¹⁴¹ Iran Constitution. Art. 110.

¹⁴² Morten Køster, “Neoclassical Realism and the Contemporary Foreign Policy of Iran.” April 2019.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ Mehran Kamrava. “Hierarchy and Instability in the Middle East Regional Order”, *International Studies Journal*, 14(4): 1-35 (2018).

¹⁴⁵ Observed by Morten Køster, “Neoclassical Realism and the Contemporary Foreign Policy of Iran.” April 2019 in Sharam Akbarzadeh & Dara Conduit. “*Iran in the World: President Rouhani’s Foreign Policy.*” New York: Palgrave macmillan, 2016.

and this could be due to Mohammad Javad Zarif, in charge of Iran's nuclear programme. This suggests that, even though the Supreme Leader indeed has the last word on state matters, the role of the President and head of nuclear programme shape Khamenei's perception of systemic stimuli and following decision-making on FP.

At the moment of the rapprochement of Saudi Arabia, the Iranian presidency rested on Ebrahim Raisi. As M. Forough states it, Raisi's FP is characterised by a huge pragmatism, an idea that is coherent with the ideas gathered in the independent variable.¹⁴⁶ A pragmatic foreign policy is able to overcome ideological disputes and implement the necessary measures to develop a proper balancing, as Iran did accept to reapproach Saudi Arabia. Since *principalists* did control all three branches of power, internal disputes within the government waned, and Raisi strengthen the presidency and focus on its foremost matters. Raisi's pragmatism combined as well with revolutionary principles. That way, even though he followed Ayatollah Khamenei's postures, Raisi claimed that the nuclear deal would not constitute the sole focus of the foreign policy. In fact, he called the United States to immediately return to the deal and fulfil its obligations under the deal. He assured that Iran would interact with the world and employed the words "negotiations" and "national interests" several times in his speeches.¹⁴⁷ Raisi's election happened in 2021, one year after the Abraham Accords, and the same year the strategic partnership with China took place. It is thus understandable that pragmatism would guide its government in matters of FP. Betting on the nuclear programme seemed inefficient, for the imminence of a Saudi Israeli normalization agreement was as uncertain as probable. By increasing the uranium enrichment Saudi Arabia's most likely balancing strategy would most likely not be an rapprochement to the regime of Tehran without the consent of Washington. Systemic inputs, such as the levels of clarity and restrictiveness coming from the threats and opportunities of the Accords and China respectively are the primary force that led Raisi's stand. In this case, leader images do not seem to exercise much of an influence on the systemic stimuli's perception and foreign policy decision-making. However, Raisi stated that his first tasks would be getting rid of internal destabilizing factors before outside factors, such as corruption and mismanagement. A focus on internal matters could restrict the range of FP options, for risky policies would probably be discarded. An internal balancing based on

¹⁴⁶ Mohammadbagher Forough. "Raisi's Foreign Policy: Pragmatic Revolutionism and the Iranian Pivot to Asia." 2021.

¹⁴⁷ Ali Akbar Dareini. "Iran's Foreign Policy under Raisi." *Al Jazeera Center for Studies* (2021).

nuclear investment supposed to much of a risk for a presidency focused on internal affairs, and thus the range of options would lower to leave the FPE with the focus on less risky policies. On the other hand, this perspective could help further explain the decision to rapproach Saudi Arabia, for restoring diplomatic ties would help diminishing tensions and help Raisi focus on the internal affairs.

If there is a body in Iran that hold incredible power is the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, an institution in which the most-well known personality is that of Qaseem Solemaini, former commander of the IRGC's Quds Force, which reports directly to Ayatollah Khamenei.¹⁴⁸ Its high reputation granted him solid access to the Supreme Leader, and many claimed he was a *de facto* foreign minister, widely assumed to control Iran's FP in the Middle East. However, he was killed in January 2020 by a US drone strike over Baghdad's airport. The leadership of Quds Force was moved to Ismail Ghaani. His persona is suitable for the commandment of the IRGC since he had taken part in the Iran-Iraq War in the 80s. He is a war veteran who seems to share with Solemaini a strong ability of improvisation and reaction to unexpected stimuli.¹⁴⁹ He too has a deep experience on reconnaissance missions. However, he lacks his predecessor's charisma, and one of the reasons for this lies on his speeches, which use official governmental rhetoric, and the ideas he includes in his discourse are but a continuation of those of Soleimani.¹⁵⁰ Ismail Ghaani seems to lack initiative and his leadership tries to keep the norms that former commander Solemaini had built. For this reason, he does not seem to have performed a crucial role in the decision-making process to reapproach Saudi Arabia.

The case of Minister of Foreign Affairs Hossein Amir Abdollahian could be the most influenceable on the decision to approach Saudi Arabia. He saw religious differences within Islam as insignificant in order to properly combat Israel.¹⁵¹ He claimed in 2017 that "The Palestinian issue can be a common denominator for efforts by the Arab and Islamic world to assemble a unified strategy against the Zionist entity and against terror [or Israel]."¹⁵² As the observer suggests, Abdollahian's statement implies the existence of a non-common

¹⁴⁸ Morten Køster, "Neoclassical Realism and the Contemporary Foreign Policy of Iran." April 2019.

¹⁴⁹ Ali Alfoneh. *Esmail Qaani: The next Revolutionary Guards Quds Force Commander?* American Enterprise Institute (2022).

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ Usjid U. Hameed, "The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry: A Foreign Policy Analysis Approach," *Towson University Journal of International Affairs*, 50(2), 2017.

¹⁵² *Ibid*, p. 24.

denominator, namely sectarianism. The minister of foreign affairs accepted cooperating with Sunni groups in order to overthrow Israel. This could potentially explain, as well, Iran's ties with Hamas.

3.4 Partial Conclusions

The Islamic Republic of Iran agreed to reapproach the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia diplomatically. The pact included the implementation of the Security Cooperation Agreement of 2001, and a general agreement for cooperation, besides re-opening their respective embassies and a reminder to respect the sovereignty of states.

The reasons behind Tehran's decision come eminently from the perceived systemic stimuli, which are two: a threat with high levels of clarity; and an opportunity with high levels of clarity. The US and Israel and their ties with Arab Gulf monarchies resemble the *threat*. A continuation in this normalization process has the potential to include Saudi Arabia, and this could end Iran's possibilities to balance against the *status quo* states. The times horizon for a Saudi-Israel deal was uncertain, yet possible and feasible in the short term. Any attempt to balance internally would likely turn counterproductive. Thus, external balancing was required for Iran. China embodies the *opportunity* and constitutes such way to balance externally, as its role in the current multipolar system is the only alternative to challenge the post-Cold War US hegemony. Due to China's interests in the Gulf and how attractive it is to Riyadh, Iran could use it as a bridge to reach Saudi Arabia before the Abraham Accords bloc could.

For Iran, domestic factors further reinforce the decision to balance externally through China, but the main and foremost pulling force building the path to be followed is still constituted by systemic stimuli. The high clarity and restrictiveness of Iran's strategic environment suggests the following variables are relevant for Tehran's perception and foreign policy decision making. *Strategic Culture* shapes Iran's perception in so that it envisions the US and Israel as imperialist and clientelist actors that menace the Islamic Republic, as seen through the lens of anti-imperialism and revolutionary Islam. On the other hand, Tehran's policy of "more East than West" additionally limits the range of foreign policy options and shifts Tehran closer to Beijing. Interestingly, the case of Iran as a powerful ideological state suggests a bidirectional correlation between the clarity nature of the strategic environment, on the one hand, and the intervening variables, on the other. *Leader Images* is probably the

least relevant cluster in this investigation. The foreign policy executive was focused on internal affairs and was unstable due to the recent election of President Ebrahim Raisi as well as the assassination of Qasem Soleimani, Ismail Ghaani not performing a decisive role whatsoever.

4. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

4.1 Dependent Variables

The dependent variable for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the same as Iran's: the signature of the *Joint Trilateral Statement by the People's Republic of China, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the Islamic Republic of Iran* that was signed the 10th of March 2023.¹⁵³ Saudi Arabia's delegation was headed by Musaad bin Mohammed Al-Aiban, Minister of State, National Security Adviser, and member of the Council of Ministers. Riyadh, too, agreed:¹⁵⁴

1. To resume diplomatic relations and re-open their embassies and missions within a period not exceeding two months.
2. To respect the sovereignty of states and non-interference in internal affairs of states.
3. To hold meetings between their respective ministers of foreign affairs in order to implement the new agreements, arrange the return of ambassadors, and discuss means of enhancing bilateral relations.
4. To implement the Security Cooperation Agreement between them, signed the 17th of April 2001.
5. To implement the General Agreement for Cooperation in the fields of Economy, Trade, Investment, Technology, Science, Culture, Sports, and Youth, signed on 27th of May 1998.

¹⁵³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *Joint Trilateral Statement by the People's Republic of China, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the Islamic Republic of Iran*, March 10, 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/202303/t20230311_11039241.html#:~:text=The%20three%20countries%20announce%20that,and%20the%20agreement%20includes%20their

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.* However, the original document does not provide a numbered record of objectives to be achieved by the signatories. This thesis provides such a list to facilitate the analysis.

Indeed, Saudi Arabia re-opened its embassy in Tehran two months after Iran, in early August 2023.¹⁵⁵ This does not meet the two months threshold that had been established, but Iranian authorities claimed that this was due to the restoration works that the embassy was being given as a consequence of the 2016 protests.¹⁵⁶ Still, migration flows between both states could be restored. The most interesting consequences of the deal are related with Yemen, however.

As it was suggested in the previous point dedicated to Iran, the IRGC Quds Force was in Yemen supervising the Houthi attacks so as not to strike Saudi facilities. In fact, the rebels assisted in Riyadh to a five-day round of talks to reach a potential agreement with the Saudis to put an end to the conflict in Yemen.¹⁵⁷ The delegation that had come together with Omani mediators managed to agree with Saudi Arabia on a timeline for the withdrawal of foreign troops from the Yemeni territory. The compromise with the deal led Saudi Arabia not to join Operation Prosperity Guardian, launched by an international coalition commanded by the US against the Houthis, who had attacked ships in the Red Sea as a response to the Israel-Hamas war in December 2023.¹⁵⁸

Also, both cooperation agreements were restored, including all the mentioned areas they covered. Saudi Arabia acknowledged and expressed its gratitude too towards Iraq and Oman for their efforts to bring peace between both regional powers.

4.2 Independent Variables

4.2.1 Structural modifiers

Geography

Saudi Arabia encompasses four fifths of the Arabian Peninsula.¹⁵⁹ It borders with Jordan, Iraq, and Kuwait to the north, with the Gulf, Qatar, the UAE, and Oman to the east, with Yemen to the south, and with the Red Sea and Gulf of Aqaba to the west. All the actors and

¹⁵⁵ NEWS WIRES. "Saudi embassy resumes operations in Iran after seven years, state media reports." *France 24*, 9 August 2023.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ Al Jazeera. "Houthis leave Saudi Arabia after talks on potential Yemen ceasefire deal," *Al Jazeera*, 19 September 2023.

¹⁵⁸ Susan Stigant, "Houthi Attacks in the Red Sea Disrupt Global Supply Chains," *United States Institute of Peace*, 22 December 2023.

¹⁵⁹ Joshua Teitelbaum, William L. Ochsenwald, and Harry St. John Bridger Philby. "Saudi Arabia." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, July 20, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Saudi-Arabia>.

body waters that surround the kingdom are essentials to be considered in any regional analysis. It is located in Spykman's Rimland,¹⁶⁰ and it thus has been serving as a core ally for the United States since the Cold War, with the difference that it has not undergone any revolution. Saudi Arabia and the US have been maintaining more or less stable relations since the Twin Pillars policy was ideated.

The Saudi territory consists largely of a plateau, just as Iran, yet the kingdom is not surrounded by a rim of mountain chains.¹⁶¹ Quite the contrary, in fact. Elevated terrains rest on the western regions of the country, meaning that the eastern part of Saudi Arabia that faces the Gulf and Iran is exposed. Bahrain, the UAE and especially Qatar cannot act as buffer states due to its small size and, in the last case, due to its ties with Iran. Still, heights in the plateau oscillate between 1,200 and 3,000 metres.

The inland is covered by vast sand surfaces.¹⁶² Rub'Al Khali is the world's largest sand area, covering 647,600 square kilometres, dominating the southern regions of Saudi Arabia. It therefore hinders lines of communication in any incoming attack from the south. This becomes relevant especially against the Yemeni rebels. If it was not enough, another 57,000 square kilometres sand area, Al Nafud, covers the north-central part of the Saudi territory. Due to its condition as a peninsula and its vast sandy regions, Saudi Arabia does not constitute an optimal place to transport commerce from the south to the north with terrestrial lines of communications, such as highways or railways. Rather, as it is surrounded by two of the most geostrategic water bodies for world commerce, lines of communication, transport, and trade surround Saudi Arabia, which subsequently gives the Wahabi kingdom power to exercise control over them.

The Red Sea separates Saudi Arabia and Egypt along 1,930 Km and a maximum width of 300 Km.¹⁶³ It has two gates: the Suez Canal on the north, a pass to the Mediterranean Sea; and the Strait of Bab Al Mandeb on the south, which separates the Red Sea from the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. They both serve as the fastest maritime path connecting Europe

¹⁶⁰ Observed by Ahmad Naderi, "*The Shia Rimland Theory, State Rationality and the Role of Iran as a Regional Power*", 2015; in Nicholas Spykman, "*The Geography of Peace*" (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company).

¹⁶¹ Joshua Teitelbaum, William L. Ochsenwald, and Harry St. John Bridger Philby. "Saudi Arabia." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, July 20, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Saudi-Arabia>.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ William B. F. Ryan, & B. Charlotte Schreiber. "Red Sea." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, July 25, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Red-Sea>.

and Asia, the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean. The Suez Canal witnessed in the first half of 2022 64,000 net tons of trade commodities crossing its waters, a number that had been increasing since 2002 when commerce between Asia and Europe started increasing at higher rates.¹⁶⁴ This can be translated in US\$ 3.6 billion in revenues during the first half of the year.¹⁶⁵ Furthermore, 7.5 million oil barrels and 36 billion cubic meters of liquified natural gas (LNG), as well as 10% and 8% of global seaborne oil and gas trade passed through the Suez Canal in 2023.¹⁶⁶ On the other hand, Bab Al Mandeb separates the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. This implies that the Houthi Rebels can threaten the security of global commerce, obviously including oil trade destined to Europe. This is one of the reasons why the US's military facilities are located on the other side of the strait, in Djibouti.

However, these oil market numbers are irrisory compared to those in the Strait of Hormuz, where 20 million barrels a day pass.¹⁶⁷ This amounts to 30% of world oil trade, 70% of which is destined to Asia. Impressively, Saudi Arabia's oil exportations comprise virtually 35% of the total worldwide amount, a remarkable share considering that the rest of exporting countries are Iran, the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, or Iraq.¹⁶⁸

Thus, Saudi Arabia is surrounded by no less than three maritime *chokepoints*, retrieving Alfred T. Mahan's terminology.¹⁶⁹ The Suez Canal and the straits of Hormuz and Bab Al Mandeb are not only important for trade. An intended Iranian-Houthi blockade of Hormuz and Bab Al Mandeb could threaten global oil and LNG trade, as well as Saudi Arabia's maritime lines of communication. Although unlikely, it is quite interesting to further think about a Hamas retaliation against a Saudi Israeli normalization pact. Even though they share a Sunni interpretation of Islam, Hamas' ties with Iran could potentially aim to an extreme blockade of Suez. This is absolutely unlikely to happen due to the lack of means to properly

¹⁶⁴ Suez Canal Authority. "Navigation Statistics." *Suez Canal Authority*. (n. d.). Retrieved from: <https://www.suezcanal.gov.eg/English/Pages/default.aspx>

¹⁶⁵ State Information Service. "Suez Canal." *State Information Service of the Arab Republic of Egypt* (n. d.). Retrieved from: <https://www.sis.gov.eg/Story/171459/Suez-Canal?lang=en-us>

¹⁶⁶ IEA. "Suez Canal. Factsheet." *International Energy Agency* (2023).

