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SMART POWER AS AN INSTRUMENT OF SAUDI ARABIA'S FOREIGN POLICY

Lesia Dorosh

*Lviv Polytechnic National University,
Institute of Humanitarian and Social Sciences,
Department of Political Science and International Relations
Stepan Bandera str., 12, 79013, Lviv, Ukraine
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8558-8525>*

Anastasiia Tereshkevych

*Lviv Polytechnic National University,
Institute of Humanitarian and Social Sciences,
Department of Political Science and International Relations,
Stepan Bandera str., 12, 79013, Lviv, Ukraine
<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-3228-8431>*

The features of Saudi Arabia's transformation in its international positioning are examined, as the Kingdom's foreign policy is becoming increasingly independent and multi-vector, and the reliance on hard and soft power tools is becoming more balanced, indicating a transition to the use of smart power tools. This refers to the niche diplomacy (according to M. Chaziza and C. Lutmar), which is actively implemented through sport diplomacy, humanitarian aid, religious influence, conflict mediation, financial generosity, and energy dominance. It is stated that the dual strategy of maintaining dominance in the fossil fuels sector alongside the active promotion of clean technologies reflects the Kingdom's smart balance of hard and soft power. The key areas of implementation of Saudi Arabia's soft power instruments are analyzed, including religious diplomacy, sports as a key tool for national branding, consolidation of power and expansion of global influence, humanitarian initiatives, and mediation diplomacy as elements of Saudi «aid diplomacy», etc. The country's military power is highlighted, as the country consistently holds high positions in global military power rankings and is the world's largest importer of weapons, having accumulated significant arsenals of modern military equipment. Evidence suggests that Saudi Arabia skilfully combines its dominance in fossil fuels, leadership in OPEC, and manipulation of the global energy market in its own political interests (hard power instruments) with «green» energy and climate initiatives and large investments in renewable energy projects, both domestically and abroad (soft power instruments). It is argued that within the concept of smart power, the Kingdom has made a notable transformation – from religious and ideological leadership to a multi-dimensional system of influence that combines energy and climate diplomacy, sport diplomacy, cultural branding, humanitarian diplomacy, and peacekeeping initiatives.

Key words: Saudi Arabia, Vision 2030, smart power, soft power, hard power, foreign policy.

Relevance of the research topic. At the beginning of the 21st century, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia emerged as a key player in international politics, capable of influencing not only regional but also global processes. The strategic location of the country at the crossroads of trade routes, its possession of significant energy resources, and its active participation in conflict resolution in the Middle East have transformed the Kingdom into an important centre of power in the system of international relations. Over the past decade, Saudi Arabia's role on the international stage has changed drastically. The country, which was previously perceived as an actor with a somewhat risky and destabilising foreign policy strategy, can now set regional and global trends



following the geopolitical shifts caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the withdrawal of Western forces from the Middle East. An important element of Saudi Arabia's new strategy is the implementation of the Vision 2030 programme, aimed at diversifying the economy, modernising governance institutions, and shaping a positive international image of the state. The transition to a non-oil economy not only changes the internal socio-economic dynamics but also affects the nature of the state's external relations, opening up space for investment, technological, and cultural cooperation with new partners. The Kingdom's foreign policy activities are becoming increasingly independent and multi-vector, and the use of hard and soft power tools is growing more moderate, indicating a transition to the use of elements of «smart power».

The concept of «smart power» describes a foreign policy approach that integrates soft and hard power instruments in order to safeguard national interests and ensure security. According to analysts, this model presupposes not only strong economic and military capacity but also sustained engagement in alliances, multilateral institutions, and strategic partnerships that enhance the influence and legitimacy of the state's actions. This tactic is not the exclusive prerogative of large powers or Western countries – it can also be developed by regional or new centres of power. Saudi Arabia has developed its own approach, which involves the intelligent use of hard and soft power tools. This model stems from the Kingdom's unique position as one of the world's wealthiest states, the cradle of Islam, and it possesses vast oil reserves and military capabilities. By combining these advantages effectively, Saudi Arabia pursues its foreign policy goals through the use of smart power.

