On August 2, 1990, King Fahd of Saudi Arabia and the top rulers of the al-Saud family recalled the state collapses, which occurred in the Kingdom in 1818 and in 1891. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, in fact, directly threatened not only the legitimacy of the al-Saud but also the existence of the Saudi state. From the time the third kingdom of Saudi Arabia was established in 1902, security and state survival have become the top priorities of the ruling family. The lack of judgment and the mistakes made in the past reinforced the principle of state survival, which from 1902 became the main pillar of Saudi foreign policy.

After World War II, two traditional dimensions characterized Saudi external relations: on the one hand, the enduring relationship with the US schematically identified as an exchange of oil for security; on the other hand, the Islamic and the Arab identities, on which Saudi Arabia exerts, for different reasons, an important influence.

The Kingdom was first established in 1744-45 as a result of an understanding between Muhammad ibn Saud and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the forerunner of an Islamic tradition known as Wahhabism. According to the agreement, the al-Saud family was recognized as the legitimate ruler of Arabia in exchange for the adoption of strict Wahhabi interpretation of Islam as the basis of government action. Both the purist and rigorous vision of Islam and its willingness to spread the ‘true faith’ throughout the Arabic Peninsula led to continuous wars and to the inevitable destruction of the Kingdom in 1818 by the Ottoman Empire and again in 1891. The lesson learnt by the Wahhabi ulama and the royal family after they had once again conquered the Holy sites of Mecca and Medina in the 1920s, was that a strong state was needed in order to allow Saudi Arabia to become the moral leader of the Islamic world. The enormous religious burden given by being the guardian of the Holy Mosques, which every Muslim is prescribed to visit at least once in life (hadj), made Saudi Arabia the spiritual center of Islam and at the same time shaped every aspect of Saudi policy-making. After WWII, however, the al-Saud used the abundance of oil as a leverage to reach their objectives both domestically – regime stability - and in the global and regional arenas – state independence.
Internationally these unique characteristics translated into Saudi adoption of a strong sense of ‘pragmatism’, which is unanimously recognized by scholars as Saudi’s main feature in its external relations. Only by taking into account this fundamental premise can Saudi foreign policy-making not be considered contradictory. At a first glance, in fact, the core lines of Saudi regional and international action might seem controversial. In the 20th century the combination of an Islamic strategy (including the refusal to recognize Israel) with the enduring alliance with the US might not appear coherent, but the pragmatist assumption of Saudi foreign policy is a fundamental key in order to explain it. King Fahd’s decision to let US troops be deployed within Saudi Arabia in 1990, despite the Islamic world’s unanimous condemnation, is the best example of Saudi pragmatism and concern for security.

In addition, Saudi’s unique ideological and religious features ostensibly affected foreign policy-making. Any Saudi decision, domestic or international, had to be approved by a decree from the ulama confirming its legitimacy and its accordance with the Koran. However, the al-Saud partially enjoyed more freedom of movement in foreign policy than in domestic issues, because national security and state survival took always the precedence. In fact, the royal family managed to obtain the clergy’s approval of the alliance with the US and even of the deployment of US troops on Saudi territory in 1990. Nevertheless, the religious dimension as an integral part of the state has to be considered when evaluating Saudi foreign policy. As Gause states, the balance between a domestic and international/regional environment has been vital for Saudi foreign policy. “The dual nature of the threats the Saudis face – conventional power and ideological appeal – at times have complicated their foreign-policy choices”. Thus, the presence of an external threat has not been sufficient to explain Saudi external choices. As a reaction to these difficulties, a constant of the al-Saud foreign policy-making has been to balance the different threatening forces – both domestic and external - and to choose the lesser of two evils with the primary concern being state survival. Two examples illustrate this. First, Riyadh provided direct assistance to Iraq during the First Gulf War (1980-1988) even if Saddam Hussein was far from an ally. Secondly, the Kingdom severed diplomatic ties with Egypt after Cairo signed a peace agreement with Israel in 1979, balancing US disappointment with domestic, and partially regional, consensus.