¹⁶⁷ IEA. "Strait of Hormuz. Factsheet." *International Energy Agency* (2023).

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ Alfred T. Mahan. *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History: 1660-1783*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company (1890).

make it possible and the expected response of the international community. Yet, it serves to illustrate one of Saudi Arabia's most latent weaknesses.

And regarding those, Saudi Arabia's greatest asset is as well its greatest weakness: petrol oil. It harbours one fifth of world's known oil reserves, located beneath the Gulf's waters and Rub Al Khali desert.¹⁷⁰ Oil establishes as the major industry for the Saudi state, but at the same time it constitutes a non-renewable source of energy. This means that Saudi Arabia must look forward an economy diversification. In fact, one of the main sectors that Riyadh is investing in is nuclear energy. Even though it has signed contracts with diverse states, the kingdom has a main inconvenient in this regard: there are not suitable places in the Saudi territory to construct nuclear facilities.¹⁷¹ An observer stated that "indicators of potential volcanic activity exist along the Red Sea's coast" and that "the Gulf coast is "quite unstable seismically."¹⁷² This is a major drawback for Saudi Arabia's most desired energy sector.

Rate of technological diffusion and the offense-defence balance

When Joe Biden took administration in 2021, the new presidency suspended all conflict-related military assistance to Saudi Arabia while he pointed out the importance to end the disputes through negotiation.¹⁷³ This decision happened months after the Abraham Accords, probably as a way to make a difference with respect to Trump's tense programs in the MENA region including the establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and Morocco.¹⁷⁴ Meanwhile, the Houthi rebels demonstrated a qualitative improvement in its military capabilities, especially missile and uninhabited aerial vehicles (UAVs) that made it possible to strike on Saudi soil. These new facilities resembled an inflow of Iranian goods. Parallely, Saudi Arabia had been undergoing a modernization of its maritime forces between 2018 and 2020, ordering *Avante* 2200 frigates from Spain, HIS-32 patrol crafts from France, and Multi-Mission Surface Combatant frigates from the US.¹⁷⁵ This does indeed help keeping

¹⁷⁰ Joshua Teitelbaum, William L. Ochsenwald, and Harry St. John Bridger Philby. "Saudi Arabia." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, July 20, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Saudi-Arabia>.

¹⁷¹ Lauren Sukin. "Beyond Iran: Containing Nuclear Development in the Middle East." *The Nonproliferation Review*, 22(3-4), 379-400, (2015).

¹⁷² *Ibid*, p. 384.

¹⁷³ IISS, "The Military Balance 2022", *International Institute of Strategic Studies*, 2022.

¹⁷⁴ Philip H. Gordon. "What Morocco's Agreement With Israel Means for the Wider Middle East." *Council on Foreign Relations*, 11 December 2020.

¹⁷⁵ IISS, "The Military Balance 2022", *International Institute of Strategic Studies*, 2022..

secure the strategic body waters that Saudi Arabia has access to. It as well helps meeting with the Security Cooperation Agreement of 2001 standards agreed on the JTS.

Saudi Arabia has been undergoing a modernization of its armed forces following the 2030 Vision.¹⁷⁶ The way, through the localization of Saudi defence industries. From 2024 onwards, Saudi Arabia would no longer ease contracts to foreign firms without regional headquarters based in the kingdom. This would grant the KSA a reduction of its defence expenses and a diversification of the economy that is necessary, as explained in the geographical analysis.

Saudi Arabia's armed forces are among the most well equipped in the region. Its air force fighters have F-15 *Eagle* and even three squadrons of *Typhoons*, showing more modern capabilities than Iran, yet less than Israel. Now, even though they are more modern, Saudi Arabia's armed forces are less in number than Iran's.¹⁷⁷ Saudi Arabia's Army consists of 75,000 units, whereas Iran's amounts to 130,000, and this number increases to 350,000 if conscripts are included. The Saudi Navy has 13,500 units, whereas the Iranian has 18,000. The air force numbers are 20,000 against 37,000, respectively. However, there is a field where Saudi Arabia has a quantitative and qualitative superiority against Iran: air defences. This could be explained considering Iran's investment in land-attack cruise missiles that have as well been imported by the Houthis, such as the *Quds-1* and *Quds-2*, which have a range of 700 and 210 Km range extension respectively. This is more than enough to strike Saudi and Emirati soil, especially for the Yemeni rebels, who actually managed to attack these two states effectively.

Saudi Arabia Military Industries (SAMI) signed an agreement with Lockheed Martin to establish a joint venture.¹⁷⁸ The new-born company would facilitate technology and knowledge, and SAMI would own 51% of the total shares. Also, the Saudi company would collaborate with the Emirati state-owned defence conglomerate, EDGE, to collaborate in the manufacture of armoured personnel carriers NIMR's Jais 4x4.¹⁷⁹ These constitute but a few

¹⁷⁶ Vision 2030, G. Government of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Government (2016). Retrieved from: <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/>

¹⁷⁷ IISS, "The Military Balance 2022", *International Institute of Strategic Studies*, 2022.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

examples that resemble that the offense-defence balance between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The former has less quantitative advantage, yet it enjoys a larger qualitative lead over the latter.

On the other hand, a Saudi nuclear programme has been a matter of discussion during the last decade. By 2015, the kingdom had already signed nuclear cooperation agreements with powers such as France, the US, Russia and China, among other states.¹⁸⁰ This constitutes a way to diversify the Saudi economy, with the consequent decrease in unemployment and increase the average wages. However, the deals do not provide Saudi Arabia with uranium enrichment technology, factor that lowers the proliferation risk.¹⁸¹ Still, Riyadh signed the NPT, and it has not shown anomalous behaviour in the nuclear sector regardless of its interest to diversify its energetic resources. It is not either subject to regular inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) thanks to the Small Quantities Protocol.¹⁸² This implies *per se* that Saudi Arabia possesses “less than the specified minimal quantities of nuclear material and no nuclear material in facility.”¹⁸³ Moreover, seismic activity risks the construction of nuclear plants in determined areas of the territory. The regions that have been chosen to harbour nuclear facilities lack water resources, a key component for its role is to cool the reactors. The only available option for Riyadh to properly construct a nuclear-powered energy sector is, hence, to pump in sea water. That is why Riyadh is investing in desalinization technology as part of its nuclear plant.

It can be concluded that even though the Saud family is committed to a diversification of its energy sector, its advances in the market include no interest in developing nuclear weapons in the short or medium term, a decision that is further reinforced by Washington’s commitment with the security of the kingdom. Thus, it is rather unlikely that it contributes to the security dilemma with Iran.

4.2.2 Clarity and Nature of the Strategic Environment

Saudi Arabia did not experience any revolution that threatened its ties with the US during the Cold War, as it indeed happened with Iran. After the United Kingdom had retrieved in

¹⁸⁰ Noura Mansouri. “The Saudi Nuclear Energy Research.” *Commentary. King Abdullah Petroleum Studies and Research Center* (2020).

¹⁸¹ Lauren Sukin. “Beyond Iran: Containing Nuclear Development in the Middle East.” *The Nonproliferation Review*, 22(3-4), 379-400, (2015).

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ IAEA Safeguards Glossary 2001 Edition, paragraph 1.23

1971 from the Gulf,¹⁸⁴ the US sought to fulfil that vacuum of power before the Soviet Union as a continuation of its containment policy. Thus, relations between Washington and Riyadh have persisted until today. For instance, Saudi Arabia offered its territory to the US-led international coalition against Saddam Hussein's Iraq during the Gulf War in 1990-1991 so as to stage operations, even if the latter posed a threat to the recently established Iranian regime as well.¹⁸⁵ As it was explained, Washington has been granting security to Saudi Arabia especially against Iran since the last two decades of the last century, yet its relations have deteriorated due to changes in polarity and decision making coming from Saudi state. These are but two of the following reasons that have influenced Riyadh to accept a diplomatic and security rapprochement with the Islamic Republic of Iran with the help of People's Republic of China in March 2023. The independent variables for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia resemble two main dimensions: economy and security.

