

Saudi Arabia's Complex Cultural Hedging Between the U.S. and China



SALMAN K. AL-DHAFEEIRE*

Ph. D. Candidate
School of International Relations and Public Affairs
Fudan University, Shanghai, China

SUN DEGANG*

Prof. Dr.
Institute of International Studies, Fudan
University, Shanghai, China

**Salman K. Al-Dhafeire is a Ph.D. candidate in International Politics at the School of International Relations and Public Affairs, Fudan University, Shanghai, China. His research focuses on political relations between China and the Middle East, with particular emphasis on Saudi Arabia, the GCC countries, and broader geopolitical dynamics. He holds a Master of Laws from Kyushu University, Japan, where he researched Japan's cybersecurity strategies and their implications for international relations. He holds dual Bachelor's degrees in Political Science and Electrical Engineering from the University of Toledo in the USA. He currently serves as a Teaching Assistant in the Department of Law and Political Science at King Saud University, Saudi Arabia. He has presented at international conferences on Middle East governance and security cooperation at Fudan University.*

ORCID: 0009-0004-3857-0364

e-mail: saldhafeire@ksu.edu.sa

***Sun Degang is a Professor and Director of Political Science at the Institute of International Studies, Fudan University, Shanghai, China. He was a visiting scholar at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard University (September 2018-September 2019), and Senior Associate Member at St. Antony's College, Oxford University, and an Academic Visitor to Oxford Center for Islamic Studies (2012-2013), Denver University (2007-2008), and the University of Hong Kong (2004-2005). His research interests are Middle Eastern Politics and International Relations, Great Powers' Strategies in the Middle East, and China's Middle East Diplomacy.*

ORCID: 0009-0003-3418-8558

e-mail: sundegang@fudan.edu.cn

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ABSTRACT

This research examines Saudi Arabia's strategic use of cultural instruments as a sophisticated form of hedging amid intensifying U.S.-China great-power rivalry and the Kingdom's Vision 2030 diversification agenda. Drawing on hedging theory, the study conceptualizes "complex cultural hedging" as a deliberate, state-orchestrated strategy that simultaneously cultivates and balances American and Chinese soft power influences without aligning with either. Four core objectives drive Saudi cultural hedging: responding to China's rise and the rise of multipolarity; forging long-term cultural and strategic ties with Beijing; reducing the historical dominance of U.S. cultural influence; and preserving Saudi national identity and Islamic values through selective adaptation. The analysis operationalizes this strategy across six dimensions: language and education; cultural institutions and food diplomacy; media visibility; air connectivity and mobility; scientific and cultural cooperation; and emerging digital sectors, including gaming, e-sports, animation, and sports diplomacy. Empirical findings from 2020–2026 reveal five key characteristics of the hedging strategy: multi-dimensional, complementary, dual, dynamic, and asymmetric. Riyadh sustains deep, elite-level ties with the United States while accelerating volume and mass exposure with China, thereby maximizing autonomy and projecting a distinctive, soft, middle-power culture rooted in moderated Islamic values. The study concludes that cultural hedging represents a low-risk, but high-legitimacy, extension of traditional hedging, transforming great-power cultural competition into a strategic asset for middle powers navigating multipolarity.

Keywords: China, complex cultural hedging, hedging strategy, Saudi Arabia, US.

Introduction

SAUDI ARABIA'S PLEDGE TO ACHIEVE Vision 2030 signaled its commitment to adapting to the changing dynamics of the international system. This grand project was unveiled in 2016 by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and was envisioned after Saudi leaders realized that the Kingdom's overdependence on the oil and hydrocarbon markets had become a major liability (Vision 2030, 2021). Among the vision's key themes were instituting a thriving economy, establishing a vibrant society, and forming an ambitious nation (Vision 2030, 2021). The Kingdom envisioned a

revitalized form of governance that would enable all stakeholders to succeed, especially through supportive business environments, investments in education, and a prosperous future.

Although traditionally aligned with the United States, KSA's changing cultural dynamics reflect a hedging strategy between China and the United States. This strategy stems from a need to respond to China's growing influence as a global power. Other objectives include building long-term cultural and strategic investments with Beijing through initiatives such as the 2025 China-Saudi Year of Culture, the expansion of Mandarin education, and joint heritage projects (Aldhobaib, 2025).

Hedging also gradually reduces the historical dominance of American cultural influence in education, media, and entertainment while mitigating the risks posed by variable U.S. commitments. Finally, the undertaking preserves Saudi Arabia's national identity and core Islamic values through selective adaptation under Vision 2030, ensuring that foreign inflows align with Arab-Islamic norms. KSA's dual-track cultural engagement is a sophisticated form of hedging executed through soft power instruments (Algamendi, 2025; Vision 2030, 2021). Its influence is paramount, as it has helped Riyadh reduce its exposure if commitments by one great power abruptly shift. These endeavors pinpoint KSA's strategic autonomy and its cultural positioning as a low-risk, high-return domain for geopolitical diversification.

Among the GCC countries, KSA is increasingly becoming prominent as a middle power. This phenomenon has sparked interest among IR scholars, with some shifting their study and application of hedging theory from East Asia and ASEAN countries to Saudi Arabia (Thomas, 2025; Yao, 2025). China's rising foothold in the Middle East and the U.S.' declining influence in the region have largely contributed to this inquiry. In their investigations, political scientists largely focus on the Kingdom's diversification of its oil market, participation in China-led initiatives, especially the Belt and Road Initiative, and continued reliance on the United States as the primary security guarantor (Thomas, 2025). The study of how Riyadh simultaneously engages with and balances between the two countries to maximize autonomy and minimize risk, however, reveals a significant gap in its exploration of the cultural dimensions of hedging behavior.

There are few comprehensive studies evaluating how KSA is leveraging soft power instru-

ments, such as educational exchanges, language programs, joint cultural years, heritage diplomacy, tourism promotion, and global entertainment events, to cultivate alternative reservoirs of influence and goodwill with both the United States and China. Consequently, the strategic logic, operational mechanisms, and comparative intensity of Saudi cultural engagement with Washington and Beijing remain underexplored. This study addresses that gap by conceptualizing and analyzing complex cultural hedging as a distinct and increasingly central component of Saudi Arabia's overall hedging strategy in relation to the United States and China.

This study argues that Saudi Arabia engages in complex cultural hedging by integrating elements of both American and Chinese soft power to strengthen its national identity and global cultural ties. This balancing act allows Saudi Arabia to maintain strategic autonomy while embracing global cultural currents.

Literature Review

Hedging Theory and Middle Powers

In recent years, geopolitical researchers and IR scholars have shown increased interest in applying hedging theory. Middle power hedging is a useful analytical lens for examining how middle powers (e.g., Saudi Arabia) can position themselves between two great powers without being either an explicit balancer or a bandwagoner. According to Kuik (2021), hedging falls somewhere in between the traditional strategies of balancing (building military or alliance capabilities to counter a perceived threat) and bandwagoning (aligning oneself with the preponderant state to gain advantages). Scholars, such as Kuik and González-Pujol,

agree that hedging combines a series of policies, including economic and political gains, that are generally mixed in their objectives, while attempting to minimize risk in an internationally uncertain environment. Hedger states will diversify their relationships with different countries; seek to develop mutually beneficial economic and diplomatic relations with each rival; and prepare contingency plans in case one country's actions become unpredictable (González-Pujol, 2024). By doing so, hedgers maintain their independence, protect against becoming involved in a conflict between the two superpowers, and benefit from the two superpowers' competitive efforts at the same time.

In the context of the shifting U.S.-China rivalry, hedging is particularly relevant for those seeking to navigate the transition in the global order.

The existing literature on hedging has primarily focused on Southeast Asia, with major scholars examining the behavior of states such as Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines (Wong, 2025; Yao, 2025). In these spheres, the focus has been on how these states respond to China's growing economic and military influence as US dominance in the region diminishes. However, most of these middle powers still rely on their security guarantees (Yao, 2025). This region has, for years, been affected by major factors in IR, including colonization by European powers, civil wars, regional and boundary disputes, and limited material capabilities, which have made non-alignment a critical need. While this literature is effective and critical to understanding hedging, some scholars have raised questions about the general applicability of its findings in other regions. Stakeholders



Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 agenda for economic and social transformation is reshaping the country's traditionally US-aligned orientation, while providing the basis for its hedging strategy between China and the United States (Photo: Soul of Saudi, 2025).

argue that most studies have been conducted in a single region. Given the differences in definition and conceptualization, scholarship must be diversified to other regions where the influence of both China and the U.S. is felt (Telci & Rakipoğlu, 2021). Considering that the aforementioned factors have historically sidelined the ASEAN region and that most of them are not resource-rich, their approach to hedging is primarily rooted in economic and security interests, leaving other important areas of hedging unexplored. Expanding the studies to the Gulf could address these gaps and provide a more important context for the behaviors of middle powers. These countries are resource-rich, and their alignments with China and the U.S. take different approaches that warrant deeper analysis and exploration. Saudi Arabia is the most prominent example of hedging strategies in the Gulf region. The Kingdom executes a sophisticated version of hedging that goes far beyond just remaining neutral.