The aim of the present work is to analyze the deterioration of the Saudi-US partnership after 9/11 and at the same time the Saudi attempt to broaden its foreign policy to the Asia-Pacific region. The fact that fifteen kamikaze out of nineteen responsible for the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington were Saudi nationals represented a breakdown in the relationship between the White House and the al-Saud, which became somewhat strained, causing the Kingdom to turn elsewhere. Nonetheless, the
'special relationship' has been declining since the end of the Cold War. By the same token, a brief review of the regional dimensions of the Islamic and Arab identities is necessary.

Saudi Arabia increased its cooperation with Eastern Asia in such a way that allows us to dispute whether a new Asian strategy pursued by Riyadh is currently taking place. Until recent years, in fact, Saudi external relations, with the exception of the alliance with the US, did not go beyond the Arab and the Islamic dimensions. The rise of emerging Asian economies made the al-Saud adopting a more interested approach toward certain countries. The death of King Fahd and the crowning of his brother Abdullah in August 2005 – who had been the regent of the Kingdom since Fahd's stroke in the mid-1990s - coincided with strengthened ties with China, India, and Malaysia among others. Indeed, the 'pragmatist' assumption described above works out also with respect to Saudi strategy toward these countries.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia extends over a territory of more than two million square kilometers. The Kingdom is home to nearly 24 million inhabitants and its GDP is the largest of the Arab countries (in the Middle East it is second only to Turkey). Given its size, Saudi Arabia dominates the Arabic Peninsula and has an important voice in the Middle East. Moreover it has the largest oil proven reserves in the world, accounting for 25% of the total, and indeed the largest share of global oil production. Due to its oil capacity, Saudi Arabia holds an important position in the international arena as promoter and leader of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), and a dominant position in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which, with the exception of Yemen, includes all the countries in the Arabic Peninsula.

**Saudi-US partnership**

A few days after the Yalta Conference, in mid-February 1945, King Ibn Saud met with F.D. Roosevelt in the Great Bitter Lake – a salt-water lake between the north and south part of the Suez Canal - aboard the USS *Quincy*. The two leaders discussed several issues, among which the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, the post-war configuration of the Middle East, and indeed oil. Ibn Saud was willing to favor US interests in the region and deepen cooperation. Even though Saudi-US ties go back to the US based Standard Oil of California (SOCAL) penetration in the Kingdom in the mid-thirties, this meeting, which was one of the first times Ibn Saud had ever left his country, may be considered to all effects as the starting point of the long-standing US-Saudi entente. The personal understanding between the two heads of state cemented the friendship between the two countries. In the immediate aftermath of the war, the common purpose was to check and counterbalance British dominant influence over the Middle East.
Aarts identifies four pillars that traditionally characterized the US-Saudi relationship. The first two are energy and security. The third is the Saudi moderate policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; and the last pillar concerns Saudi ‘balancing’ role in the Middle East, which was evident especially during the Cold War. Each of these pillars underwent a change in the aftermath of 9/11.

During the Cold War the US-Saudi relationship has generally been characterized as a “bargain of oil for security.” The US energy needs were partially met by the first oil producer country in the world in exchange for guaranteeing the long-term security of the Kingdom under the US military umbrella. On the one hand, Saudi Arabia is surrounded by potential regional powers – such as Egypt, Iran, and Iraq – which at various times had threatened Riyadh. Moreover, they held (especially until the 1970s, but also nowadays) an incomparable advantage on population size. On the other hand, after WWII the US was the largest global economy with the largest oil demand. It is evident, though, that Washington looked to Riyadh as a fundamental long-term partner.

However, Bronson argues, the simple scheme oil-security is not sufficient to characterize and to fully explain such a durable relationship. The answer lies in the Cold War: namely, the two super-powers made alliances that were functional to the objective of undermining the rival.