Saudi Arabia's current foreign policy cannot be understood without taking in consideration the *Saudi Vision 2030*, a strategic framework issued in April 2016 that pretends to reduce the kingdom's dependence on oil and diversify its economy fostering sectors such as health, education, tourism and infrastructure, among others.¹⁸⁶ This framework hence constitutes the first prism that shapes Riyadh's perceptions of systemic stimuli. It has three pillars. First, Saudi Arabia aims at becoming the heart of both the Arab and Islamic worlds. Second, it is encouraged to become a global investment powerhouse. Third, being aware of its unique location between three continents, Saudi Arabia wants to transform this strategic location on the map into a global hub connecting Europe, Asia, and Africa to act as an epicentre of trade. To meet these three pillars, some policies focus on Saudi Aramco transforming from an oil company into a global industrial conglomerate, or the Public Investment Fund into the "world's largest sovereign wealth fund."¹⁸⁷

Quite interestingly, the first pillar that pretends to position Saudi Arabia as the core of the Islamic world could be understood as a challenge to Iran. Let it be remembered that, in fact, the Saudi Vision 2030 was announced only three months after Riyadh had broken its

¹⁸⁴ Esra Çavuşoğlu, "The Securitization of the Persian Gulf and its Changing Dynamics", *Uluslararası İlişkiler ve Politika Dergisi*, 3(2).

¹⁸⁵ Daryl G. Press. "The Myth of Air Power in the Persian Gulf War and the Future of Warfare." In *Warfare in the Middle East since 1945*. Routledge, 309-348 (2017).

¹⁸⁶ Vision 2030, G. Government of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Government (2016). Retrieved from: <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/>

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid*, "Leadership message."

diplomatic ties with Iran, and sectarianism has been constituting an important dimension in this rivalry. Polish author Ryszard Kapuściński narrates how Persians embraced Shia Islam as a way of opposition against the Arabs, and such competition persists until today.¹⁸⁸ As it has been explained, one of the FP goals of the Islamic Republic was to export and spread its revolutionary model in the Arab world, including its vision on religion. However, Khomeini's desired domino effect failed, and the Arab states did not incur into any Islamic revolution.¹⁸⁹ However, as Gause III puts it, sectarian focused analysis can incur in oversimplifications. In this case, the author warns that understanding the Saudi Iranian confrontations under a sectarian perspective can make the reader to misunderstand the actual motivations behind Riyadh and Tehran to win the zero-sum game. He stresses that sectarianism is one among many tools in an actual balance of power game. However, the Saudi state is built on the basis of the agreement with the Wahabi family, and the kingdom is the "land of the Two Holy Mosques, the most sacred sites on Earth, and the direction of the Kaaba (Qibla) [...]."¹⁹⁰ It is logical that religion constitutes the first pillar of the Saudi Vision 2030. Still, regardless of the interpretation of Islam, these places are sacred for every Muslim. It is, hence, a common point for the civil societies of both Saudi Arabia and Iran, and it could therefore explain why reopening the Saudi embassy in Iran was expected to take place in June, prior to the pilgrimage for the Hajj.

Islam is common for both Saudis and Iranians, and even though their respective official interpretations of the religion disagree in several matters, they obviously share core principles. Sectarianism is not the driving force of Saudi and Iranian respective foreign policies, as Gause III explains, but it for sure constitutes the main component of the political rhetoric when it comes to the relations between these rivals. In conclusion, Islam, traditionally a confronting factor, is now used as the first bridge to gather the Saudi and Iranian societies, as Riyadh has the means to provide it. This reminds to Samuel Huntington's Islamic civilization, which interestingly, the author argued, was expected to

¹⁸⁸ Ryszard Kapuściński. *El Sha o la desmesura del poder*. Spain: 1987.

¹⁸⁹ F. Gregory Gause III. "Beyond Sectarianism. The New Middle East Cold War." *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper*, 11, July 2014.

¹⁹⁰ Vision 2030, G. Government of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Government (2016). Retrieved from: <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/>: "Leadership Message".

develop and deepen its ties with the Confucian civilization,¹⁹¹ a point that reminds to the Joint Trilateral Statement.

The second pillar is based on a diversification of the Saudi economic sectors. This is a core point, for it illustrates probably the Saudi Arabia's main attractive to the international community: petroleum oil. The kingdom harbours 17% of the world's proven oil reserves,¹⁹² which in 2020 amounted to 40 billion metric tons thus constituting the second largest in the world.¹⁹³ This is translated in, for example, a yearly net income in 2022 of US\$ 161.1 billion by Saudi Aramco, foremost actor in the Saudi oil market.¹⁹⁴ Owning such immense quantities of valuable natural resources is definitely an advantage and it can place the state in question in a privileged position within the international arena. But it can definitely lead to an overreliance on them. 74% of Saudi Arabia's exports belonged to the hydrocarbons sectors,¹⁹⁵ and petrol oil has a due date taking place sooner or later. This constitutes the *times horizon* for a threat that does come from a structural modifier. Furthermore, this *times horizon* shrank after COVID-19 pandemic, when oil prices fell below records, yet the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 stretched the revenues again. This proves how *times horizon*, a crucial factor in the FPE perceptions and any NCR analysis can be subject to constant fluctuations if the conditioning criteria make it that way. This can incur in problems of perception for the foreign policy executive, and consequently in the state underbalancing or overbalancing. Thus, it is coherent with the Neoclassical Realist critical statement that systemic stimuli can turn blurred.

Diversifying its economy is an imperative for Riyadh, and the Saudi Vision 2030 is a way forward. Yet, the presence of the US, which had been constituting Saudi Arabia's closest foreign partner since the Cold War, has been waning throughout the last decade. For instance, the US imported in 2022 crude oil valued in US\$ 16.6 billion, and refined petroleum valued in US\$ 4.7 billion.¹⁹⁶ This is the result of a longstanding relationship

¹⁹¹ Samuel P. Huntington. "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs, Summer, Vol. 72, No. 3*, pp. 22-49 (1993).

¹⁹² International Trade Administration, "Oil & Gas Petrochemicals: Saudi Arabia Country Commercial Guide", ITA (2024).

¹⁹³ Statista. "Proved oil reserves in Saudi Arabia from 1990 to 2020", *Statista Research Department*, 15 December 2023.

¹⁹⁴ International Trade Administration, "Oil & Gas Petrochemicals: Saudi Arabia Country Commercial Guide", ITA (2024).

¹⁹⁵ Anna Jacobs. "Understanding Saudi Arabia's Recalibrated Foreign Policy." *International Crisis Group*, 14 September 2023.

¹⁹⁶ OEC. "United States/Saudi Arabia", *The Observatory of Economic Complexity*,

between Washington and Riyadh. In fact, during the last five years the exports of KSA to the US increased at an annual rate of 17.6%, from US\$ 8.86 billion in 2017 to US\$ 19.9 billion in 2022. Nonetheless, these are absolute numbers. In relative terms, the share of exportations dedicated to the United States has been diminishing clearing up the way to other international actors.

In 2013, 14.1% of Saudi exports were destined to the United States, the second largest share made up by China with 13.4%.¹⁹⁷ However, in 2022, 16.2% of Saudi exports were destined to China, whereas the US held the fifth position with only 5.7%. India, Japan, and South Korea surpassed Washington. It is therefore logical that Riyadh's interests in partnering with China have been increasing quite considerably during the last years. But China is encouraged to cooperate with Saudi Arabia not only in the oil market, but also in the sectors mentioned in the Saudi Vision 2030, something that Washington has not offered, and this is crucial for Riyadh.