Analysis of recent studies. Among scientific studies whose authors analyse the issue of Saudi Arabia's positioning in the international arena through a “smart” combination of hard and soft power tools, it is worth highlighting the study by M. Chaziza and C. Lutmar [6], who analyse the Kingdom's transition from traditional dependence on the United States to a more independent course, which involves niche diplomacy, i.e. targeted participation in specific international initiatives – mediation, conflict resolution and energy negotiations. A. Czornik analyses the evolution of Saudi soft power – from religious leadership to cultural and humanitarian partnership, emphasising that cultural diplomacy is becoming a key element in the competition for influence in the Muslim world [7]. A. Sager considers the Kingdom to be one of the leading international actors in energy diplomacy, using the oil and gas sector as a means of foreign policy influence. The author emphasises that the gradual transition to «green» energy within the framework of Vision 2030 does not diminish the geopolitical significance of the state, but rather strengthens it, opening up opportunities for investment and hydrogen exports to Europe [27]. A solid theoretical foundation for this study was also formed by an English-language article by Ukrainian researchers N. Konopka and T. Strykhotyskiy [18], who analyse the implementation of cultural and communication initiatives within the framework of the Vision 2030 national strategy. The authors examine how, through investments in culture, tourism, and international expositions, the Kingdom is shaping a new image of itself as an open, modern, and attractive country. They pay particular attention to the development of national cultural infrastructure (the Diriyah, AlUla, and Jeddah Historic District projects), which simultaneously contribute to the diversification of the economy and the strengthening of Saudi Arabia's cultural influence on the international stage. Data from the Vision 2030 state strategy website [31] and its individual programmes (Diriyah, Qiddya, NEOM [17; 23; 24; 26]) were used to analyse the features of the Kingdom's foreign policy. Global Firepower data made it possible to assess the pace of development of the country's military potential [1].

The aim of the study is to analyze the specifics of the use of smart power tools in the implementation of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy priorities in regional and global contexts, taking into account key aspects of its military, economic, cultural, and diplomatic strategies.

Research objectives: 1. to examine the scope for using Saudi Arabia's soft power tools through religious, sports, mediation diplomacy and humanitarian initiatives; 2. to explore key aspects of the state's economic, energy and military power; 3. to identify, within the concept of smart power, the features of a skilful combination of soft and hard power tools to shape a new image of the state on the international arena. **The chronological framework of the study** is limited to the second decade of the 21st century until 2025.

Research results. Saudi Arabia's foreign policy course in the 21st century is based on the strategic desire to preserve the monarchy, ensure national sovereignty, and maintain regional stability. At the same time, it has evolved significantly in terms of both its content and implementation methods, due to a combination of internal reformist ambitions and changes in the geopolitical environment. Today, the Kingdom's foreign policy is closely intertwined with its internal modernisation programme, primarily with the Vision 2030 initiative. Since its launch in 2016, Vision 2030 has become not only a plan for internal transformation, but also a guideline for foreign policy, which is aimed at economic diversification, reducing geopolitical risks, and improving the country's global status [2]. Since the early 2020s, there has been a clear shift in the Kingdom's foreign policy away from the aggressive, interventionist approach of the early 2010s – which was evident, in particular, in the military campaign in Yemen and the diplomatic conflict with Qatar – to a more balanced, diplomatically oriented and economically motivated strategy. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman began to review the approach focused on the use of hard power tools in foreign policy. He understood well that if force-based tools had not been successful, then soft power tools needed to be used to achieve success and change the Kingdom's image [7]. This reorientation, initiated by the Crown Prince, can be seen as a response to changes in the regional and global landscape, as well as the need to adapt to new challenges. The current emphasis is on economic diplomacy, conflict mediation, and the projection of soft power. Saudi Arabia is increasingly positioning itself as a centre for tourism, international investment, and global events, combining strong external behaviour with the image of a modernised, open, and globally integrated state [6].