In the Middle East, both the US and the USSR had their allies. Given its deep religious character and its authoritarian rule, Saudi Arabia represented a strong partner for the US in counterbalancing the atheist Soviet Union, which instead supported secular and nationalist pan-Arab regimes such as Egypt and Syria. Especially during the 1950s and 1960s, the ideological confrontation between the secular regimes and the religious monarchies was extremely harsh. Except for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where Riyadh exerted a moderate policy even if it has never recognized Tel Aviv, the US and Saudi Arabia shared the same short-term objectives notwithstanding completely different views on society and political institutions. Once the Soviet Union collapsed, the ‘special relationship’ started progressively to weaken until the decline post-9/11.

The first event undermining the solid partnership was Saddam Hussein’s decision to invade Kuwait. On a diplomatic level it seemed to reinforce US-Saudi ties. Washington, in line with the commitment of providing security to the Kingdom, waged war against Iraq to safeguard its economic and strategic interests in Saudi Arabia. By the same token, the Saudis played a main role in gaining almost the unanimous support of other Arab countries against Saddam. Nonetheless, a major problem arose for Riyadh when King Fahd decided to host on a temporary basis the US troops to defend the Kingdom. Nonneman says that “in 1990 Saudi Arabia moved closer to an explicit reliance on Washington and other western protectors, but this was mainly the result of the Kuwait crisis, and the direct implications of that crisis for Saud security.” To many both within Saudi
Arabia and in the Muslim world the presence of foreign troops on the land of the Holy sites represented an irreparable offense and threatened Saudi domestic security. As a consequence, although the King obtained the favorable response (fatwa) of the Wahhabi clergy, Riyadh experienced the rise of domestic opposition and the hostility of the Muslim world. Within the Kingdom, radical Islamist factions resorted to terrorism, identifying the domestic enemy in the al-Saud family and committing to fight the US all over the world.

One of the first cruelest terrorist attacks claimed by al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia occurred in 1996 at the US military housing complex in Khobar Towers. Bin Laden’s first target was the overthrow of the al-Saud regime, which sold the Kingdom to US interests. The wave of anti-Americanism in the region started to grow during the 1990s also because “of the shift from a bipolar international structure” to a unipolar one. The end of the Cold War deprived the US of a counterbalance in the region. Also the al-Saud “did not publicly defend its own choice to rely on US power”\textsuperscript{9}. Support for Washington weakened as anti-Americanism increased within the ruling family and in some sectors of society. US foreign policy was now perceived as an unjustified direct involvement in domestic affairs of Middle East countries. The low price of oil during the 1990s also contributed to Saudi popular dissatisfaction. Moreover, the fact Saddam remained in power after the liberation of Kuwait represented along the 1990s a continuous threat to the region and specifically to Saudi Arabia. By the end of the decade there was no longer agreement between Riyadh and Washington on how to deal with Iraq. The sanctions against the Saddam regime, together with the humanitarian crisis that they created, contributed to popular Saudi resentment against the US.

According to Bronson, the case of Afghanistan represents another good example to understand how the US-Saudi common interests diverged after the end of the Cold War\textsuperscript{10}. In 1979 the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan led Saudi Arabia to directly involve in the country through the funding of Islamist groups of mujaheddin. During the 1980s, also the US backed the Afghan resistance against Moscow. The collapse of the Soviet Union radically changed the picture of the alliances in Afghanistan. Here, at the same time, civil war erupted and the Talibans rose to power offering a ground base for transnational terrorism. In the 1990s, the US was no longer in a position to support Saudi connections in Afghanistan politically. The peak was reached after 9/11, at the time of the US-led coalition against the Talibans. As a matter of fact, the religious motivation of Saudi financial assistance to these groups during the Cold War was deep-rooted. During the 1990s and especially after 9/11, the contradiction between the support to Islamist groups coming from within the Kingdom on the one hand, and the US ‘war on terror’ on the other hand, greatly contributed to the strained relationship between Riyadh and Washington.
US support indirectly granted to radical Islamist factions in Afghanistan during the 1980s is an example of the contradiction of US post-1991 foreign policy in the Middle East and helps to understand why Washington and Riyadh were no longer in concordance. After the Cold War, the two countries no longer shared common interests in the region and did not have the same perception of the regional threats, as in the case of Iraq. The honey-moon that the US and Saudi Arabia experienced for several decades came to an end after 9/11 but it suffered from an irreversible decline after the collapse of Soviet Union. As a Saudi businessman put it, 9/11 was “an accident waiting to happen”.

