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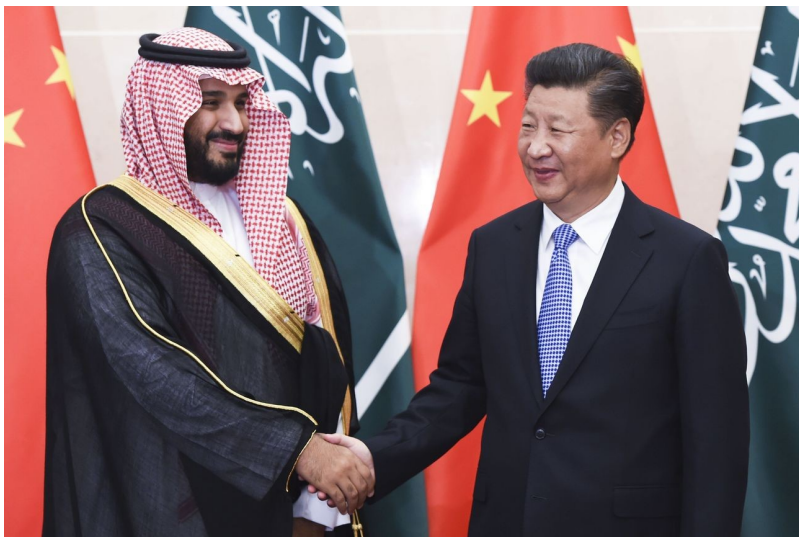
OPINION | COMMENTARY

# *Saudi Arabia Turns Toward China*

Crown Prince Mohammed is guiding the kingdom toward an assertive foreign-policy stance.

By Karen Elliott House

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Chinese President Xi Jinping meets with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Beijing, Aug. 31.

PHOTO: GAO JIE/ZUMA PRESS

*Riyadh, Saudi Arabia*

Aging disco queen Gloria Gaynor opened a global investment conference here with her signature song: “You think I’d lay down and die? Oh no, not I. I will survive.” Whether intended by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman as a pugnacious rebuke to human rights critics or not, the song’s message sums up a newly visible bravado and assertiveness in Saudi Arabia.

Five years ago, Mr. bin Salman, then-deputy crown prince and now Saudi Arabia’s de facto leader, unveiled Vision 2030, his ambitious—many said grandiose—plan to diversify the Saudi economy. Only three years ago, Western investors horrified by the murder of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi stayed away from

the annual Future Investment Initiative conference. But this year Wall Street's biggest names were back.

On a recent three-week visit to Saudi Arabia, I met with a dozen senior ministers and royal court advisers as well as ordinary Saudis of long acquaintance. What I found was a kingdom grown confident about its domestic economic reforms and increasingly assertive in its foreign policy—perhaps out of necessity.

Doubts about the Biden administration's reliability are ubiquitous and readily expressed. Saudi Arabia is edging East with no apologies. "The crown prince managed President Trump effectively, but he meshed with China's President Xi," one of his ministers says. Most Saudi ministers prefer to speak without attribution as the crown prince likes to speak for Saudi Arabia.

Xi Jinping visited Riyadh in 2016, and Crown Prince Mohammed traveled to Beijing three years later. Indeed, the crown prince is emulating Mr. Xi's tactics: suppressing political dissent, tightening his grip on the Saudi economy, and assertively pursuing a self-interested foreign policy.

"We are pro-growth," says Mohammed al Tuwaijri, a royal court economic adviser. "Wherever we find an opportunity that works for us we take it."

"You name it, we are doing it with China," says another adviser. "China is a strategic partner." Saudi secondary schools have begun teaching Chinese.

Crown Prince Mohammed is juggling several difficult transitions at once. To wean Saudis off their dependence on government largess, he has cut subsidies for energy, raised gasoline prices, and imposed heavy taxes for the first time, thus sharply increasing the cost of living. He has anesthetized the pain by giving Saudis sweeping social freedoms—concerts, car races, and mixing of the sexes. Women can now drive and hold jobs outside the home. These changes are popular, but huge investments in digital infrastructure—which during the pandemic lockdowns provided 99% of Saudis access to telemedicine, education and routine government services—have solidified support for the crown prince's agenda.