Another description of Saudi Arabia's smart foreign policy approach comes from M. Chaziza and C. Lutmar. They refer to the Kingdom's combination of soft and hard power tools as niche diplomacy. Saudi Arabia actively implements it through sports diplomacy, humanitarian aid, religious influence, conflict mediation, financial generosity, and energy dominance [6].

As H. Ismaik notes, Saudi Arabia's soft power has four unique characteristics that are skilfully combined by the Kingdom. In particular, the balance in international relations, the status of the cradle of Islam, and the position as the heart of the Arab world. The fourth characteristic is Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman himself, and his views on the future progress of the state [15]. A key objective of Saudi Arabia's public diplomacy is the construction of international bridges. Today, Riyadh advances its foreign policy agenda through a model that blends hard and soft power instruments. This strategy is directly related to Saudi Arabia's religious significance and its status as one of the world's wealthiest states, endowed with vast oil resources [18]. The combination of soft and hard elements of governance creates a unique political discourse in Saudi Arabia.

Historically, Saudi Arabia's main soft power tool – religious diplomacy – has evolved considerably, transforming from an ideologically oriented approach into a strategic instrument of influence under state control. The Kingdom's religious outreach was based on exporting Wahhabism, financially supporting Islamic institutions, religious education, leadership in Islamic organisations, and control over the Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages. However, global attention, security concerns, and regional rivalries have necessitated a rethinking of this approach. Within the

framework of Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia seeks to combine Islamic values with economic and geopolitical benefits, religious tourism, and interfaith interaction.

Institutionally, the Kingdom strengthens its religious leadership through organisations such as the Muslim World League, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, and the King Salman Centre for Humanitarian Aid and Religious Support. The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and its subsidiaries, including the Islamic Development Bank, located in Jeddah and Mecca, were established in 1969 and serve as a key diplomatic platform where Saudi Arabia exerts significant influence over the global Muslim community. Beyond the Middle East, the Kingdom's religious influence extends globally through investments in religious schools (madrasas) and scholarship programmes for students from Muslim-majority countries. These students, after getting their education at Saudi universities, go back to their home countries and take up leadership positions in religious and political fields; it's further strengthens the Kingdom's ideological influence [6].

Furthermore, Saudi Arabia positions itself as the «heart of the Arab world», extending beyond religious leadership to encompass the protection and promotion of Arab culture, language, and heritage. The Kingdom actively invests in the preservation of the Arabic language, literature, and national archives, as well as in supporting cultural projects in the region and beyond, which contributes to the affirmation of Arab identity. As part of Vision 2030, cultural centres, and educational programmes are being created to preserve and promote the Arabic alphabet, traditional arts and literature, while integrating them into international platforms. One of the key institutions in this area is the King Salman Global Academy for the Arabic Language, which is responsible for raising the status of the Arabic language in the world through four strategic areas: language planning and policy, computational linguistics, educational programmes and cultural programmes. The academy implements projects at the international level, such as Arabic Language Month in India and Indonesia, the launch of a series of educational programmes for Arabic teachers abroad, and participation in major book festivals in Latin America [16]. Through such efforts, Saudi Arabia not only preserves the cultural core of the Arab world but also actively promotes the Arabic language and culture as an element of its soft power on the global stage.

Over the past decade, the Kingdom's leadership position in the niche of sports diplomacy has become a phenomenon. Saudi Arabia has used sports as a key tool for national branding, consolidating power, and expanding global influence. Thanks to huge investments in sports infrastructure, the Kingdom is seeking to establish itself as a leading global centre for major sporting events. Although Saudi Arabia joined this trend later than other Gulf States, it has made rapid progress, significantly reducing the gap and becoming one of the most influential players in global sport. Through large-scale sponsorship projects, acquisitions of European football clubs, and the organisation of international sporting events, the Kingdom uses sport both as a geopolitical tool and as an economic lever to expand its influence beyond the region [6].