Saudi Arabia in the Middle East

Concerning the Saudi position at the regional level, there are different dimensions. On the one hand, there is the geographical distinction between the Middle East and the Arabic Peninsula – where, with the exception of Yemen, the Kingdom exerts a dominant role over the smaller monar.chies in the Gulf. On the other hand, we have to deal with two transnational identities, namely the Arab and the Islamic, which may sometimes coincide but more often require different analyses and have separated institutions of policy-making, i.e. some regional organizations may be characterized by the Islamic identity, such as the Islamic Conference Organization (1969), whereas others are concerned with the Arab dimension, such as the Arab League. For our purposes, we should bear in mind that Islam is the official religion also of some countries in the Asia-Pacific region, such as Malaysia and Indonesia, and it is widespread in countries such as India and has substantial minorities in China. It is therefore crucial to take into account the religious dimension as an explanation for Saudi ties with certain Asian countries in the framework of Saudi’s new Asian strategy. With the holy places of Mecca and Medina on their territory the Saudis not only have a broad legitimacy toward the whole Islamic community, but also play a fundamental role in being committed to the global welfare of Islam.

Concerning Islamic identity as opposed to the Arab one, Riyadh has always privileged the former, given the extensive role of the ulama in the political and social life of the Kingdom. This position translated in affirming the Islamic identity in opposition to the rise of pan-Arabism and nationalism coming primarily from Egypt, but also from Iraq and Syria. From the mid-1960s and throughout the 1970s Saudi Arabia promoted an ‘Islamic revival’ and counteracted nationalist influence by strengthening ties with non-Arab Muslim countries such as Turkey and Iran. Thus, the identity dimension is intertwined with the geographical one. In the Middle East the battle for hegemony was primarily one for legitimacy. In this respect the Saudi’s support for Islamist movements throughout the region – i.e. the Muslim Brother-
hood – aimed at undermining secularism and reaffirming the role of Islam in politics and in society.

Concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Saudi Arabia has militarily opposed the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine from the very beginning. During the Cold War, the refusal to even recognize the existence of Israel has been the leitmotiv uniting the heterogeneous Arab world. The intransigent position of the Kingdom denied any peace agreement through the formula: “No peace, no direct negotiations, no recognition.” Therefore, the peace initiative launched in February 2002 by then Crown Prince Abdullah represented a breakthrough in the traditional Saudi attitude. The Saudi proposal included Israeli withdrawal from all the territories occupied in 1967 and the ones reoccupied in the West Bank after the start of the 2000 Intifada in exchange for the Arab countries’ recognition of Israel’s right to exist. The initiative was not directed at Israel and the Palestinian authority, but at the whole international community committed to ending the conflict. According to Kostiner, in fact, Abdullah’s initiative responded mainly to both Saudi domestic factors and the kingdom’s need to regain US confidence. By managing to gain the support of the main Arab countries (Egypt, Jordan, and Syria) for his plan, Riyadh “emerged as the key player in this inter-Arab initiative.” By the same token, the Saudi plan was aimed at bridging the gap between the rising anti-Americanism in the region and the priority of keeping a stable relationship with the US itself. Thus, Saudi Arabia was trying to act as a mediator between the US and the Arab countries. Kostiner concludes saying that Abdullah’s initiative “exploited mediation as a means to improve Saudi standing with Washington, the main Arab parties and Iran, rather than to pacify the Israeli-Palestinian dispute for its own sake.”