China follows a non-alliance policy since 1982.¹⁹⁸ Instead, it follows a strategic partnership diplomacy that permits Beijing building ties without the idiosyncratic formal commitments an alliance includes. This offers China the opportunity to be present in states or regions where other partners would not, hence the ability to forge strategic partnerships with both Iran and Saudi Arabia in 2016. The Sino-Saudi relations, as it has been explained, are key for Riyadh they are expected to foster the economic diversification that Riyadh is pursuing to escape its overdependence on oil. China's investments in Saudi Arabia between 2013 and 2019 consisted of a 33% destined to the energy sector, 20% to utilities, 19% to the transports market, 18% to real estate, 5% to chemicals, and 1% to agriculture.¹⁹⁹ But just after Beijing had brokered the Saudi Iranian rapprochement, a summit in Riyadh concluded a US\$ 10 billion investment in renewables energies, mining, healthcare, tourism, and technology.²⁰⁰ These sectors are core in the 2030 Vision. *Exempli gratia*, one of the strategy's most widely known projects is NEOM, a smart city to be constructed near the Red Sea. China won a contract to build a 28 Km long high-speed rail tunnel to connect the city. The General

¹⁹⁷ Joshua Teitelbaum, William L. Ochsenwald, and Harry St. John Bridger Philby. "Saudi Arabia." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, July 20, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Saudi-Arabia>.

¹⁹⁸ Jonathan Fulton. "Strangers to Strategic Partners: Thirty Years of Sino-Saudi Relations." *Atlantic Council* (2020).

¹⁹⁹ The 4% resting catalogued as "other sectors".

²⁰⁰ Nik Martin. "China's economic ambitions a huge draw for Saudi Arabia." *Deutsche Welle*, 13 June 2023.

Agreement for Cooperation in the fields of Economy, Trade, Investment, Technology, Science, Culture, Sports, and Youth of 1998 included in the dependent variable (Joint Trilateral Statement) is a way for KSA and Iran to diversify their respective economies. Therefore, China comes again as a *clear opportunity*, as the main propeller to diversify Saudi Arabia's economy. But this petrol oil matter includes a deeper geoeconomic variable: the petrodollar.

In 1974, Saudi Arabia and other oil producers agreed to accept the US dollar as the currency to measure oil sales.²⁰¹ This is largely because the US dollar has been the dominant reserve currency since 1944, when the Breton Woods agreement took place. Its currency has been deemed to be safe thanks to its economic and financial stability, political stability, and liquidity, as suggested by Berger & Chaboud, Choi & Cook, and Eichengreen & Mathienson respectively.²⁰² All these characteristics make the US dollar a strong currency during market stresses. Such is the reason why oil export revenues are denominated in US dollars.

Now, the developments in the global oil market have been hazardous, creating concerns for Washington. For instance, the shock caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which proved the interconnections and dependence in international economies and markets, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, where Western states' sanctions had a combining effect on the international monetary system, or even the Chinese intentions to annex Taiwan, all of them led to many economies to be affected, and many states to support a de-dollarization. The China Securities and Regulatory Commission announced that oil contracts commencing on March 2022, one year previous to the Saudi Iranian rapprochement, would be denominated not in US dollars but rather Chinese Yuan, thus giving the term *petroyuan*.²⁰³ In fact, Saudi Arabia expressed its willingness to accept payments from oil purchases in Chinese currency. Besides the economic implications that this might have, the decision is charged with a huge symbolism, resembling how Riyadh is shifting to China.

²⁰¹ David A. Hughes. "The End of US petrodollar Hegemony?", 2018.

²⁰² Observed by Wagdi, Akram Elnahraway, & Atef Fathi. "Petrodollar and De-dollarization: A survey from OAPEC countries", *International Scientific and Practical Conference "Priority Directions of Complex Socio-Economic Development of the Region" (PDSED 2023)*, Section: *Foreign Experience of Integrated Socio-econom*, November 2023.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

Following its desire to diversify its economy, one of Saudi Arabia's goals for 2030 is to provide its army with the best possible equipment.²⁰⁴ After the Abraham Accords had taken place, Saudi Arabia decided not to accept less than what it had been pledged to Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates for normalizing relations with Israel.²⁰⁵ In fact, during Donald Trump's presidency the US approved Saudi purchases of more advanced defence systems, such as Terminal High Altitude Area Missiles (THAAD) systems, helicopters, or Littoral Combat Ships, probably trying to clear the path for an Israeli Saudi normalization agreement. But the reality is that the US has been showing a reticent attitude to keep maintaining Saudi Arabia safe. For example, the Washington removed advanced missile defence systems while the kingdom was facing Houthi air strikes, and there was no response whatsoever against the attacks on Saudi oil facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais in 2019.²⁰⁶ Biden sold exceptionally more advanced air-to-air missiles and spare parts of armoured vehicles after some Houthi strikes.²⁰⁷ But this does not reach the same qualitative value as the F-35 and MQ-9 *Reaper* drones that Trump had offered to Abu Dhabi whatsoever.²⁰⁸

Overall, the United States has been more reluctant to provide the Saudi kingdom with defence capabilities. A seemingly *sine qua non* condition for the purchase of advanced defence systems is the establishment of normalization ties with Tel Aviv. Considering the consequences of a normalization pact between Tel Aviv and Riyadh not only in the Muslim and Arab societies but the international community as a whole, Saudi Arabia started looking to diversify its partners, thus explaining further ties with China in the sector. As an observer puts it, Chinese arms sales to Saudi Arabia are a result of the kingdom not being able to purchase its preferred equipment from Washington.²⁰⁹ But this is not completely true. If it is studied that Chinese arms sales to Saudi Arabia during the increase of tensions with Iran between 2016 and 2020 soared 400%, it is evident that the decrease of US security and the increase of Chinese security agreements are not equal. Some of the contracts include the purchase of Chinese Wing Long II drones, as well as a plan to design and construct drones

²⁰⁴ Vision 2030, G. Government of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Government (2016). Retrieved from: <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/>

²⁰⁵ Grant Rumley. "Israel Normalization Negotiations and the U.S.-Saudi Defense Relationship." *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 23 September 2023.

²⁰⁶ Layla Ali. "Saudi Arabia Developing a Partnership with China." *Gulf Research Centre*, 18 October 2022.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁸ Alexander Bertschi Wrigley & Thomas Abramson. "UAE Arms Sales Survive Senate Vote." *Arms Control Association*, January/February 2021.

²⁰⁹ Jonathan Fulton. "Strangers to Strategic Partners: Thirty Years of Sino-Saudi Relations." *Atlantic Council* (2020).

in the kingdom.²¹⁰ This helps another plan included in the Saudi Vision 2030. Riyadh pretends to improve qualitatively its army by manufacturing itself at least 50% of its military needs. By doing so, it would additionally create job positions and keeping resources within the Saudi territory and economy.

China is aware that it is still not capable of replace the US as the main security provider in the region. Beijing does not convey strong deterrence stimuli to expand its security in the Gulf, it does simply not have the naval power that the US has in the region, and its defence capacities do not match yet the threshold required to become a critical security partner as Washington is.²¹¹ Even though there might be a slight revisionism consequence of the US's interest in East Asia and the Pacific, there is *no expressed hostility* to harm the territorial integrity or core interests of Saudi Arabia. One may perhaps argue that this could be interpreted as a *tacit* hostility, but following the theoretical framework provided by Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro, in order a threat to be *clear* there needs to be an expressed intention as well as a sense of imminence, something that the Washington's apparent reticence lacks. Thus, there is no conclusion stating that the United State's less involvement in the Gulf constitutes a threat with high levels of clarity for Saudi Arabia.

But Beijing is not that interested in being the main provider of security to Riyadh. Its ascension to become the first world power requires from an economic effort that entails a wide variety of investments. Focusing only on the security realm bearing in mind how strong Washington's presence still is would be an error. China is playing its cards properly and Riyadh looks at the East with curious interest.

Saudi Arabia is thus combining internal and external balancing to avoid a gap in its security and economy. On the one hand, Saudi Vision 2030 redirects the military industry and resources within its borders as a way of economic diversification and an increase in military production and capabilities. On the other hand, it has signed agreements with China to help commit these goals. Whereas in the case of Iran internal balancing seemed to be quite difficult, Saudi Arabia's economy makes it feasible for the kingdom to combine both external and internal balancing.