The Kingdom is developing a deep dependence on the United States for national security (through arms agreements and joint defense arrangements), while establishing new economic and cultural ties with China (Qin & Razali, 2025).

Saudi Arabia's complex hedging is characterized by five interconnected dimensions that distinguish it from more general forms of hedging. First, Saudi Arabia's hedging practice is multi-do-

main. The Kingdom engages in hedging simultaneously across all four of the primary policy areas of national security, economics, diplomacy, and culture, instead of using hedging in only one domain (Bakir & Al-Shamari, 2025). By taking a multi-domain approach, the KSA can ensure that any positive outcome in one policy area offsets any vulnerability in another. Second, Saudi Arabia's hedging is complementary. The Kingdom is developing a deep dependence on the United States for national security (through arms agreements and joint defense arrangements), while establishing new economic and cultural ties with China (Qin & Razali, 2025). This relationship creates a situation in which the Kingdom receives "added value" from the two superpowers rather than making a zero-sum choice between them.

Third, the strategy is dual. The nation sustains a longstanding quasi-alliance with Washington rooted in historic oil-for-security arrangements, while cultivating a comprehensive strategic partnership with Beijing that has gained prominence since the early 2020s (Thomas, 2025). Fourth, Saudi hedging is dynamic, reflecting an evolving trajectory. Historically weighted toward reliance on the United States as the primary external guarantor, the Kingdom has progressively elevated China's importance in response to perceived shifts in U.S. regional commitment and Beijing's growing global influence (Qin & Razali, 2025). This temporal dimension underscores adaptability to changing power distributions.

Finally, the strategy is asymmetric rather than equidistant. Riyadh calibrates engagement pragmatically according to specific needs: prioritizing depth, quality, and elite-level ties with the United States, while favoring breadth, volume, and mass-scale interactions with China. This deliberate tilt optimizes returns and risk management without

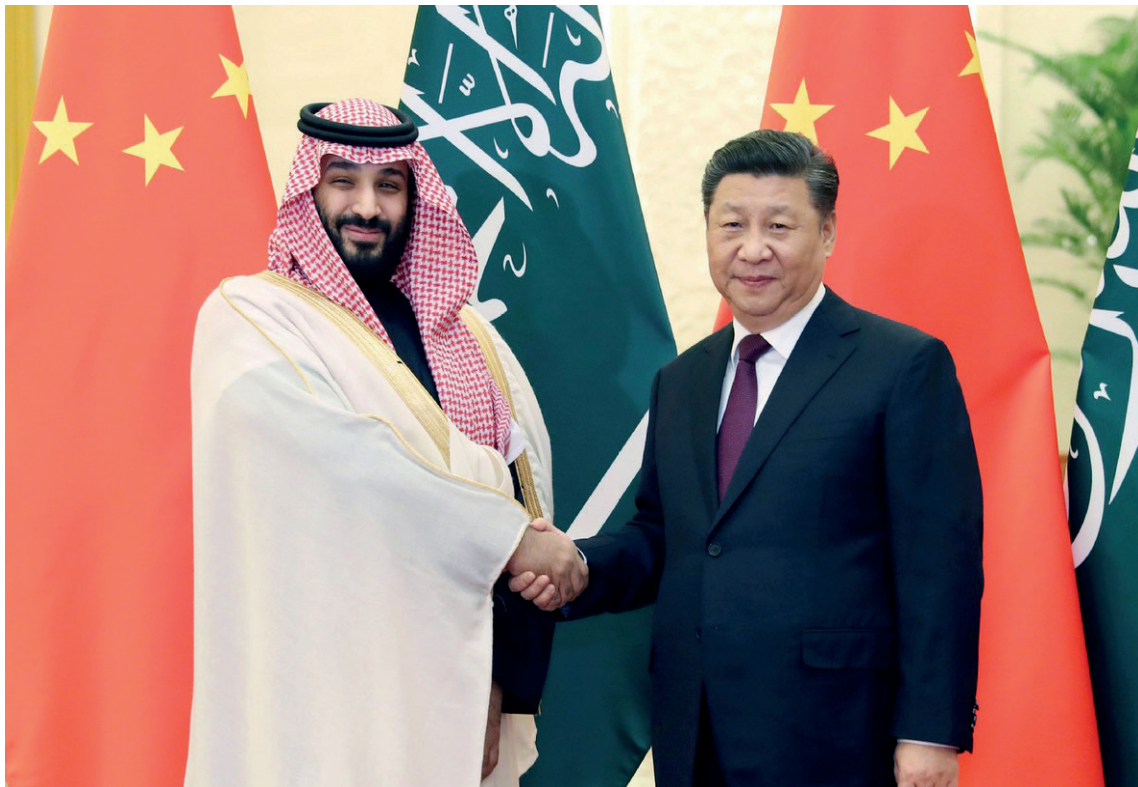
pursuing perfect balance. Together, these five dimensions inform KSA's complex hedging. They enable the Kingdom to turn great-power competition into a strategic opportunity, boosting autonomy and influence in a multipolar era. By extending hedging principles across multiple domains and over time, Saudi Arabia positions itself not as a passive bystander but as an active shaper of its international environment.

While scholars have explored, though not exhaustively, the dimensions of KSA's behavior in its interactions with the U.S., these interactions have essentially focused on security and economic needs. Other domains, like cultural hedging, remain underexplored. This leaves an analytical gap

regarding how the Kingdom manages competing soft-power influences and whether this is a deliberate dimension of its broader hedging strategy.

Soft Power, Cultural Diplomacy and Constructivist Identity

Countries and States should have an established strategy to maintain their security and ensure their survival in an often chaotic international order. This survival is, at most times, guaranteed through a State's perceived power. Among social scientists, power is defined as the probability that an actor (within a social relationship) can carry out their will despite resistance (Raimzhanova, 2015).



President Xi Jinping meets with Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud, Saudi Arabia's crown prince, at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, capital of China, Feb 22, 2019 (Photo: Xinhua, 2019).

In such a situation, the qualities, resources, and capabilities of the said actor are stronger than those of the other actors. Through power, actors can secure binding obligations within the system they operate in, and these obligations are legitimized when the actors involved share the same goal or the weaker power presumes negative sanctions from the powerful actor. In international politics, the power struggle is always the immediate aim, and power politics are the core of how States perceive the world around them. IR scholars often describe power as hard, often demonstrated through military power, territorial acquisition, imperialism, and domination (Gallarotti, 2022). Power can also be soft, referring to nonmilitary forms such as culture, ideology, and institutions, which have attracted increased interest as the international framework changes (Raimzhanova, 2015). Soft power manifests as a State's ability to persuade other States to do what it wants without conflict or the need for military force (Wagner, 2014).

Culture and cultural influence fall in the category of soft power as conceptualized by Joseph Nye in 1990 (Dutta, 2025; Raimzhanova, 2015). The Middle States have, in recent times, turned to culture to persuade or attract other powers. In these lenses, such countries assert their influence in world affairs by serving as positive role models or by earning the admiration and trust of other nations. The success of soft power lies in the legitimacy of a nation's actions or programs. There are several mechanisms States can use to leverage culture as soft power. To start, public diplomacy and communication are major mechanisms through which governments engage in strategic communication via media, educational exchanges, and digital platforms to influence foreign publics (Çiçek, 2022).

Through this strategy, such governments can enhance their image and engage in international dialogue.

Soft power also entails cultural influence, in which nations spread their values and identity through films, songs, and international brands (Alyakhri & Al-Btoos, 2025). Humanitarian efforts, including aid and disaster relief, demonstrate soft power by building goodwill and strengthening diplomatic ties. States may leverage their scientific and educational successes to influence other countries through knowledge sharing and the creation of personal and professional networks.

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tional institutions, such as the United Nations (UN), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the World Trade Organization (WTO), are also important tools for a country to enhance its international standing and diplomatic leverage (Cimino-Isaacs & Fefer, 2021; Columbia SIPA, 2024). Besides projecting soft power, these mechanisms illustrate the most essential requirement for that prediction. Whether a country uses its culture, media, academia, or international norms, each mechanism must demonstrate legitimacy that attracts other actors in the international system and persuades them to emulate its influence.