In the aftermath of 9/11

The terrorist attacks against the US on September 11 produced a shift in American foreign policy, especially concerning the Middle East. The ‘war on terror’ included, among others, the diplomatic and military pressure against regimes alleged to sponsor terrorism or host terrorist groups, and the promotion of democracy in the region as the sole viable regime that can lead to stability. According to the different actors, Washington alternatively used the stick or the carrot to pursue its interests.

From this shift Saudi Arabia experienced repercussions not only concerning its partnership with Washington, but also concerning its domestic and international environments. Saudi alleged involvement in the terrorist attacks through covered funding to al-Qaeda coming from within the royal family was the most evident factor contributing to US suspicions of Riyadh. The several underground financial activities, the obscure distribution of charity within the Kingdom all made
the US suspicious. Moreover, the fact that the head of the international terrorist network, Osama bin Laden, was a member of a powerful Saudi family and that fifteen hijackers came from the kingdom fueled a wave of public resentment in the US toward Saudi Arabia. In addition, a large number of militants killed or captured during the campaign in Afghanistan were Saudi nationals.

The above picture highlights the increasing strains between Washington and Riyadh concerning the mutual confidence that they had and which has now been lost forever. In reality, concerning the fundamental pillars of Saudi-US partnership, almost nothing changed. “While the mutually beneficial foundations of continuing strong Saudi-American partnership in many fields remain unshaken, the window of mutual mistrust has been opened wider.” Aarts argues that in the aftermath of 9/11 the relationship between the two suffered from increased suspicion on both parts, but that it has never undermined top-level relations. Rather than publicly push the Saudis toward active cooperation in intelligence gathering, Washington avoided threatening the Kingdom or putting in doubt the partnership. The moderate US stance toward Saudi Arabia was not influenced by public opinion, which from 9/11 systematically attacked Riyadh and contributed to tensions between the two.

From the Saudi point of view, the US-led ‘war on terror’ has also embarrassed the regime. The al-Saud are threatened by the growing anti-Americanism throughout the Islamic world. By being perceived as a strong US ally, Saudi Arabia is losing legitimacy both internationally, where Muslim countries are critical toward US foreign policy, and domestically. In fact, at the national level, on the one hand, the Wahhabi clergy has given more than one sign of discontent toward the ruling family, and on the other hand, political opposition has been fueled by Washington’s claims for democracy. Therefore, it is natural that Riyadh, which is constrained by several challenges both domestic and concerning its external dimension, looks for a way out from this impasse. In this respect, the Asian alternative seems appealing to the al-Saud because it partially resolves the dilemma of being both a strong US ally in the war against terrorism and the ideological ‘protector’ of the Islamic world.

In this respect, Nonneman underlines the difficulties faced by the al-Saud in justifying Saudi alleged involvement in the terrorist attacks against the US. As explained above, Saudi support for radical Islam was functional to US interests in the region until the end of the Cold War. Furthermore, Saudi recognition of the Taliban as legitimate rulers of Afghanistan was not of particular concern in Washington at least until 1998 - at the time of the bombings of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania - when the Taliban were alleged to host terrorist groups. Therefore, Nonneman does not agree with US public wave against the Saudis. According to him, there is no proof that the royal family has explicitly supported terrorist acts against the US for the simple
reason that al-Qaeda’s terrorist attacks targeted from the very beginning not only the US, but also the house of the al-Saud.

By the same token, Aarts identifies a fifth pillar characterizing Saudi-US relationship in addition to the four enlisted above, namely the fight against Islamic terrorism. 9/11, he argues, produced a new common ground linking Riyadh and Washington. In his view, the war on terror is likely to encroach further rather than divide the US and Saudi Arabia. Islamic fundamentalists directly threaten the stability of the regime and the legitimacy of the al-Saud, as in other moderate Muslim countries. The royal family is, in fact, blamed for allowing US troops within the country and for the moderate foreign policy. Nevertheless, although in the past the Saudis openly supported Islamic factions throughout the Arab world, today’s Kingdom’s alignment with the US-led ‘war on terror’ is unambiguous.