²¹⁰ Layla Ali. "Saudi Arabia Developing a Partnership with China." *Gulf Research Centre*, 18 October 2022.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

Still, one of China’s great concerns is the instability that can lead investors reticent to get involved in the region. The Security Cooperation Agreement of 2001 included in the JTS is a step further in the stabilization of the Gulf and its surroundings, and subsequently China’s routes to Africa and Europe. As it was mentioned, Saudi Arabia does not only own incredible oil reserves, but its peninsular nature between the Gulf and the Red Sea makes it a key factor in the world’s foremost trade routes. The Strait of Hormuz has traditionally constituted the world’s largest chokepoint in terms of million oil barrels per day (mbd). However, China, Japan, and South Korea are now the primary importers of Saudi hydrocarbons. This can be observed in the volume of oil barrels that pass through the Strait of Malacca, which serves as the gates of East Asia. As of 2023, when the JTS took place, 23.7 mbd were crossing Malacca, and 20.9 mbd passed through Hormuz.²¹² Considering that the third position is held by Suez and the SUMED Pipeline with 8.8 mbd, the figures expose how the Gulf oil is being diverted to the far East, especially China. It is thus crucial that stability is maintained in the region. For more information on oil trade, see table below.

Location	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Strait of Malacca	23.1	22.8	21.9	22.9	23.7
Strait of Hormuz	20.0	18.4	19.0	21.1	20.9
Suez Canal and SUMED Pipeline	6.2	5.3	5.1	7.3	8.8
Bab Al Mandeb	6.0	5.2	5.4	7.5	8.6
Danish Straits*	3.4	3.1	3.1	4.2	4.9
Turkish Straits (Dardanelles)	3.5	3.3	3.4	3.2	3.4
Panama Canal**	1.5	1.7	1.8	2.1	2.1
Cape of Good Hope	7.5	7.7	7.0	5.9	6.0
World Maritime Oil Trade	78.2	73.0	74.3	76.2	77.5
World Total Oil Supply	100.9	91.6	97.6	99.9	101.9

Table 4. Volume of crude oil and petroleum liquids transported through world chokepoints and the Cape of Good Hope, 2019–2023 (million barrels per day). Source: own elaboration with information retrieved from EIA, June 2024.

*The Danish Straits do not include flows through the Kiel Canal.

**Data for the Panama Canal are by fiscal year (October 1 to September 30).

It is interesting to note the effects of both the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2020 and 2022 with a decrease and an increase in the figures. Still, Bab Al Mandeb is a previous step to cross Suez and an entry into Africa, and it can be appreciated in the table. Both Europe and Africa are of interest to Beijing in its path to become the world’s first power. It is necessary for China to arrive at its neighbouring continents and

²¹² US Energy Information Administration. “Country Analysis Brief: World Oil Transit Chokepoints.” *US Department of Energy*, 25 June 2024.

make sure that the pass of Bab Al Mandeb, largely vulnerable to Houthi presence, is safe. If the respect for sovereignty mentioned in the JTS is an indirect way to reduce tensions in Bab Al Mandeb, then China will not only be able to contribute to stabilize the region and encourage new investments. It would as well fill the holes and gaps in Saudi security and defence left by the US.

All in all, the main systemic stimulus driving Saudi Arabia to reapproach Iran is China, understood in this analysis as a *clear opportunity*. First off, there is evidence of improving capabilities, which in this case is a crucial diversification of the Saudi economic sectors. Second, because it is not an alliance *eo ipso* but rather a comprehensive strategic partnership, there is evidence that other consequential parties, such as the US, lack the political resolve to resist the rapprochement. Third, there is a favourable balance of capabilities that will not persist indefinitely, the oil reliant Saudi economy. On the other hand, the information on the *times horizon* is fluctuating. The international oil market, which is Saudi Arabia's main concern, experienced during the years prior to the rapprochement with Iran dynamic shocks that have altered the times horizon, the two most important being the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Finally, the range of options for Saudi Arabia is wider than for Iran. This is due to the absence of an imminent threat with high levels of clarity as the Islamic Republic has perceived, with the Abraham Accords. As for Saudi Arabia, there seems to be standing an optimal policy: a diversification of the economy that Beijing can foster. Saudi Arabia's strategic environment is as narrow as the life expectancy of the oil market, such is its reliance on it. Considering that such horizon will take in a medium term, it is difficult to conclude whether the nature of the strategic environment for Riyadh presents itself as *restrictive* or *permissive*. Nevertheless, the absence of a *clear threat* as imminent as Iran's could invite the research to conclude a *permissive* strategic environment.

Now, this study argues that that clusters of intervening variables suggested in Table 1 are not accurate in this case, namely, strategic culture, state-society relations, and domestic institutions.

Were the strategic environment *permissive* or *restrictive*, Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro argue that with a high level of *clarity*, the cluster for *strategic culture* would matter in the foreign policy decision making of a state. However, Saudi Arabia's strategic culture has been experiencing a change, a shift from its traditional partners to new partners, changing the

“shared expectations of society as a whole” that this cluster largely consists of²¹³. Consequently, it is considered not to be a decisive intervening variable. Instead, bearing in mind how bin Salman holds *de facto* Saudi Arabia’s decision making to a large extent, the variables for *leader images* will be chosen. Besides, *state-society relations* do as well matter in the rentier systems of the Gulf monarchies. Considering that *permissive* strategic environments foster the role of this cluster it will be as well chosen for the analysis. Finally, taking into account that the state-society relations and institutions are built on the same bases, namely the petrol oil economy and tribalism, both clusters will be analysed jointly.

4.3 Intervening Variables

4.3.1 Leader Images

Saudi Arabia is a monarchy governed by Al Saud family, which gained power after establishing ties with the Wahabis. Hence, the main foreign policy executive actor would be the king, in this case Salman bin Abdulaziz. However, it is widely known that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is *de facto* ruling the Saudi state apparatus. The current Crown Prince, namely the second in line to the throne who is appointed by the king itself, serves as well as Prime Minister, and he is known for being in charge of Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy, characterised by its initiative and determination.²¹⁴

Bin Salman has traditionally been interested in the government from a very young age and has been conscious about his status and image.²¹⁵ In 2015, he was appointed Defence Minister by King Abdullah until 2022. He thus held the charge during the bloodiest years of the Yemeni war, including the deployment of Operation Decisive Storm. When he became Crown Prince in July 2017, ties with Iran had already been broken, but he did set since the beginning very solid objectives. For instance, the young leader did not hesitate to blockade its neighbour Qatar for three years, a moment he used to redirect Saudi Arabia’s economic efforts away from its Gulf partners. Additionally, he has been in charge of Aramco as well.

²¹³ Paul D. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Relations* (Webcom: Oxford University Press, 2016): p. 66.

²¹⁴ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Mohammed bin Salman." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, July 28, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mohammed-bin-Salman>.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Following its strong initiatives, he launched Saudi Vision 2030, which among other plans pretends to foment both religious and non-religious tourism.²¹⁶ This is an interesting point to be considered, for it is coherent with two of the main lines of the Joint Trilateral Statement: the reopening of the Saudi embassy in Tehran before the pilgrimage for the Hajj, and the reimplementation of the General Agreement for Cooperation of 2001. Some other areas like sports are important in Bin Salman's vision. For example, Saudi Arabia has been redirecting the international focus on its football league by acquiring high-quality players, as well as investing in competitive athletics abroad. But in order to fulfil all of its goals, Mohammed bin Salman is aware that Saudi Arabia's traditional interpretation of Islam and society are conservative. For that reason and considering the current trends of the international arena, Saudi women have been granted more rights through labour reforms. Political rights remain the same, however.²¹⁷

Prior to 2020, its FP was as ambitious as aggressive. Having taken office after breaking ties with Iran, bin Salman launched operations Decisive Storm and Restoring Hope in Yemen,²¹⁸ increased the tensions with the Houthis and Iran, and managed a blockade against Qatar. Nevertheless, a few months after the Abraham Accords Mohammed bin Salman started aiming at a less aggressive FP. After Israel had normalized ties with two Gulf monarchies, the UAE and Bahrain, he decided to lift the blockade of Qatar in early 2021, probably fearing further presence of Israel in the Gulf. The first pillar of Saudi Vision 2030 is to become the centre of the Arab and Muslim world. Approaching Tel Aviv would then turn these two communities against Riyadh after giving up on Palestine. Moreover, he got closer to Asia by becoming a dialogue partner with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which includes China, India, and Russia. It can be perfectly appreciated some kind of break-even-point in the Crown Prince foreign policy.