One of the most critical tools of soft power is cultural diplomacy. It is defined as “the exchange of ideas, information, art, and oth-

er aspects of culture among nations and their people to foster mutual understanding” (U.S. Department of State, 2005). It involves deliberate efforts by governments to promote national culture abroad through exchanges, exhibitions, educational programs, and global events, thereby building long-term relationships and enhancing national branding (Algamendi, 2025). Cultural diplomacy fosters people-to-people ties, counters negative stereotypes, and creates mutual understanding, often proving more sustainable and less provocative than economic or military tools (Alyakhri & Al-Btoos, 2025). It can amplify a nation's attractiveness by showcasing its heritage, arts, and contemporary creativity, while facilitating economic gains such as tourism and investment.



The constructivist approach to international relations, as proposed by Alexander Wendt, offers valuable insights into how States craft and project their identities in the global arena. According to Wendt, identity is not simply a reflection of a State's material interests, but is actively constructed through interactions with other States (Mengshu, 2020). This process involves the use of soft power and cultural diplomacy, in which States leverage cultural and ideological tools to define themselves and shape others' perceptions. Soft power theory, cultural diplomacy, and identity formation are important for understanding cultural influences, but the current literature has failed to integrate them into hedging frameworks. Specifically, soft power projection has been explored unidirectionally, with one state projecting influence on others, while omitting the bidirectional balancing acts in the face of competing external influences.

Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy in the Literature

In studying Saudi Arabia's foreign policy and the formation of identity, existing scholarship has adopted a broad, multidisciplinary approach. The literature shows that KSA continues to do all that is necessary to shape its identity as a modern global player while maintaining deep Islamic values, which can be trusted to take the mantle as the leader of the Islamic world (Chaziza & Lutmar, 2025). While this identity is important with the Kingdom being the seat of the two holiest muslim sites, its leaders continuously strive to chase modernization and a seat at the global stage actively. Scholarship reveals intentional strategies towards this, particularly public and cultural diplomacy. To communicate to the outside world, KSA continues to leverage state-run

media institutions such as Al Arabiya. The kingdom also engages in global cultural initiatives to communicate its identity. (Chaziza & Lutmar, 2025) Saudi Arabia has also invested heavily in educational and cultural programs aimed at advancing its vision of modernization and development, such as the King Abdullah Scholarship Program, which sends thousands of students abroad to study (Hilal & Denman, 2013). These efforts are strategically designed to foster a positive image of Saudi Arabia in both the Western and Eastern worlds, positioning the kingdom as a global cultural hub, with strong ties to both the U.S. and China.

Over the last few decades, China's rise and continued global influence have prompted scholars to examine its impact on national identities. Saudi Arabia's scholars highlight the alignment of KSA's Vision 2030 with China's Belt and Road initiative and how this has impacted KSA's identity, soft power, and diplomacy (Vision 2030, 2021).

Given the bidirectional nature of soft power, scholarship has situated KSA's identity within the influence of both the U.S. and China. The U.S. has been the dominant power in the Gulf region for decades, and KSA, as a major ally, has been influenced by American soft power. Through institutions such as universities, media networks, and cultural exchanges, the U.S. has exerted consid-

erable influence on Saudi Arabia's cultural landscape (Algofaili & Rashed, 2023). Programs such as the Fulbright Scholarship and the presence of American universities in the kingdom have fostered closer cultural ties between the two nations (Taylor & Albasri, 2014). Moreover, Hollywood's influence on Saudi cinema and the recent lifting of the ban on foreign cinematic content reflect the ongoing cultural exchange between the two. However, the literature shows that Saudi Arabia has been careful in managing its relations with the U.S. and has been actively strategizing to balance this influence with its values and identity.

Studies on Saudi-U.S. relations indicate that cultural cooperation, especially in education and entertainment, plays a key role in enhancing diplomatic ties, while also reflecting the king-

dom's cautious approach in aligning too closely with Western values. Over the last few decades, China's rise and continued global influence have prompted scholars to examine its impact on national identities. Saudi Arabia's scholars highlight the alignment of KSA's Vision 2030 with China's Belt and Road initiative and how this has impacted KSA's identity, soft power, and diplomacy (Vision 2030, 2021). Scholarship highlights a recognizable and growing framework for cultural diplomacy, with China establishing Confucius Institutes in Saudi Arabia and promoting joint academic partnerships (Liang, 2021). Saudi students are increasingly seeking education in China, particularly in fields such as engineering, technology, and Chinese language studies, further strengthening bilateral cultural ties.



Academic cooperation between Saudi and American universities constitutes an important dimension of the cultural ties between the two countries. Saudi Minister of Education Yousef bin Abdullah Al-Benyan and U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Michael Ratney at the opening of the Saudi-US Higher Education Partnerships Forum, Riyadh, November 20, 2024 (Photo: Saudi Ministry of Education, 2024).

Saudi Arabia is also involved in Chinese cultural events, such as the Chinese New Year celebrations, and has supported Chinese cinema in the kingdom. The collaborative film productions, such as the Saudi-Chinese co-production, are a key example of cultural diplomacy aimed at fostering mutual understanding between the two nations. As China continues to expand its influence in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia's cultural ties with it are likely to deepen, further complicating its balancing act between the U.S. and China.

Despite the growing body of research on Saudi Arabia's soft power and cultural diplomacy, significant gaps remain in the literature, particularly concerning the comparative data on U.S. and Chinese cultural influence in Saudi Arabia. The literature continues to focus on economic and military hedging and has failed to establish cultural and public diplomacy within this context. The literature also identifies the individual influences of China and the U.S., analyzing them independently rather than through the lens of a deliberate balancing logic that structures these relationships. There is a need for scholars to conceptualize cultural hedging in the context of KSA's construction of its national identity and strategic management of competing external influences. Further research is needed to explore how cultural exchanges, media, and educational initiatives serve as instruments of Saudi Arabia's broader geopolitical strategy, allowing the kingdom to maintain a neutral stance in a highly polarized global order.

Conceptualizing Cultural Hedging

Cultural hedging is the major focus of this research. It is therefore important that the study formally define its analytical boundaries and

clarify how it will advance existing theoretical approaches in IR. This analysis conceptualizes cultural hedging as a deliberate strategy by a middle power to simultaneously cultivate, balance, and instrumentalize the soft-power influence of two competing superpowers across several cultural domains. This strategy entails avoiding full alignment with either of these powers, positioning the executing middle power to maximize its strategic autonomy, navigate ideological risks, and project independent cultural identities rooted in its national values.

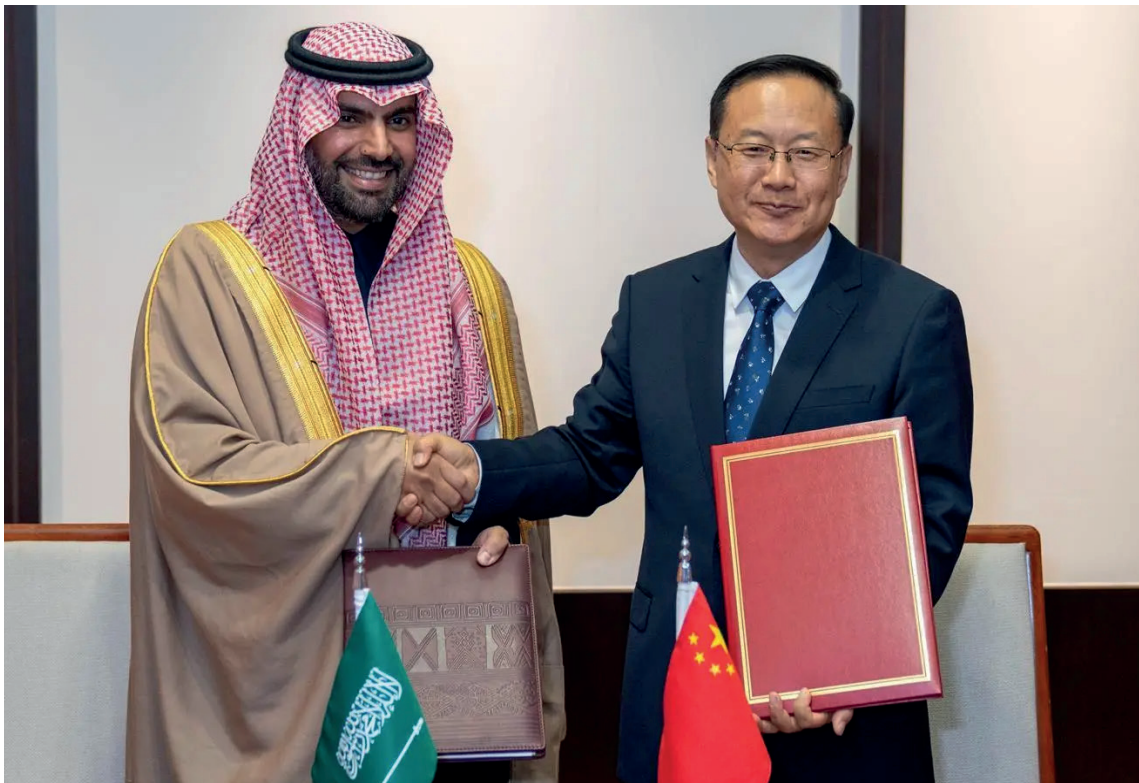
Cultural hedging is a new concept in the analysis of international relations, as it differs from the other types of hedging explored in literature. Major IR scholars, such as Kuik Cheng-Chwee, approach hedging through the lenses of security or economic dimensions. By bringing cultural hedging into the fold, one can extend their analysis of state behavior into unexplored dimensions, including language programs, media framing, educational exchanges, mobility flows, and cultural institutions.