What is ambiguous, instead, is the Saudi position concerning the war against Iraq in 2003. The US-led military intervention represented the last point of Saudi-US disagreement on how to deal with Saddam. In fact, throughout the 1990s the two countries often held different ideas on the diplomatic measures to adopt against Baghdad. In 2003, the al-Saud officially opposed the US decision of waging war against Iraq for opportunistic reasons. The Arab countries, in fact, were mainly concerned with the potential domestic opposition and of the hostility of their public opinions to the US. Therefore, almost unanimously, (with the exception of Kuwait) the Middle Eastern countries did not support the war. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia played a major role for the coalition. Riyadh, far from the eyes of the public, granted logistic support to the coalition. Even if the US were not allowed to carry offensive operations from Saudi soil, Crown Prince Abdullah agreed to any request coming from Washington. As a matter of fact, the Prince Sultan air base (PSAB) was the main US military base in the Gulf. However, once Saddam was removed, the US agreed to pullout from Saudi Arabia. In order to avoid the pullout seeming a victory of al-Qaeda’s claims, it was linked to the fact that Iraq no longer constituted a threat to Saudi security. The withdrawal was completed in August 2003 after more than twelve years of US military presence.

In conclusion, concerning future perspectives, Aarts and, to a certain extent, Peterson believes that the US and Saudi Arabia are entering a phase characterized by a “more ‘normal’ relationship”, which will stress more security and energy aspects. What is changing, therefore, is the exclusiveness of the partnership. Aarts argues that the war in Iraq and the US pullout from the Kingdom will bring the US-Saudi security ties back to the period pre-1991 when they were characterized by military and technological cooperation such as US training of Saudi forces and weapons sales. Nonneman, instead, is more skeptical when he argues that unipolarity is shaping international relations today and that “if one adds the effect of 9/11 in the context of a George W. Bush administration, and the consequent
shift in US foreign and security policy towards the neoconservative agenda and a more unilateralist, pre-emptive agenda that distinguished increasingly sharply between those ‘with us’ and ‘against us’, the room for manoeuvre that states such as Saudi Arabia have was arguably doomed to shrink further.\(^7\)

**Saudi Arabian strategy - A first approach**

In late January 2006, King Abdullah visited China, India, Malaysia, and Pakistan. By opting to make in Asia his first trip abroad as a king, Abdullah gave a strong signal of Saudi new top priorities in foreign policy. The strengthening of ties with emerging Asian countries may be considered on the one hand as an attempt to broaden Saudi external relations, on the other hand as a further step away from Washington. The Saudi leadership is correctly interpreting the new system of international relations and acting accordingly. Both multipolarity and the rise of new states in the international arena broaden the range of choice of states like Saudi Arabia. In this respect, not only the impasse in the relationship with the US, but also a wider geopolitical vision contributes to the seeking of potential strategic partnerships, which can counterbalance US influence in the Kingdom. In fact, the adoption of a unilateralist foreign policy by the Bush administration after 9/11 opens possibilities for other states to reallocate their interests far from the US, and leads to a potential redistribution of power. However, both security and political economy play a major role in Saudi’s decision of turning to China and India.

Undoubtedly, China represents the most important Asian potential partner for Saudi Arabia. As a matter of fact, the two heads of State met twice in the last few months. In January, King Abdullah visited Beijing accompanied by a huge delegation including the foreign and the oil ministers, and several Saudi businessmen. The visit has been the first one ever made by a Saudi king since diplomatic ties were re-established in 1990. Then, in late April 2006, Chinese President Hu Jintao visited Riyadh after his visit to the US.

