

**Saudi Arabia**

## Saudi Arabia moves closer to joining Chinese security club

Beijing's push for Mideast influence gathers momentum as Riyadh takes step towards political and trade alliance



When Xi Jinping met Saudi Arabia's crown prince Mohammed bin Salman in Riyadh in December he hailed a 'new era' in Beijing's relationship with the Gulf © Saudi Press Agency/Handout via Reuters

#### **Samer Al-Atrush** in Dubai YESTERDAY

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Saudi Arabia has taken a step towards joining a Chinese-led regional security and trade club, as Beijing's push for influence in the Middle East gathers momentum.

The kingdom will become a dialogue partner of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation after the move was approved by the cabinet on Wednesday, almost three months after Chinese president Xi Jinping visited [Saudi Arabia](#).

The SCO, a political, security and trade alliance set up in 2001 as a rival to western influence, has eight full members: China, Russia, India, Pakistan and four central Asian nations. Iran is expected to become a full member of the alliance this year after signing a memorandum of obligations last September.

Other Middle Eastern states such as Qatar and Egypt — which like Saudi Arabia have close military ties to Washington — are also dialogue partners of the SCO, a first step to full membership.

When Xi met Saudi Arabia's crown prince Mohammed bin Salman in Riyadh in December, he hailed a "new era" in Beijing's relationship with the Gulf. Two months after the December meeting, Beijing brokered a deal to restore diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and its regional rival, Iran.

The rapprochement helped to ease regional tensions and added momentum to peace talks in Yemen, where a Saudi-led military coalition had been battling Iranian-backed rebel Houthis.

But China's involvement also underscored Beijing's growing ambitions in a region long considered a US zone of influence, as well as Saudi Arabia's desire to diversify its foreign relations.

Chinese state media reported that Xi spoke with Prince Mohammed on Tuesday, offering Beijing's assistance in further Saudi-Iranian talks.

[China](#) is already Saudi Arabia's largest trade partner, and the kingdom has been investing more in the country. This week, it announced a joint venture with Chinese companies to build a 300,000 barrel-a-day refinery in China, and an agreement to acquire 10 per cent of a Chinese oil refiner for \$3.6bn.

Washington has watched China's advances in the Middle East with wariness, and warned that some types of co-operation with Beijing could weaken their relations with the US. It has raised concerns about the adoption of Huawei 5G technology in the region, and put pressure on the United Arab Emirates into shutting down what the US said was a Chinese security facility.

Xi's visit to Saudi Arabia in December came a month after President Joe Biden vowed during a trip to Jeddah that the US would not abandon the region to China, Russia and Iran.

But few analysts expect China to supplant the US, which remains the top military and security partner for Gulf countries, despite such Gulf states expressing concern that Washington has grown increasingly distant.

US relations with Saudi Arabia reached a low point last year after Riyadh led moves by oil-exporting countries to raise production at a time of soaring inflation and just before the US midterm elections. The White House threatened to reassess its relationship with Saudi Arabia, but Saudi and US officials say the crisis has passed.