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approach hedging through the lenses of security or economic dimensions. By bringing cultural hedging into the fold, one can extend their analysis of state behavior into unexplored dimensions, including language programs, media framing, educational exchanges, mobility flows, and cultural institutions. Complex cultural hedging also steers the study of state behavior away from the concept of omni-ennmeshment. Goh, among other authors, has introduced this concept, especially in the study of Southeast Asian countries' behavior toward the United States and China. This approach entails these states trying to entangle these powers in complex webs of inter-

dependent economic and diplomatic relations to influence or forestall aggressive intentions (Goh, 2005). Complex cultural hedging takes a different approach, deviating from constraint and focusing on strategic value extraction from both competing powers.

This analysis deliberately introduces the “complex” dimension of hedging, as the intended behavior cuts across multiple domains, including language, media, science, mobility, and food culture. The strategy is also intentionally asymmetrical, as middle powers such as KSA deliberately calibrate their hedge to extract different types of value from the major powers.



Saudi Arabia and China are developing cultural exchange as a strategic dimension of their bilateral relations. Saudi Minister of Culture Prince Badr bin Abdullah bin Farhan Al Saud and Chinese Minister of Culture and Tourism Sun Yeli at the signing ceremony of the executive program for the Saudi-China Cultural Year 2025, Beijing, October 17, 2024 (Photo: Saudi Press Agency [SPA], 2024).

Methodology and Conceptual Framework

The study employs a mixed-methods explanatory design that systematically combines quantitative and qualitative evidence. Quantitative components establish the measurable scale, growth rates, and comparative intensity of Saudi cultural engagement with the United States and China. In contrast, qualitative components reveal the strategic intent, official framing, and deliberate balancing that characterize complex cultural hedging. The integration of both methods provides a more complete picture than either could achieve alone.

The analysis is structured around the original concept of Complex Cultural Hedging, defined as Saudi Arabia's state-orchestrated strategy to simultaneously cultivate and balance cultural influences from two competing great powers without fully aligning with either. This framework operationalizes hedging across five concrete dimensions: (1) language and education, (2) cultural institutions and food diplomacy, (3) media and cultural visibility, (4) aviation connectivity and mobility, and (5) cultural and scientific cooperation. These dimensions are directly tied to Vision 2030's cultural openness pillar and serve as observable indicators of geopolitical maneuver.

Quantitative data is collected from official and international institutional sources covering 2020–2025: Saudi Ministries of Education and Culture (for language programs, Confucius Institutes), airline schedules (passenger flows), Scopus/Web of Science (co-authored publications), UNESCO and bilateral announcements (cultural and scientific agreements), and Google Maps/TripAdvisor listings (restaurant and fast-food chain expansion). Qualitative data comprise official documents (Vision 2030 reports, Ministry of Culture statements,

bilateral cultural-year agreements) and media content from state-aligned outlets (Al-Arabiya, Saudi Press Agency), as well as CGTN Arabic, VOA Arabic, and related coverage.

Quantitative analysis uses descriptive statistics, year-on-year growth rates, and comparative visualizations (tables, bar charts, line graphs) to highlight asymmetries and trends across the five dimensions. Qualitative analysis applies manual thematic coding to official statements and media texts, identifying recurring themes such as strategic ambiguity, selective adaptation, and narrative parallelism. Findings from both streams are triangulated in side-by-side tables and narrative synthesis to demonstrate how measurable cultural expansion serves deliberate hedging objectives.

Analysis and Findings

China's influence on KSA's language and education is evident in the number of educational institutions teaching Mandarin programs or curricula. Confucius Institutes are hallmark tools China uses to promote the Chinese language and culture. The first institute was inaugurated in July 2023 at Prince Sultan University, while a second operational one is at the University of Jeddah (Chaziza, 2023; Xinhua, 2023). Saudi schools also integrate Mandarin programs with the government's 2025 education plans, stating that over 102,000 students would learn Mandarin by 2029, with 56,000 learning it in 2025 as part of its win-win strategy to promote cultural exchange and enhance communication with China (Aboutine, 2024; Xinhua, 2025b). As of the second quarter of 2025, the total number of students studying Chinese in Saudi public education schools had reached about 56,000. This number is possible through the integration of Mandarin



Chinese language education constitute a growing dimension of linguistic and cultural exchange between Saudi Arabia and China. A Chinese language class for Saudi students at the Wisdom House Chinese Education Institute in Jeddah, October 20, 2024 (Photo: Su Yunhua/Nanfang+, 2024).

programs into Saudi Universities such as King Khalid University (2024), King Saud University (for language, history, and culture), and Jeddah University.

The influence of the U.S. on Saudi language and culture is evident through the Fulbright program. As the flagship educational exchange program between the countries, sponsored by the U.S., enables Saudi Academics and professionals to access U.S. universities, while U.S. experts are sent to engage with universities and cultural institutions (U.S. Mission Saudi Arabia, 2022). As of 2025 November, the number of Saudi students in the U.S. was approximately 15,000. English-language institutions in Saudi Arabia are also heavily influenced by America, with notable schools including The American International School of Jeddah (AISJ), The American School Dhahran (ASD), and the American International School

Riyadh, which enhance academic partnerships and promote Western values (Thomas Keith Independent School, 2025).

Curriculum reforms also point to a change in the English Foreign Language approach, with a mandatory communicative curriculum adopted nationwide since 2019. With digital/critical-thinking additions in 2023–2025 and in higher education, Saudi Universities were instructed to adopt the approach of the now-renowned English department, which delivers academic graduate and postgraduate programs and teaches English courses to students at the institutional level. 2019 also saw changes in the curriculum, with boys' secondary schools in Riyadh and Jeddah. Dammam was introduced to the Chinese as a third language, and this has been reflected ever since, especially with Vision 2030's growing demand for bilingual education.

Table 1: Indicators of Linguistic and Academic Engagement in Saudi Arabia: U.S. vs. China

Aspect	China's Influence	United States' Influence
Main Soft-Power Tool	Confucius Institutes	Fulbright Program
Key Institutions in KSA	Prince Sultan Univ. (2023), Univ. of Jeddah	AISJ, ASD, American Int'l School Riyadh
University Programs	Mandarin at King Khalid, King Saud, Jeddah Univ.	English departments mandatory; grad/postgrad in English
Student Numbers	56,000 learning Mandarin in public schools	15,000 Saudi students in U.S.
Curriculum	Mandarin as 3rd language since 2019; fast expansion	English mandatory since 2019; critical-thinking upgrades
Flow Direction	Mostly inward (teaching in KSA)	Two-way exchanges
Strategic Goal	"Win-win" cultural ties with China	Mutual understanding & Western values

Compiled by the authors.

Table 1 compares American and Chinese soft-power tools in Saudi education, detailing key programs, student numbers, and strategic goals for language learning and academic exchange as of 2025.