Along with targeted investments, Saudi Arabia is gradually establishing a dominant position in the global sports ecosystem. The Saudi Pro League has attracted world-class star players such as Cristiano Ronaldo, Karim Benzema, and Neymar, while partnerships with European football federations have secured the Kingdom the right to host key international tournaments, including the 2023 Spanish Super Cup. Saudi investors, often linked to the royal family, are expanding their presence in clubs of England, Spain, France, Belgium, India, and the UAE, further solidifying the Kingdom's position in world football [21].

Despite the fact that many of the Kingdom's sports investments are directed towards lower-level projects, the successful bid to host the 2034 FIFA World Cup and plans to allocate tens of billions of dollars to World Cup-related projects demonstrate Saudi Arabia's ambition to establish itself as a strategic geopolitical power at the crossroads of Asia, Africa, and Europe [10].

At the same time, Saudi Arabia has taken the most ambitious steps in motorsport, primarily in Formula 1, where it is surpassing other players in the region – Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE – in the competition for the status of the world’s motorsport centre. With the launch of Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia secured the right to host the Saudi Arabian Grand Prix [20]. As part of a 15-year partnership with Formula 1, the Kingdom held its first Grand Prix in Jeddah in 2021. The deal with F1 for the right to host the Grand Prix is estimated to be worth up to \$65 million annually, complemented by a sponsorship contract between state-owned company Aramco and F1 worth over \$40 million per year [9].

A series of large-scale projects reflects the Kingdom’s long-term vision for a sports-oriented transformation of the economy. NEOM, a futuristic megacity covering 26,500 km² along the Red Sea coast, is part of a \$500 billion project that includes the Trojena resort, which will host the 2029 Asian Winter Games [28]. Nearby, the Red Sea Project, a luxurious 28,000 km² tourist cluster integrating sports and adventure tourism, is being developed. One of the stadiums for the 2034 World Cup is planned to be built at an altitude of 350 metres in NEOM [24], whilst another, named after Mohammed bin Salman, is to be located on a 200-metre cliff within Qiddiya City [26].

By attracting global sports stars and hosting international events, Saudi Arabia has confidently mastered the tools of sports diplomacy. The results are already tangible: international media discourse has changed, and the Kingdom has firmly established itself on the global stage not only as an oil-producing nation, but also as a powerful player in the world of sports [29]. The impact of sports diplomacy is clearly evident in the growth of positive coverage of Saudi Arabia in the global media: according to Carma’s 5th annual Kingdom Reputation Report, sports dominated media and social discourse about the country in 2024 [2].

A powerful lever of soft influence for any state is its humanitarian initiatives. Thanks to the continuous flow of petrodollars, the oil-rich Gulf States, including Saudi Arabia, have been able to implement projects providing humanitarian or financial assistance. As N. Konopka and T. Strykhot-skyi note, such actions are not only an act of humanism, which is highly valued by the international community, but also aim to achieve political, security, or economic goals. Saudi Arabia’s assistance to less developed African and Middle Eastern countries is an example of active South-South cooperation, as the main recipients of Saudi aid are poor Arab and sub-Saharan countries [18].

The page dedicated to humanitarian initiatives on the official government website of Saudi Arabia mentions that the country has a reputation for being the «Kingdom of Humanity» [17]. Saudi Arabia has established itself as a global leader in humanitarian aid, providing more than \$134 billion in aid to 172 countries between 1996 and 2025. Most of this aid went to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, which received \$28.68 billion, representing the largest share of the Kingdom’s foreign humanitarian and development aid [6].

Saudi Arabia’s foreign aid is implemented through two key institutions: The Saudi Fund for Development (SFD), established in 1974, and the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre (KSRelief), established in 2015. The SFD provided approximately US\$39.39 billion in development assistance between 1975 and 2021, focusing on concessional loans for infrastructure projects in the transport and energy sectors, as well as supporting long-term economic growth in developing countries, especially those with predominantly Muslim populations [12]. KSRelief, in turn, focuses on crisis situations, armed conflicts, natural disasters, and health emergencies, which has made it the cornerstone of Saudi Arabia’s «aid diplomacy», which is aimed at fulfilling the Kingdom’s religious and moral obligations [6].