Bin Salman thus lifted the blockade on its neighbour, improved ties with the Red Sea states,²¹⁹ and got closer to new partners in Asia. It is thus conceivable and coherent in the Crown Prince's foreign policy to accept a rapprochement with Iran. By and large, *leader*

²¹⁶ Anna Jacobs. "Understanding Saudi Arabia's Recalibrated Foreign Policy." *International Crisis Group*, 14 September 2023.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

²¹⁸ USCENTCOM, "Yemen", *United States Central Command*, n. d.

²¹⁹ Anna Jacobs. "Understanding Saudi Arabia's Recalibrated Foreign Policy." *International Crisis Group*, 14 September 2023.

images seem to really matter in Saudi Arabia's decision making. The FPE is committed with and encouraged to diversify Saudi Arabia's economy knowing that collaborating with new Eastern partners is essential.

4.3.2 State-Society Relations and Domestic Institutions

State-society relations and institutions in Saudi Arabia are built on the basis of the oil economy and tribalism.²²⁰ When this resource started becoming a strategic good, the main benefits were accrued to the traditional shakily rule while the modern Saudi state was not yet established. The impact of the oil-based economy has had two main effects. First, the control and distribution of the petrodollar permitted the political elites to secure their rule through deepening clientelist networks, as well as dependent clients. Second, these revenues granted the elites the chance to shape the statal institutions in a determined desired way, thus solidifying their political control over them.

Moreover, there is a factor to be considered when analysing the sociopolitical realities of the Gulf, which is tribalism. As Álvarez-Ossorio and Gutiérrez de Terán point out, belonging to a tribe does determine a person's status within the Gulf's societies.²²¹ And it is coherent, for the tribal factor strengthens patron-client practices. That is why state-society relations and institutions have been made up by rent-seeking, clientelism, and patronage.²²² Rentierism and the rentier state (RS) became the main source of legitimacy. Because the oil and gas revenues are directed vastly to the authority, rulers quite often distribute this rent to allies and supporters. Nepotism constitutes de *modus operandi*.

But RSs come together with a simple yet strong social value, what Steffen Hertog defines as the *rentier mentality*.²²³ Considering that petrol oil and gas have a global daily demand, relying on this market generates such an irrisory amount of revenues that the sectors benefited the most from it result in a weak work mentality due to the timid link between

²²⁰ Mehran Kamrava. "Oil and institutional stasis in the Persian Gulf." *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 8:sup1, 1-12 (2018).

²²¹ Ignacio Álvarez-Ossorio & Ignacio Gutiérrez de Terán. *Qatar. La perla del Golfo*. Barcelona: Península Odiseas (2022).

²²² Mehran Kamrava. "Oil and institutional stasis in the Persian Gulf." *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 8:sup1, 1-12 (2018).

²²³ Observed by Makio Yamada & Stephen Hertog. "Introduction: revisiting rentierism-with a short note by Giacomo Luciani", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 47:1, 2020: p. 3.

effort and economic reward. This explains, for example, the lack of efficiency and overemployment in the Saudi public sector.

That is why Bin Salman's foreign policy is pragmatic. The Saudi FPE is aware of this condition, the so-called *resource curse*, and he knows that the assured collapse of oil and gas markets can lead to the collapse of the Saudi state apparatus. That is why Saudi Vision 2030 has a considerable component of privatization and aims at creating employment in other sectors than oil to distribute revenues gradually substituting patronage and clientelism as far as possible. However, this leaves a central concern for Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies. If the oil and gas markets are surely collapsing, the tribal patronage systems in these societies will likely change. Therefore, it is a sensible topic that requires from meticulous policies that will probably rise tensions between tribal families, patrons, clients, and the Saudi state. In the end, once power is created, it normally is either kept or transferred, but not destroyed.

This last statement is consequence of the rent-seeking behaviour in patronage networks, as it tends to be self-reinforcing, therefore impeding institutional change.²²⁴ Maintaining the internal *status quo* is a characteristic of rentierism. For this reason, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy especially since 2016 and even more since 2021 is surprising, for it commences to change the *status quo* that had been established in the kingdom throughout the last decades. The Saudi Iranian rapprochement seen with Riyadh's eyes is a foreign policy decision, but it for sure is part of a larger thing: a grand strategic adjustment.

Luíza Cerioli²²⁵ assures that Saudi Arabia has been undergoing through a grand strategy since 2003, after the US invasion of Iraq that Riyadh was opposed to. The term refers to how a determined state assesses its geostrategic environment and how it plans and allocates its resources, as well as prioritizing which policies meet the national interests. Grand strategies do not necessarily need to be pasted on an official document. Instead, it can be enough to observe the state in question's behaviour in the international arena.²²⁶ As she agrees, Saudi Arabia's decision to reapproach Iran does not constitute a grand strategic adjustment, but

²²⁴ Mehran Kamrava. "Oil and institutional stasis in the Persian Gulf." *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 8:sup1, 1-12 (2018).

²²⁵ Luíza Cerioli. "Saudi Arabia strategy reassessment since 2003: The emergence of a regional leadership via Neoclassical Realist lenses." *International Area Studies Review*, Vol. 26(3), 287-303 (2023).

²²⁶ *Ibid.*

rather a foreign policy decision. Yet, it is a continuation of a change in Riyadh's grand strategy following Iraq's invasion of 2003.

Meanwhile, state-society relations and domestic institutions keep following the same *modus operandi*. Rentierism and patronage still build the Saudi clientelist networks, and thus it does not influence *per se* the decision of the FPE to agree on the Joint Trilateral Statement with Iran. Still, it must be said that this reality constitutes the base on which such decision has been made. Bin Salman has been proven to be a pragmatic leader aware of the conditions of the state that he *de facto* rules. He is mindful of how multipolarity can turn out to be beneficial for Saudi Arabia while its traditional partner, the US, has not provided the new opportunities that Riyadh needs. For this reason, it is argued that these intervening variables, namely the state-society relations and domestic institutions, can in that period of time become a danger to Al Saud family and its state due to the inevitable change in the Saudi internal paradigm.

4.4 Partial conclusions

Saudi Arabia's foreign policy decision to sign the Joint Trilateral Statement brokered by China to reapproach Iran is both influenced by the independent and intervening variables.

First of all, Saudi Arabia's role in the international system is largely conformed by oil and gas, natural resources that can be allocated to the *structural modifiers*. Riyadh's role in these markets have shaped both its foreign policy before and after Mohammed bin Salman's rise to power. The KSA's economic overreliance on these structural modifiers constitutes a threat, since the Saudi state is in the need to diversify its economy if it wants to survive in the medium to long term. The threat in this case comes not from an international actor, for it has been argued that the US's reticence in Saudi Arabia's security cannot theoretically be interpreted as a threat with high levels of clarity. Conversely, China presents itself as a *clear opportunity* that can help the kingdom to commit its goal, i.e. to diversify the Saudi economy before the collapse of the oil and gas markets.

Thus, systemic stimuli influence Riyadh's FP decision to reapproach Iran to the extent that its relations with Beijing are mutually beneficial. China needs Saudi Arabia's location between Africa, Europe, and Asia, and between the Red Sea, the Gulf, and the Indian Ocean, to properly develop its Maritime Belt and Road Initiative. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia

needs China, to a final extent, in order to survive as a state, although the times horizon for this to happen is not imminent. The collapse of Saudi Arabia could mean the collapse of a core strategic cornerstone for Beijing. Saudi Arabia is aware of that, and it has fostered its cooperation with China. However, such an unexpected and determined foreign policy decision as the restoration of ties with Iran is, has been largely influenced by the intervening variables, especially the *leader images*.