Saudi Arabia's engagement with China in video games and esports focuses on access to the mobile market, operational expertise, and infrastructure partnerships. In 2023, Savvy Games Group invested \$265 million in Tencent-backed VSPO, becoming its largest external shareholder to expand mobile esports tournaments and events in the Kingdom (Daniels, 2023). Chinese titles dominate the Saudi market, claiming 37 of

the top 100 most profitable games, while Saudi Arabia ranks among the top 10 foreign markets for Chinese games (Iqtait, 2025). Bilateral ties deepened with esports-strengthening agreements signed during a 2024 ministerial visit. Gi-ga-projects, such as Qiddiya's esports district and NEOM's AI gaming hub, actively invite Chinese tech firms and Tencent to serve as a strategic partner for the Esports World Cup, reinforcing people-to-people and economic linkages.

Saudi investments in U.S. gaming entities prioritize IP ownership and content innovation. PIF-backed Savvy Games Group, with a \$38 billion endowment, acquired Scopely for \$4.9

Table 2: US and Chinese Game Strategies in Saudi Arabia

Aspect	U.S. Engagement	Chinese Engagement
Investment	\$38B fund; Scopely \$4.9B; EA \$55B (2025)	\$265M in VSPO
Focus	IP ownership; stakes in major publishers	Mobile esports; tournaments; infrastructure
Market Role	Western innovation; NGES targets (\$13.3B GDP, 39k jobs)	37/100 top games; top-10 market; 2024 accords
Key Partners	Global acquisitions	Qiddiya/NEOM; Tencent (EWC)

Compiled by the authors.

billion and holds significant stakes in Activision Blizzard, Electronic Arts, and Take-Two Interactive (Goswami, 2023; Jaiswal, 2023). A landmark \$55 billion consortium-led acquisition of Electronic Arts was announced in 2025, poised to reshape global industry dynamics (Electronic Arts, 2025). These moves secure cutting-edge Western technology and creative pipelines, aligning with the National Gaming and Esports Strategy's ambition to contribute \$13.3 billion to GDP and create 39,000 jobs by 2030 while establishing Saudi Arabia as a global hub (PwC, 2024).

This table contrasts Saudi Arabia's gaming strategy: major U.S. investments target IP ownership and industry control, while engagements with China focus on mobile market access, esports infrastructure, and operational partnerships for mass-scale growth.

Saudi Arabia's PIF has sought to engage with the U.S. on sports, and since 2017, it has invested over \$170 billion. The most notable investment in sports was the LIV Golf series, which challenged the U.S.-based PGA Tour and eventually merged with it (Schenker, 2023). The PIF has

also demonstrated interest in American football events and Formula 1 hosting, which was announced in a 10-year deal worth over \$50 million (Bulos, 2024). The Kingdom uses lobbying firms to secure its influence in sports and also uses broadcasting through Saudi-owned football clubs.

China's influence on Saudi Arabia's use of sports as a soft power tool is evident in joint statements issued at the 2022 Saudi-Chinese summit that emphasize sports partnerships and cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2022). Collaborations include football infrastructure, youth academies, and strategic alliances for Asian football.

Collaborations are also evident in film production, with Chinese entities signing MoUs with the Saudi Film Commission since 2022. In 2025, Manga Productions entered into a strategic partnership with Bilibili, a Chinese entity, to stream Saudi anime series in China, distribute selected Chinese animated titles in Saudi Arabia, and produce a first-ever joint short film collection (Manga Productions, 2025).

Table 3: Saudi Arabia’s dual approach to film and animation

Aspect	U.S. Influence	Chinese Influence
Exhibition & Infrastructure	AMC Theatres JV; IMAX expansions	CineWaves China office (2023); ORI Group partnerships
Production Deals	Stampede Ventures multi-film pact (\$350M slate)	Manga-Bilibili 2025: streaming, MENA distro, joint shorts
Content Distribution	PIF backing Paramount Warner bid (2025 financing)	Ne Zha 2 Arabic premiere (2025); Saudi Film Commission MoUs
Animation Focus	Indirect via Japanese co-productions (e.g., The Journey)	Co-productions (ORI); Bilibili CAPSULES joint model

Compiled by the authors.

The findings also reveal engagement with co-production, including ORI animation and Arabic-dubbed Chinese films like *Ne Zha*. KSA’s top film distributors, like Cinewaves, have become more open to partnering with China. In 2023, it announced the opening of a physical office in China, with a business model of production, distribution, and talent cultivation (Vivarelli, 2023).

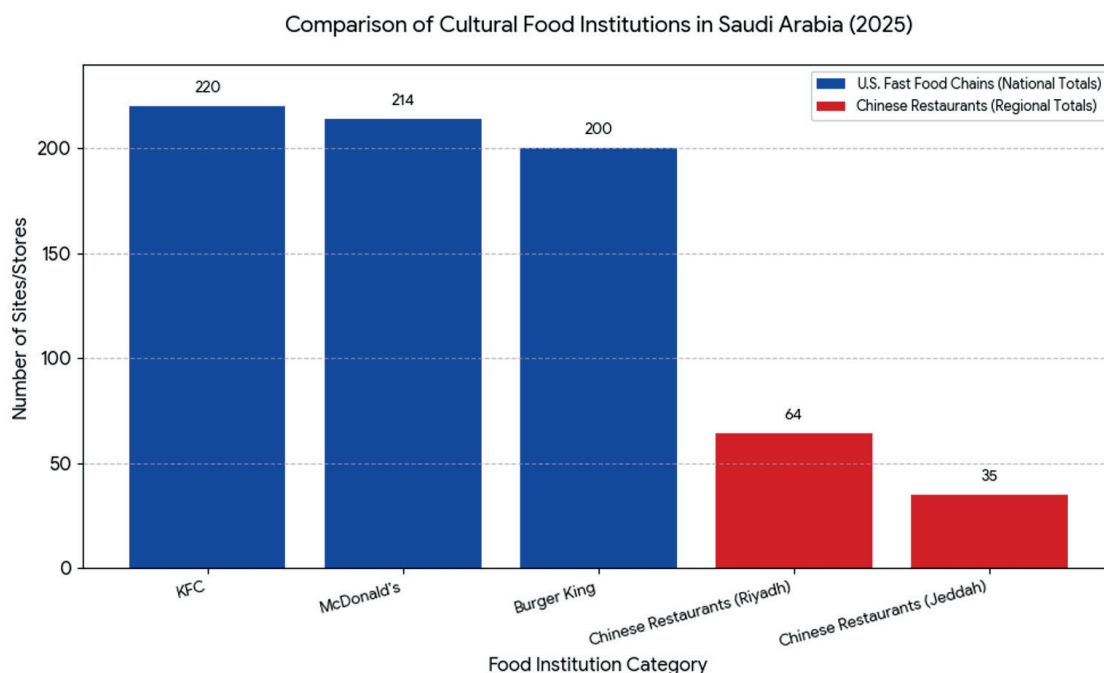
Saudi Arabia’s cultural hedging in films and animation balances U.S. Hollywood influence with emerging ties elsewhere. Post-2018 cinema ban lift, partnerships with U.S. firms like AMC Theatres (joint venture for chains, IMAX expansions to 18 screens) and Stampede Ventures multi-film deals (e.g., *Chasing Red*, *Fourth Wall* dominate exhibition and production). PIF-backed financing supports major Hollywood bids. Animation sees indirect U.S. links via Japanese co-productions, Manga Productions, and Toei to produce *the Journey*, while direct U.S. co-productions remain limited, prioritizing

prestige access over deeper alignment.

This table illustrates Saudi Arabia’s dual approach in film and animation: leveraging U.S. influence for high-value exhibition infrastructure and major production deals, while cultivating Chinese partnerships focused on co-production, content distribution, and market access.

Data from 2020–2025 indicate a robust expansion in food-related cultural institutions in Saudi Arabia, reflecting Vision 2030’s emphasis on tourism and experiential economy. As of 2025, Saudi Arabia ranks first in the growth rate of the Quick Service Restaurant (QSR) sector. American fast-food chains have become ubiquitous symbols of Western consumer culture, with steady outlet growth in urban centers like Riyadh and Jeddah, including McDonald’s (214), Burger King (200), and KFC (220). Meanwhile, Chinese restaurants have seen a more dynamic surge, particularly in the wake of enhanced bilateral ties. As of October 2025, the Riyadh region had hosted 64 Chinese restaurants, includ-

Figure 1: Comparative Scale of Food Diplomacy: U.S. QSR Chains vs. Chinese Restaurants in Saudi Arabia (2025)



Compiled by the authors based on data from Arora (2025).

ing 41 single-owner operations and 23 operated by larger brands. In Jeddah, there are over 30 Chinese restaurants, including Baytoti, China Hut, and Royal Chinese.

Figure 1 contrasts the presence of American fast-food chains (e.g., McDonald's with 214 outlets) against Chinese restaurants (e.g., 64 in Riyadh), illustrating asymmetric growth in cultural food influences under Vision 2030.