However, the two countries have already established unofficial relations in the past. Yet in the mid-eighties they first approached when Saudi Arabia purchased from China CSS-2 intermediate-range ballistic missiles. Arms sales from Beijing to Riyadh also occurred during the 1990s. Saudi leadership was driven by security concerns coming from both Iran’s and Iraq’s potential threats. In both occasions the US manifested its opposition.\(^8\)

The core of the Saudi king three-day visit to Beijing was energy cooperation. Currently, Saudi Arabia provides 17% of Chinese domestic oil consumption. The share of Beijing’s oil imports from the Middle East is around 60% and it is likely to increase in the following years. Thus, as the first world oil producer, Riyadh represents the major target for Chinese increasing oil demand. China is
currently the second largest importer of oil after the US, which is therefore likely to deter China from investing in the Kingdom. In Beijing five agreements were signed. The most important one calls for increased cooperation in oil, natural gas, and minerals. China is trying not only to achieve new contracts for oil sales, but also to make investments in the exploration of new fields in the Kingdom. In this respect, the veto coming from Washington seems to prevail at the moment. Moreover, there is at stake a project of an oil pipeline running from Saudi Arabia through Pakistan to China. Other agreements concern trade cooperation and the elimination of dual taxation, both giving relevance to the fact that Saudi Arabia is Chinese first trading partner in the Middle East. Trade between the two countries was more than $16 billion in 2005 with a 56% increase with respect to the previous year. The two leaders also committed to facilitate and further develop bilateral trade. According to Li Guofu, a Middle East expert at the China Institute of International Studies, “there’s no fundamental conflict of interest between the two countries [China and Saudi Arabia]. They share the same or similar views on many important international issues, like the establishment of a new international order, a multipolar world, antiterrorism and reconstruction in Iraq. The cooperation on energy lays a good foundation for friendly political relations.”

From its point of view, Saudi Arabia is eager to progressively but cautiously diversify its oil customers by turning to emerging Asian economies, which have both substantial needs of oil and are potential great powers. Indeed, the Saudi rationale is to gradually gain independence from the US protection by selling large amount of oil to these countries. However, the Saudi leadership aims at eluding US resentment toward Saudi openness; for this reason King Abdullah is acting with great prudence and circumspection in order to avoid sensational breakthroughs with Washington.

Concerning India, King Abdullah and Indian Prime Minister Singh signed a joint declaration during Saudi monarch visit to New Delhi in January 2006. Despite Indian suspicions for Saudi strong relationship with Pakistan, this has not prevented the two countries from establishing the basis for a long-term partnership. The joint declaration calls for increasing oil and gas sales and for Saudi investments in refining, marketing, and storage in India, aiming at building “a strategic energy partnership based on complementarity and interdependence,” as the declaration states.

Concerning security, instead, the Saudis are extremely cautious in moving away from the US. In this respect, the sensibility of the US is by no means more pronounced than in the case of any other issue at stake. No statement or references have been made by any official document of the meetings with both leaders of China and India. The views that King Abdullah exchanged with his Chinese and Indian counterparts on strategic issues, such as arm sales and future alliances,
were kept far away from the eyes of the media. In fact, analysts agree on the fact that neither China nor India is likely to substitute the US in providing security to the Kingdom in the short-run. From this point of view, the Saudi-US partnership is solid as ever. Yet there is room for penetrating the partnership by improving Chinese sales of weapons to the Kingdom.

In conclusion, two more reasons are worthy to be mentioned to understand Saudi current foreign policy. First, at the domestic level the Saudis need to balance the increasing anti-Americanism within the Kingdom. This alone represents a sufficient reason for the al-Saud to turn to Asia in order to regain domestic legitimacy, which has been highly questionable during the 1990s. Recent opinion polls in Kuwait, for example, showed that the population is against considering Osama bin Laden a terrorist and not in favor of the US-led ‘war on terror.’ It is likely that the results would have a similar outcome in Saudi Arabia if such a poll were allowed. Therefore, stepping back from the US may coincide not only with a new position at the regional and international level, but also with a new phase of domestic stability for the Kingdom once the terrorists would be definitely ousted.

