Digital currencies

Saudi Arabia quits China-led cross-border currency platform

Kingdom's central bank withdrew from programme which is part of Beijing's effort to develop an alternative system to the dollar

A customer uses China's digital currency to pay for goods © FeatureChina/AP

FT reporters

Published SEP 20 2026

Saudi Arabia has withdrawn from a Beijing-led digital currency programme that is part of China's efforts to develop an alternative cross-border payments system to the dollar.

The mBridge platform has attracted controversy in the US amid concerns that participants could use it to bypass dollar-dominated conventional payment systems such as Swift.

The new platform, which will soon be rolled out commercially, uses blockchain technology to transact directly between central banks using their own digital currencies, cutting the time and costs of foreign exchange transactions and reducing the role of the dollar as an intermediary currency.

Saudi Arabia, a longstanding US ally in the Middle East, became an active participant in the platform in 2024, joining China, Hong Kong, Thailand, the United Arab Emirates and the Bank for International Settlements. Riyadh confirmed to the FT that it had withdrawn last year, saying this was part of its original "plan". Its withdrawal had not previously been made public.

When asked if the Saudi Central Bank, also known as SAMA, had faced any US pressure to withdraw, a person familiar with the matter said it would be "inaccurate to draw any wider inference" from the decision given that its involvement was limited to begin with.

The Bank for International Settlements left the platform in October 2024. The FT has reported that Washington put pressure on the BIS to withdraw. Agustín Carstens, general manager of BIS at the time, later said that the institution "graduated out" of the project, leaving it in the hands of the central bank partners, "not because it was a failure and not because of political considerations".

US President Donald Trump has threatened Brics countries with 100 per cent tariffs if they pursue alternatives to the dollar. Early last year, Daleep Singh, the then White House deputy National Security Advisor for International Economics under the Biden administration, said China could "exert tremendous leverage in setting the standards for this platform in terms of privacy, security, interoperability and the enforcement of US sanctions".

Eswar Prasad, professor at Cornell University and senior fellow at Brookings, said many US allies saw initiatives such as mBridge as beneficial for their economies and to reduce excessive dependence on the dollar-dominated global financial system.

"But they are also acutely sensitive to US pushback against initiatives seen as potentially reducing the dollar's importance and, even worse, boosting the Chinese renminbi's role in international finance," Prasad said.

But he said “backing off from such initiatives puts caution ahead of valour” given the potential benefits of these financial innovations.

In a statement provided to the FT, the Saudi Central Bank said that as part of its research into central bank digital currencies, it first joined “mBridge under the umbrella of BIS as an observing member” in 2023.

It then participated in the efforts to develop the basic version of the platform, known in business parlance as a “minimum viable product”, and to create a “proof of concept” in 2024.

“As planned, SAMA successfully completed its mBridge [proof of concept] on 13 May 2025. Following the completion of the PoC, SAMA is no longer a participating member of mBridge,” the statement said.

Another person familiar with the situation confirmed that the Saudi Central Bank no longer wanted to be publicly involved with the project, while adding that it continued to engage more discreetly.

Among the other central banks involved in the programme, the Bank of Thailand, Central Bank of the United Arab Emirates, the PBoC and the Hong Kong Monetary Authority declined to comment. The Monetary Authority of Macau joined the platform this year and launched the system in June.

Reporting by Joe Leahy in Beijing, Arjun Neil Alim in Hong Kong, Ahmed Al Omran in Riyadh, Nicolas Parasie in Dubai and A. Anantha Lakshmi in Jakarta

Follow the topics in this article

Foreign exchange

Digital currencies

Central banks

Chinese economy

Chinese business & finance