While in Iran this cluster was not concluded to be determinant in Tehran's decision to approach Saudi Arabia, leader images in Saudi Arabia are determinant. The KSA's foreign policy since Mohammed bin Salman hold power is characterised by initiatives and shaped goals. The fact that an actor *de facto* rules a state should already be an indicator that it is the main driving force behind the FP decision-making of a state. However, this is further evidenced all over several examples throughout the last decade, such as operations Decisive Storm and Restoring Hope in Yemen, or the blockade against Qatar. The Saudi Vision 2030 constitutes the most solid work of bin Salman, and it starts the path that Saudi Arabia is following and will follow at least for a decade. The Crown Prince's perception of the Saudi reality (economic overdependence on natural resources) and systemic stimuli (the waning presence of the US in the Gulf and the increasing interest to collaborate with China) dictates the kingdom's foreign policy.

It is interesting to note that Saudi Arabia's strategic environment is permissive regarding the role of external actors, yet it is restrictive according to the structural modifiers. Its location and natural resources restrict its role in the international arena. Still, *leader images* are the key variable in Saudi Arabia's decision to reapproach Iran.

Saudi Arabia has used both internal and external balancing as means to reapproach Iran. Still, domestic elements play a privileged role in the FP decision-making.

Conclusion

The Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia restored their diplomatic ties in March 2023 after a deal brokered by the People's Republic of China. This study analysed the event using a framework provided by Type III Neoclassical Realism. Considering how important perception is for the theory, both Iran and Saudi Arabia have been analysed their dependent, independent, and intervening variables.

The dependent variable has proven to be the same for both actors, the only difference being Iran's apparent compromise to supervise Houthi operations and Riyadh's to host talk with the rebels. Tehran and Riyadh agreed to sign, together with Beijing, a Joint Trilateral Statement. After reviewing the document, five core agreements were found to constitute the pact: to resume diplomatic relations, to respect the sovereignty of states, to implement further agreements, to implement the Security Cooperation Agreement of 2001, and to implement the General Agreement for Cooperation of 1998. A thorough examination of the JTS concluded that the restoration of diplomatic ties started in time for the Hajj pilgrimage. This was argued to foster migration and the sense of Islamic unity, constituting a big benefit for Iran and its isolation, and Saudi Arabia and the touristic objectives of its 2030 Vision. Furthermore, the respect for sovereignty and cooperation in the security sector are essential for China, that mediated the deal. Improving the security in the region would have two main advantages: it would ease the transit of goods in the Gulf, Bab Al Mandeb, and the surrounding waters; and it would reduce tensions between the Houthi rebels and KSA, a step that, it is suggested, is based on the supervision of the Houthi operations by Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps so as to not strike on Saudi soil. Eventually, the General Agreement for Cooperation of 1998 encourages collaboration in several sectors to help the Saudi and Iranian economies to diversify in an attempt to start palliating the collapse of the oil and gas international markets.

Iran's decision to agree on the JTS with Saudi Arabia is primarily motivated by systemic factors. These are: the signature of the Abraham Accords that permitted the cooperation between Israel and two Gulf monarchies, and China's interest to develop critical infrastructure and security in Iran. The first is perceived as a threat with high levels of clarity, whereas the second is perceived as an opportunity with high levels of clarity too. The latter constitutes basically the optimal policy that Tehran could follow, as a pact between Tel Aviv and Riyadh seemed imminent and Iran's international partners are reduced. For this reason, it was concluded that Tehran was facing a restrictive strategic environment. The intervening variables do not seem to have played an important role in Tehran's decision to reapproach Saudi Arabia, however. Leader images indicated that the foreign policy executive was focused on internal matters while the sanctions led to more cooperative stances. As for Iran's strategic culture, it is concluded that it actually further restricts its strategic environment. This is attributed to the "more than East than West" policy, as the Islamic Republic's FP is

ideologically guided by revolutionary Islam and anti-imperialism opposed to the United States and Israel, thus constraining its FP options.

Regarding Saudi Arabia, systemic stimuli do exercise a large pressure on Riyadh, but intervening variables are *key* to understand Saudi Arabia's decision to reapproach Iran. Its main threat comes from structural modifiers. The kingdom relies to a very large extent on hydrocarbons to keep its economy alive. However, this implies that the times horizon is as imminent as the collapse of such market. Also, amid Washington's gradual reticence to keep providing Saudi Arabia with security, Beijing arrives proposing the Saudi kingdom with investments in the critical sectors that the Saudi Vision 2030 is aiming at. These sectors are the way to escape Saudi Arabia's overreliance on the oil and gas markets. Thus, China is plausibly the best policy option for Riyadh, presenting itself again as an opportunity with high levels of clarity. Riyadh's modus operandi constitutes of both internal and external balancing, improving its domestic industries and keeping resources within its territory, on the one hand, and developing a partnership with China, on the other. Intervening variables have proved to exercise more influence in Riyadh's decision to sign the JTS than in Iran. It was difficult to conclude whether KSA's strategic environment was permissive or restrictive. But since the absence of such an imminent threat as Iran was facing was not present in Saudi Arabia's perceived systemic factors, the conclusion suggested a more permissive strategic environment. Still, due to such ambivalence this study disagrees with the proposed intervening variables. Leader images, contrary to the Iranian case, constitute a foremost variable driving Saudi Arabia's FP. Mohammad bin Salman's guidance of Saudi FP is characterised by initiatives and determined objectives. Even though prior to the Abraham Accords his foreign policy was more aggressive, from 2021 onwards Saudi Arabia's FP outcomes became more cooperative. Considering this and the risk that oil economy has for patronage, clientelism and rentierism in Saudi Arabia, a rapprochement with Iran than can help to foster relations with China is perceived by the FPE as feasible and the optimal option for the kingdom.

The future prospectives rely on the fact that the dependent variable constitutes a foreign policy decision for both actors. Yet, for Saudi Arabia it is a further step in his gran strategy that has been guiding its path in the international arena for the last twenty years. An FP decision has a short-term life expectancy, but a grand strategy has at least medium-term consequences. This implies that in a period of up to ten years the Saudi Iranian cooperation

is unlikely to amplify to new sectors more than those explained before. War in Yemen and Syria are still going on, and the US is still present in Riyadh's agenda. But the fact that is growing as a part of Saudi Arabia's grand strategy leaves an open possibility to witness further cooperation between both states, either brokered by China or not. As well, prospectives depend on the time horizons explained in this study. The collapse of oil market is a reality that will arrive in the medium-term. Considering that both Iran and Saudi Arabia share this common threat, cooperation is more likely to develop as a cause of this structural modifier.

The fact that an Islamic civilization with common interests can be forged leaving aside sectarian differences places some theories back to the table. One argument in support of Huntington's hypothesis is how the Islamic and Confucian civilizations will strengthen their ties and cooperate to increase their relative power within the system. If the Islamic states end up identifying a common rival, the Middle East region could eventually be considered as a sole civilization, sectarianism could be relegated to the background, and the Khaliji identity could be restored. The current Middle East is a conglomerate where China and the US try to be present. But the fact that the UAE signed the Abraham Accords with Israel, thus satisfying Washington, does not seem to be an impediment for Abu Dhabi to get closer to China. The Gulf monarchies are not one-sided anymore, and they look towards the East with curiosity and interests while Washington's glance at East Asia is leaving a power vacuum that is unstoppably being filled by China.

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List of Appendices

Appendix no. 1: Type III NCR Model (figure)

Appendix no. 2: Intervening Variable Clusters by Degree of Systemic Clarity and Nature of Strategic Development (table)

Appendix no. 3: Iran's stockpile of enriched uranium (graph)

Appendix no. 4: Uranium Enrichment (U-235 Percentages) (table)

Appendix no. 5: US Main Military Facilities in the Gulf and Levant (figure)

Appendix no. 6: US Main Military Facilities in the Gulf and Levant (table)

Appendix no. 7: Volume of crude oil and petroleum liquids transported through world chokepoints and the Cape of Good Hope, 2019–2023 (million barrels per day) (table)