Secondly, Saudi Arabia is looking at Asia because neither China nor India care about Saudi poor human rights record and democratic standards as the US does after 9/11. The Bush Administration’s commitment to promoting democracy in the Middle East targeted also the regime of the al-Saud. Nowadays, the Saudis find it harder to make business with the US with respect to few years ago – for example, it is more difficult after 9/11 to obtain a US visa for Saudi nationals. To a certain extent, the US is subordinating economic and political ties to Saudi compliance with democratic requirements. According to Freeman (a former US ambassador to the Kingdom), the simple bargain oil for security has become more complex because after 9/11 there are “all sorts of other agendas, including women’s rights, human rights, religious freedom and other issues that the Saudis either find irksome or difficult to address.” China and India, on the other hand, are convenient partners for Riyadh because they are “low-maintenance customers that buy its [Saudi] oil without meddling – as Washington does – in Saudi affairs.”

Conclusion

As seen, after 9/11 due to domestic and international reasons Saudi Arabia is currently reallocating and redistributing its system of alliances, notwithstanding the partnership with the US. Probably, not even Roosevelt and Ibn Saud could imagine that their personal understanding in 1945 would have been the cornerstone of a ‘special relationship’ between their two countries lasting for more than fifty years. Now that the partnership is suffering from mutual suspicion,
Saudi Arabia is likely to deepen its cooperation with selected Asian countries, but without major and spectacular breakthroughs that could irritate Washington. Riyadh is likely to proceed toward widening its external relations and to present to the US a de facto new situation in which the US influence will progressively weaken. The terrorist attacks against New York and Washington were done in the name of Islam and willy-nilly they are likely to produce a cultural and religious cleavage between the Western world and the Islamic countries. Saudi Arabia is addressing the new challenges through a pragmatic attitude, which has constantly characterized its foreign policy-making for the last century. Only time will tell whether Saudi inclusive strategy manages to balance the US and the rising Asian powers.
NOTES


3 F. Gregory Gause III, “The Foreign Policy of Saudi Arabia”, in Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami (eds.), The Foreign Policies of Middle East States (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002), p. 197. In this respect Nonneman warns that an approach including both the domestic and international level is needed to understand Saudi foreign policy. He adds that especially concerning non-Western countries, it is useful to adopt an approach defined by Buzan and Little as “theoretically pluralist”, which integrates the Realist school of thought with specific “dynamics internal to the state.” Nonneman’s aim is to reverse the realist assumption that so-called weak states are not able to act independently in the international arena and influence international outcome. Nonneman, “Determinants and Patterns of Saudi Foreign Policy”, pp. 316-317, 328-329; Barry Buzan and Richard Little, International Systems in World History (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 35.


Illusion of Security, pp. 81-82.
9 Nonneman, “Determinants and Patterns of Saudi Foreign Policy”, p. 334.
14 In this respect, one of the five agreements signed between Saudi Arabia and China in January 2006 concerned a Saudi loan for the improvement of Aksu in Xingjian province, which has a large Muslim community.
24 “The Saudi leadership made every effort to separate itself publicly from American policy toward Iraq. However, the importance of the Saudi-American security relationship was such that Riyadh sought to cooperate with Washington where that cooperation could be kept out of their public’s eye.” Gause III, “The International Politics of the Gulf”, pp. 273-274.
27 Nonneman, “Determinants and Patterns of Saudi Foreign Policy”, p. 334.


31 “Saudi monarch in Beijing”, Beijing Review, Vol. 49, Iss. 6, p. 3.


36 Mr. Freeman is quoted from the International Herald Tribune, in “Saudi Arabia Looks Ahead”, Businessline, January 30, 2006.


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