Media coverage from 2024–2025 across American and Chinese outlets reveals a patterned portrayal of Saudi relations: U.S. media emphasize security pacts, arms deals, and economic investments as foundational to long-standing

alliances, often framing them within broader regional stability and countering Iranian influence. Chinese media, conversely, highlight diplomatic milestones, economic synergies with Vision 2030, and cultural exchanges as symbols of mutual prosperity and multipolar harmony. Saudi state media and government-aligned platforms maintain a posture of equidistance, using parallel language to amplify positive narratives from both powers while curating content to underscore “active neutrality.” This approach is evident in state broadcasts, social media, and press releases, where coverage volume on bilateral events is roughly balanced.

During the 2025 Trump-MBS meeting, the American Media, particularly CNN Arabic, extensively reported on the high-stakes meetings. The main focus, however, was on security deals such as a \$142 billion arms deal, the transfer of advanced fighter jets, Riyadh’s nuclear ambitions, and U.S. access to rare earth metals. Other themes include the Khashoggi murder, the Abraham Accords, and the transfer of mil-

itary technology. U.S. media frame Saudi-U.S. relations as security partnerships and strategic benefits for both. Chinese media coverage of Saudi-China relations is comprehensive. In 2025, CGTN Arabic reported on Saudi-China relations through cultural lens, including the spring festival fair in January, which marked the launch of the China-Saudi Arabia Year of Culture. Coverage highlighted multidimen-

Table 4: Comparative Media Presence for China and the United States in Saudi Arabia

	American Media (CNN/VOA Arabic) Focus on Saudi-U.S. Relations	Chinese Media (CGTN Arabic) Focus on Saudi-China Relations
Primary Frame	Conditional Security/Transactional (Emphasis on risk, leverage, and policy pressure).	Stable Development/Mutually Beneficial (Emphasis on opportunity, respect, and growth).
Core Components	Military Deals, Geopolitics (Iran/China rivalry), Oil/Energy Security, Technology Transfer (security-focused).	Economic Investment (BRI), Tech/AI Cooperation, Cultural Exchange, Non-interference principle.
Values Focus	High & Critical: Human Rights, Khashoggi, Democracy, Regional Policy Alignment (Abraham Accords).	Low & Positive: Sovereignty Respect, Non-interference. Values are framed via cultural exchange.
Geopolitical Context	Indispensable Security Anchor; partnership often stressed/challenged.	Economic Counterweight; constructive, non-interfering diplomatic presence.
2025 Example	Focus on \$142B Arms Deal, Nuclear Ambitions, and Khashoggi Murder shadow.	Focus on Cultural Year, Spring Festival Fair, and expanding strategic cooperation.

Compiled by the authors based on CGTN, 2025; CNN Arabic, n.d.

sional cultural displays, art, performances, and festivals, as bridges for people-to-people ties, aligning with 35 years of diplomacy and Vision 2030's openness. CGTN also covered comprehensive strategic partnerships in 2025 during Chinese Vice President Han Zheng's visit to Saudi Arabia, noting expanding practical cooperation in strategic fields and increased people-to-people and cultural exchanges to lift the China-Saudi Arabia comprehensive strategic partnership.

This table (Table 4) contrasts U.S. and Chinese media framing of relations with Saudi Arabia, highlighting differences in primary narrative focus, core coverage themes, and values emphasized in 2025 reporting.

The government-affiliated media (such as the Saudi Press Agency - SPA) manages its relations with China and the U.S. by compartmentalizing its coverage, emphasizing different thematic areas for each superpower. The core

media narrative seeks to replace the image of a dependent client state with that of an autonomous middle power that dictates the terms of its partnerships. In the U.S., it presents the benefits of cultural and soft influences by portraying U.S. engagement through the lens of modernization, high-tech security, and elite collaboration. In China, the media frames the country as a reliable, results-oriented partner in massive economic transformation, strategically using cultural diplomacy to solidify this bond.

The table summarizes how Saudi state media compartmentalizes coverage of U.S.-Chinese relations, aligning each partnership with distinct value propositions and strategic objectives.

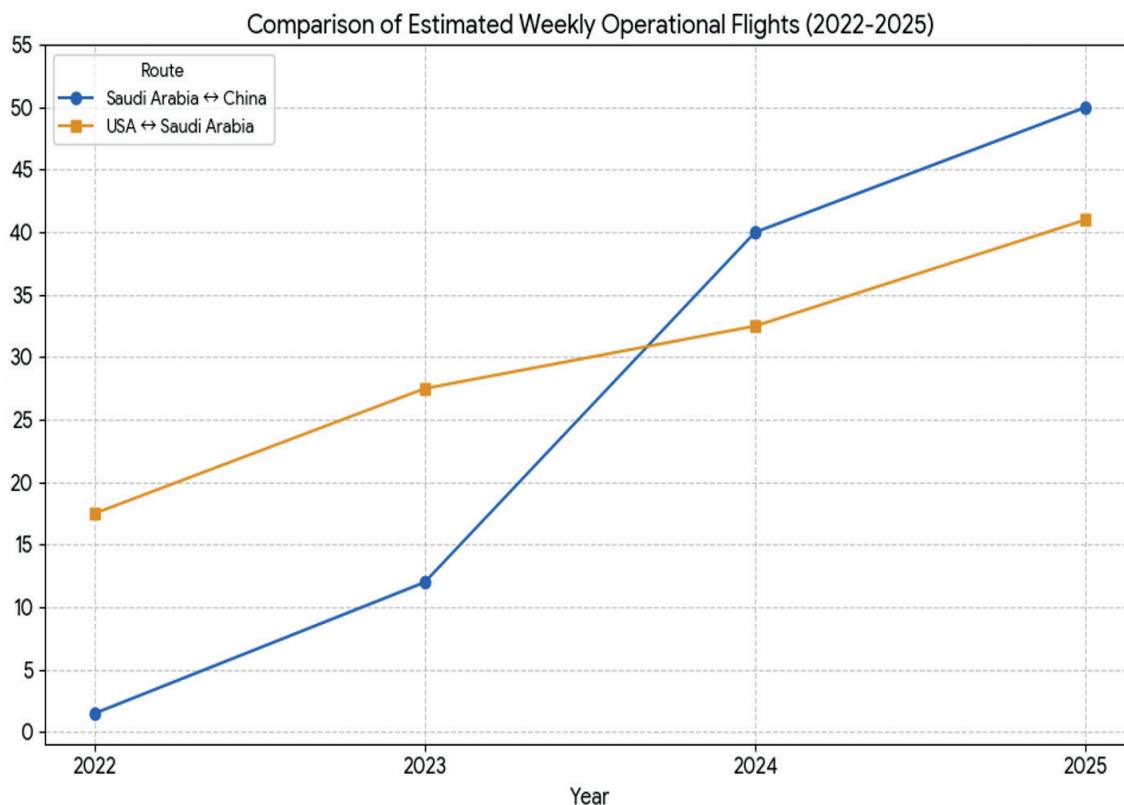
Air connectivity data from 2022–2025 demonstrate a marked acceleration in Saudi Arabia's aviation links with both the U.S. and China, aligning with Vision 2030's tourism and diversification goals.

Table 5: Saudi Government Media Narratives

Partnership	Media Focus (Value Proposition)	Goal in Media Narrative
U.S. Relations	Security & Strategic Technology	Maintains the essential defense umbrella and access to advanced Western knowledge while signaling internal autonomy.
China Relations	Economic Development & Soft Power	Secures long-term economic development and a reliable customer/investor for Vision 2030, all framed by a principle of mutual respect.

Compiled by the authors.

Figure 2: Comparison of estimated weekly operational flights between Saudi Arabia and both China and the United States



Compiled by the authors using data from Aviation360 Team (2024), Momondo (n.d.), and Simple Flying (2024).