Still, progress on domestic reforms could be washed away by external events. Saudi Arabia is surrounded by growing dangers. Iran is on the cusp of becoming a nuclear power. Ethiopia is embroiled in a civil war, and Sudan's government has

fallen to a coup. The Saudi-backed government in Yemen is still fighting a war against Houthi rebels. Riyadh would like to end the fighting but doesn't expect that will happen soon.

All this poses the nightmare possibility of a stream of refugees into wealthy and stable Saudi Arabia. Such mass migration could play havoc with an expensive plan to transform the Red Sea into an international tourist destination. "This isn't just a migration crisis but could destroy our tourism industry, and jobs," says one minister.

Another international issue with domestic implications is the growing tension between the U.S. and China. Saudi officials worry about getting stuck between the two big powers. China is now Saudi Arabia's largest trading partner because of Beijing's thirst for Saudi oil. The kingdom buys weapons from China. The growing animosity over Taiwan and global trade unnerve Riyadh. The U.S habit of imposing sanctions on opponents and expecting allies to join is something Saudi Arabia seems determined to resist. "Don't make us choose," says a prominent Saudi minister in a sentiment echoed by many. "Our oil sales have to fund our people."

While the Biden administration pays lip service to partnership with Saudi Arabia, actions haven't followed. The U.S. has largely cut sales of offensive weapons to Riyadh, pulled out the defensive Patriot missiles that protect the kingdom from attack, and thus far failed to enunciate any strategy for how to confront a nuclear Iran. Saudis believe an Iranian bomb is imminent. There also is grumbling here that the U.S. purports to want peace in Yemen but won't act to interdict the flow of weapons from Iran to the Houthis.

"Muddled" and "confused" are the words Saudi ministers use to describe U.S. Mideast policy. "Public pronouncements are fine but on the working level nothing happens," says a Saudi foreign policy official.

Beyond the complex domestic and external transitions confronting Saudi Arabia is the growing global battle over climate change. Saudi Arabia has committed to net-zero carbon emissions by 2060. As the world's largest producer of fossil fuels, however, it is a favorite target of green activists who want an immediate end to investments in fossil fuel. President Biden, who has hamstrung U.S. production to

please climate activists, now insists that the Saudis pump more oil to keep stateside gas prices low. “Hypocrisy,” say senior Saudis. Oil now is more than \$80 a barrel. Once the pandemic ends and economic growth rebounds, Saudi officials believe it could reach \$150. Asked how the kingdom will balance all these complex and competing demands, one senior foreign policy official said, “With difficulty.”

Here again the Saudis are showing their determination to pursue self-interest, even at the risk of alienating allies. Prince Abdul Aziz bin Salman, the kingdom’s oil minister, told an international conference here recently that the developing world can’t be kept in poverty by developed nations eager for a cleaner climate. As poor nations develop, he said, their energy needs will grow. “Renewable energy will take time,” he said. “Meanwhile, there must be energy to fuel the global economy.”

Saudi Arabia is investing in renewables but also is raising its capacity to produce oil. The kingdom will invest \$300 billion to expand its production capacity to 13 million barrels a day by 2027 from 12 million now. Currently, Saudi Arabia is pumping only about nine million barrels a day, but officials believe global demand will rise rapidly as economic growth resumes after the pandemic. “We are doing this as a hedge for the world economy,” says Finance Minister Mohammed al Jadaan.

Saudi Arabia’s rulers once preferred to pursue cautious, consensual policies. Those days are over for good. Mohammed bin Salman’s Saudi Arabia is speaking with a newfound authority.

*Ms. House, a former publisher of The Wall Street Journal, is author of “On Saudi Arabia: Its People, Past, Religion, Fault Lines—and Future.”*

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