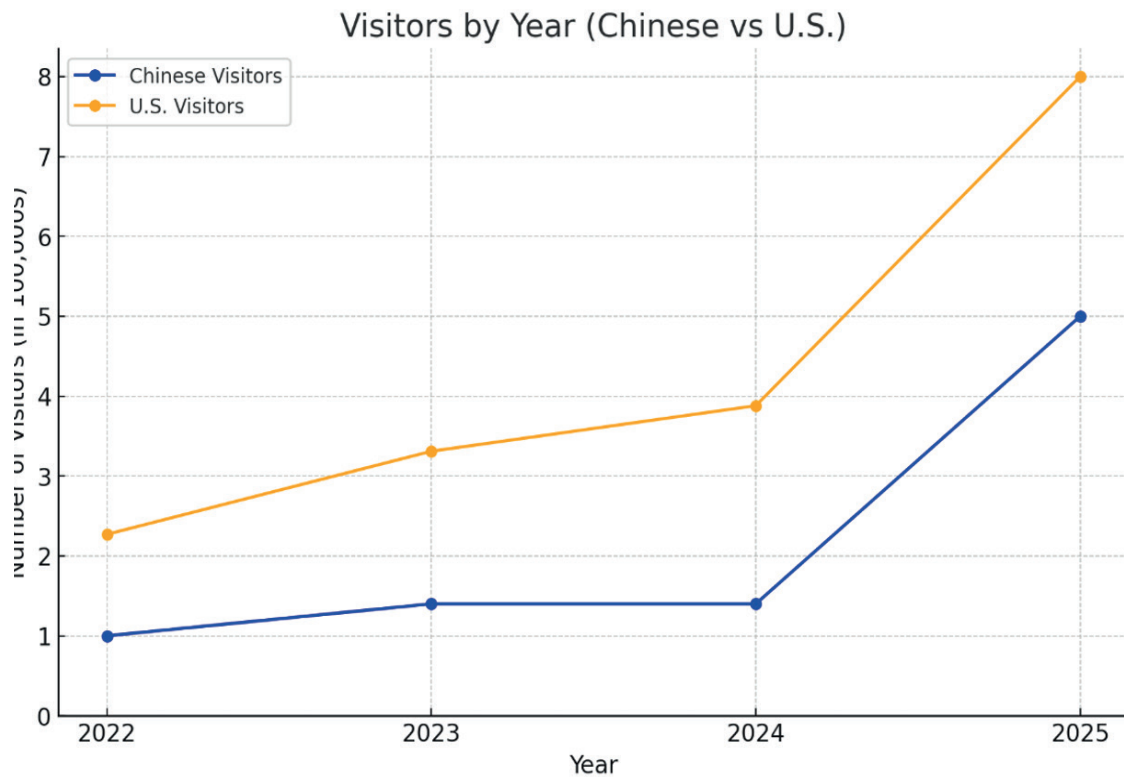
The results in the above graph show a significant increase in Saudi-China air routes, with direct flights expanding from 1 weekly in 2022 to over 45 weekly by November 2025. The airlines responsible for these flights are Saudia, Air China, and China Southern. Regarding the number of passengers, the number of travelers from China to Saudi Arabia is expected to exceed 500,000 in 2025, up from Q3 projections of 350,000, which is 350,000 more than in 2024 and 400,000 more than in 2023 (Xinhua, 2025a).

A look at Saudi-U.S. flight routes shows an in-

crease from about 20 flights per week in 2022 to more than 45 in 2025, especially during the summer and peak Hajj periods. The biggest airline on this route is Saudia, which has also applied for extra routes. In 2024, the U.S.-Saudi Arabia air route carried approximately 388,000 bilateral passengers, rising to an estimated 800,000 in 2025.

The number of tourists from both China and the U.S. in Saudi Arabia has risen steadily over the last four years. The table below compares tourist numbers from both countries in these years.

Figure 3: A comparative line graph for Chinese and U.S. visitors between 2022 and 2025



Compiled by the authors using data from Aviation360 Team (2024), Simple Flying (2024), Xinhua News Agency (2025), and Sabq (2025).

This line graph in Figure 3 compares the rising trends in tourist arrivals from China and the United States, highlighting the sharp increase in Chinese travelers.

Cultural and scientific cooperation between Saudi Arabia, the U.S., and China from 2020 to 2025 demonstrates a balanced yet differentiated approach to exchanges, with the U.S. leading in established scientific research partnerships and China in emerging cultural initiatives. On student exchange programs focused on the U.S, the Fulbright program facilitates considerable exchanges

annually, including U.S. Scholars, English Teaching Assistants, and Fulbright/KAUST Graduate Awards supporting Saudi master's students in STEM at King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST). In exchanges with China, a July 2025 report showed 174 Saudi students studying in Chinese colleges, comprising 43 self-funded students and 131 scholarship recipients. Chinese students are also enrolled in Saudi Arabian institutions, with 688 enrolled as of July 2025, some of whom are supported by the 477 annual scholarships Saudi Arabia offers to Chinese Students.

**Table 6: Comparative Indicators of Saudi Arabia’s Educational and Cultural Exchanges:
U.S. vs. China (2025)**

Indicator (2025)	U.S. Focus	China Focus
Student Exchanges (Annual)	5 annual Fulbright/KAUST awards	174 (scholarships; target 800 by 2028)
Total Students Abroad	15,000 Saudis in U.S. for 2025	174 Saudis in China; 688 Chinese in KSA
Cultural Infrastructure	Fulbright Program	2 Confucius Institutes; 56,000 Mandarin learners
Tourism Arrivals (Mobility Indicator)	800,000	500,000
UNESCO-Supported Exchanges	Joint faculty visits via KAUST ties	Intercultural dialogue training (AlUla)

Compiled by the authors based on Benaim (2025), U.S. Fulbright Program (n.d.), and Xinhua (2025b).

Tourism trends in 2025 indicate that cultural diplomacy with tourists from both China and the U.S. has steadily risen year-on-year since 2022. Educational mobility between Saudi Arabia and the U.S. remains skewed toward the U.S., with about 15,000 Saudis studying there. For China, educational mobility includes hybrid programs at KSU and PKU, with 56,000 domestic Mandarin learners supporting outbound flows.

Saudi Arabia is expanding its cultural and scientific engagements with the U.S. and China in multiple ways. U.S. collaborations emphasize long-term scientific research and educational exchanges, with established partnerships yielding high-impact outputs in energy, space, and STEM fields. Chinese initiatives, accelerated by the 2025 Cultural Year, focus on heritage

preservation, archaeological joint ventures, and emerging academic ties, fostering cultural diplomacy.

The two countries are engaging in heritage restoration and archaeological research. In 2025, a five-year agreement established a structured cooperation mechanism to conduct research projects jointly and systematically catalog cultural materials. This agreement was signed by the China-Arab Cultural and Tourism Cooperation Research Center (CACTCRC) and Saudi Arabia’s Ministry of Culture as part of the China-Saudi Arabia Year of Culture. Notable partnerships are restoration at AlUla and Diriyah sites. Cultural exchanges are also evident in MoUs between Chinese and Saudi Arabian learning institutions. Such MoUs include the

Table 7: Comparative Cultural and Scientific Collaborations (2020–2025)

Aspect	With China	With the U.S.
Primary Focus	Cultural Heritage & Soft Power	Advanced Science & Core Technology
Key Areas	Archaeology, Film Co-Production, Language Institutes	Energy R&D, Space Exploration, University Networks
Institutional Forms	Joint Cultural Centers, Media MoUs, University Institutes	Endowed Academic Chairs, Government Space Agreements, Research Consortia
Strategic Objective	Diversify cultural influence and build alternative soft power partnerships.	Maintain technological access and secure expertise for economic diversification (Vision 2030).

Compiled by the authors based on Aramco Americas (2022), Saudi Gazette (2025), Saudi Press Agency (2025), and Yang and Knowles (2019).

King Abdulaziz University's (KAU) Chinese Culture and Science Institute, in collaboration with the Chinese language institute in Jeddah, to promote China-Saudi cultural exchange through cultural events, scientific exhibitions, and advanced Chinese language courses, as well as collaborative research projects between the two institutions.

The collaboration is centered on scientific cooperation, with specific examples such as the Aramco-Stanford partnership, which endows a professorship in Earth sciences and supports joint R&D for sustainable energy futures. The findings also reveal a trilateral King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM)-Aramco-Stanford collaboration, which has published reports on complex reactive fluids and

engaged in academic discussions on sedimentation and the reservoir properties of barchan dunes. They are also engaged in space research and cooperation through the 2024 U.S.-Saudi Aeronautics and Space Agreement, which enables joint space science projects and lunar exploration. By embedding its next generation of scientists and engineers within top U.S. research ecosystems, Saudi Arabia cultivates essential expertise and fosters enduring academic networks, creating a stable, knowledge-based link that persists through geopolitical shifts.

Table 7 highlights the distinct primary areas of Saudi cooperation with China (cultural heritage, soft power) and with the U.S. (advanced science and technology), including key institutional forms and strategic objectives.

Table 8: Primary Data Sources and Methodological Notes

Dimension	Key Claim	Primary Source	Notes
Language & Education	56,000 Mandarin learners (2025)	Saudi Ministry of Education via Arab News (2024); China.org.cn (Dec 2025)	Confirmed figure per Q2 2025 official count; 102,000 target by 2029 is ministerial projection
Language & Education	~15,000 Saudi students in U.S.	U.S. Embassy Riyadh; Fulbright/KAUST data (Nov 2025)	Approximate figure from embassy reporting
Gaming & Esports	\$265M VSPO investment	Esports Insider (Feb 17, 2023); Reuters (Apr 5, 2023)	Confirmed via company announcement
Gaming & Esports	37/100 top games Chinese titles	Near East Policy Forum (Dec 4, 2025)	Based on revenue rankings reported by NEPF citing Sensor Tower data
Gaming & Esports	\$55B EA acquisition	EA investor relations press release (announced Dec 2025; accessed Jan 7, 2026)	Announced deal; subject to regulatory approval
Air Connectivity	~500,000 Chinese visitors (2025)	Simple Flying (Nov 2024); Aviation360 (Apr 2024)	Q3 2025 projection extrapolated from route expansion data; treated as estimate
Air Connectivity	~50 weekly U.S. flights (2025)	Momondo route data (Dec 9, 2025)	Includes seasonal Hajj-period peaks
Food Diplomacy	McDonald's 214, KFC 220, BK 200 sites	Restroworks Industry Report (May 2025)	Outlet count from industry database
Food Diplomacy	64 Chinese restaurants in Riyadh	Google Maps/TripAdvisor search (Oct 2025)	Author-verified count; 41 independent, 23 chain
Science Cooperation	KFUPM-Aramco-Stanford collaboration	Aramco Americas press release (Dec 2022); Stanford Daily (Apr 2019)	Ongoing partnership confirmed via institutional sources
Science Cooperation	2024 U.S.-Saudi Aeronautics Agreement	Saudi Press Agency (SPA), specific article: Saudi Space Agency Signs Agreement with NASA, accessed Dec 9, 2025	Government-to-government agreement

Compiled by the authors.

Research Findings and Discussion

From the empirical findings, it is clear that KSA is pursuing a state-sanctioned hedging strategy that shifts from the traditional security and economic domains into the cultural space. With its position in the GCC and history of relations with major powers, KSA has redefined foreign influence through deliberate strategies that maximize its autonomy without compromising national identity.

The basis of KSA's complex cultural hedging lies in managing both U.S. and Chinese ideological influences. The U.S. continues to offer the preferred pathway for elite formation and scientific excellence: approximately 15,000 Saudi students studied in American universities in 2024–2025, sustained by the Fulbright program and KAUST partnerships that embed Western critical-thinking paradigms. Within the Kingdom, there is a notable focus on Mandarin classes, as evidenced by the presence of over 50,000 domestic learners and Confucius Institutes. The Kingdom, however, frames the need for Mandarin classes as a tool to enhance its economy, without acknowledging their political value. Through the strategy, KSA is positioned to balance liberal Western values with the efficiency of China's model, all while ensuring these values do not upend its domestic ideologies.

In its cultural hedging, Vision 2030 is the central filter for all foreign cultural inflows, explicitly subordinating them to "Saudi characteristics" and Arab-Islamic identity. Language is a perfect example of a selective adaptation strategy, with English compulsory from primary school through higher education institutions. It is, however, considered a second language, with Arabic being the first language and largely used in religious and civic education. The adoption of Mandarin as a third language is also framed as a tool for China-Saudi

Arabia win-win cooperation and for tapping into BRI opportunities, rather than for cultural assimilation. Vision 2030 thus allows KSA to transform potentially disruptive foreign cultural inflows into controlled, identity-compatible assets and to position itself as a strategic middle soft-power culture. In food culture and cuisine diplomacy, the explosive growth of American quick-service restaurants demonstrates Western consumer modernity. These chains are located in urban hubs and cater to KSA's youth demographic, which is insistent on speed, personalization, and casual socializing. Chinese restaurants offer exotic authenticity and allow individuals in Saudi Arabia to experiment with new dishes, aligning with China's emphasis on collective exchange over individualism without threatening halal norms. This dual engagement in consumer culture reinforces a hedging strategy, where both are welcomed as revenue generators for economic diversification under the tourism pillar and as sources of soft-power goodwill, without endorsing either model's values in full.

The findings in culture and entertainment reveal a sophisticated dual-track strategy: Saudi Arabia leverages Chinese partnerships for market scale and infrastructure (e.g., mobile esports, distribution networks), while engaging with the U.S. for intellectual property, creative capital, and prestige (e.g., acquiring major studios, Hollywood deals). This allows the Kingdom to simultaneously build mass appeal in China and secure high-value global influence in the West, directly fueling its ambition to become a middle soft-culture power by controlling both the platforms and the content of modern entertainment.

Media strategy reinforces the posture of active neutrality. Saudi state-aligned outlets such as Al-Arabiya and the Saudi Press Agency consistently frame the U.S. as a historic strategic partner.

China, on the other hand, is portrayed as a comprehensive strategic partner, and both countries are accorded almost equal coverage. The Saudi Media is also selective on the topics it can discuss for each country. It avoids discussions on critical narratives such as the death of Khashoggi and the ensuing tensions between Saudi Arabia and the U.S. after the incident. For China, the Saudi media avoids Uyghur-related stories or other internal affairs in China. The result is a domestic public opinion that overwhelmingly prefers a balanced approach.

Mobility patterns provide the clearest expression of the strategy. Direct flight capacity to and from China exploded between 2022 and 2025, delivering an estimated 500,000 Chinese visitors in 2025. U.S. routes, while growing more modestly to approximately 50 weekly flights, continue to attract higher-value traffic, including elite students, business executives, and long-term residents. The asymmetry is intentionally crafted by Saudi Arabia, ensuring that China supplies volume and future-oriented mass exposure, while the United States retains primacy in depth and human capital formation. Combined with a total of 30 million international arrivals in 2025, these flows demonstrate that people-to-people diplomacy has become the most dynamic frontier of Saudi foreign policy.

Despite its sophistication, Saudi Arabia's cultural hedging strategy and the resulting middle soft-power culture carry significant risks. Most evident are ideological tensions with liberal values such as individualism, gender mixing, and secular critique, which directly clash with the Chinese state-led model of collective discipline and political conformity. Although both are officially depoliticized through selective adaptation, prolonged exposure could cause unease, impacting the grand strategy. There is also a high chance of unaddressed or unevenly distributed domestic resistance. Conser-

vative segments, including religious scholars and tribal elders, continue to view American cultural imports as the primary threat to Islamic identity. At the same time, Chinese influence is often perceived as economically utilitarian and therefore less corrosive. This could create the perception that the hedge tilts eastward, potentially alienating pro-Western elites and triggering renewed social-conservative mobilization.

The Saudi government, the architects of Vision 2030, and hedging strategies also need to strategize on how to manage perceptions. When cultural openness is overly instrumentalized, as in state-orchestrated fusion festivals or rapid Mandarin rollouts, younger Saudis and international observers may dismiss it as "soft-power washing," undermining the desired image of organic moderation. Another risk is that success hinges on cultural elites and public opinion. Religious authorities, intellectuals, and social-media influencers retain veto power over what is deemed acceptable. Any major incident, such as a high-profile controversy involving Western entertainment or Chinese labor practices, could rapidly shift public sentiment and force retrenchment. Sustaining the hedge, therefore, demands continuous, delicate calibration between openness and the preservation of identity.

Conclusion

Evidence from the study on Saudi Arabia's complex hedging strategy challenges the prevailing focus of hedging scholarship on trade balances, arms procurement, and base access. The Kingdom's strategic leveraging of Vision 2030 institutions, selective adaptation mechanisms, and dual-track cultural diplomacy acts as a lower-risk, higher-legitimacy domain for diversifying great-power exposure. By cultivating parallel relations and goodwill with Washington

and Beijing, Riyadh mitigates the uncertainties of U.S. retrenchment and Chinese assertiveness. Also, it strengthens domestic legitimacy among a youth population hungry for global engagement. In an era of intensifying U.S.–China competition, Saudi Arabia's cultural hedge therefore represents a pioneering adaptation. It transforms soft power competition into a strategic asset, creating a middle-ground soft power culture rather than a liability, thereby securing greater maneuvering room while preserving the Kingdom's core identity. On autonomy, Riyadh derives maximum benefit from both superpowers without subordinating itself. Future research should examine emerging digital arenas, streaming platforms, anime co-productions, esports partnerships, and AI collaboration frameworks, as the next frontier of complex cultural hedging, where soft-power competition is likely to intensify. 🌸

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