An important vector of humanitarian support for the Saudis today is Palestine. The Kingdom actively finances UN humanitarian programmes and institutions, including the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). Between

1975 and 2021, Saudi Arabia participated in 91 humanitarian projects within the agency and provided financial assistance amounting to over \$950 million [12].

After the war began in the Gaza Strip on 7 October 2023, Saudi Arabia sent 58 planes with humanitarian aid, delivering food, medicine, and basic necessities. These operations were coordinated by the KSRelief centre in cooperation with the Kingdom's Ministry of Defence [4]. As of October 2024, Saudi Arabia had provided \$185 million in direct humanitarian aid to Palestine through KSRelief [3].

The Saudi leadership has decided to remain neutral and act as a mediator in Russia's war against Ukraine, and is not financing any military-related aid projects, although it is providing humanitarian support to Ukraine. In February 2023, Saudi Arabia officially signed an agreement with Ukraine worth \$400 million, which includes two key components: \$100 million in direct humanitarian aid through the KSrelief centre and \$300 million in the form of a grant for fuel and petroleum products through the Saudi Fund for Development [14].

Thus, humanitarian aid is a soft power tool in Saudi foreign policy, which not only allows the Kingdom to strengthen its moral authority and restrain regional rivals, but is also economically consistent with the Vision 2030 strategy, by helping to expand markets for Saudi businesses and strengthen the country's role in global sustainable development initiatives.

Mediation diplomacy is a logical extension of the use of soft power humanitarian tools: mediation allows the Kingdom to project its influence through its ability to create space for dialogue and serve as a platform for resolving international and regional crises. In recent years, Saudi Arabia has adopted a more active and strategically balanced approach to diplomacy, moving away from confrontational and interventionist foreign policy in favour of conflict resolution. This transition is reflected in the Kingdom's withdrawal from military operations in Yemen and its landmark rapprochement with Iran in 2023, brokered by China, which restored diplomatic relations after years of hostility. Through such steps, Saudi Arabia seeks to strengthen regional stability while increasing its international influence.

The Kingdom's role as a mediator is underscored by the numerous high-profile summits it has hosted, including the Arab-Islamic Summit, the 32nd Summit of the League of Arab States, the Gulf Cooperation Council-Central Asia Summit, the Saudi-African Summit, the Saudi-Caribbean (CARICOM) Summit, and the Gulf Cooperation Council-ASEAN Summit [27].

The Saudi leadership has taken a neutral stance in Russia's war against Ukraine, acting as a mediator to achieve its own domestic, regional, and international strategic goals. One of the key steps was the Peace Summit in Jeddah in August 2023, which brought together representatives of 40 countries to discuss ways to resolve the conflict. Although the meeting did not produce any concrete results, it demonstrated the diplomatic influence of the Crown Prince and his desire to become a central mediator in the Russian-Ukrainian war. Subsequently, Saudi Arabia, together with the UAE, facilitated the exchange of prisoners between the parties [27].

Apart from Ukraine, Saudi Arabia has played a key role in resolving long-standing disputes in the Middle East, including the crisis in relations with Qatar. Initially, in 2017, the Kingdom led efforts to isolate Qatar, but eventually became a leader in reconciliation, restoring diplomatic relations and reaffirming its leadership in the Gulf Cooperation Council [25]. The Kingdom's mediation efforts have also been decisive in conflicts in Sudan, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen. In Sudan, Saudi Arabia is a key mediator in the ongoing civil war, hosting numerous peace talks in Jeddah and helping to broker ceasefire agreements between the warring parties. Its involvement is motivated by strategic interests, including investments in the Red Sea region and a desire for overall regional stability. In Yemen, after years of military intervention, Saudi Arabia has shifted to diplomatic negotiations with the Houthis, recognising their control over key territories and facilitating peace talks aimed at achieving a lasting settlement [27].

In response to the crisis in Gaza, Saudi Arabia has ramped up diplomatic efforts, calling for an immediate ceasefire, the withdrawal of Israeli forces, and humanitarian access. By speaking out in support of the Palestinian cause and organising key diplomatic summits, the kingdom is reinforcing its long-standing role as a central player in the search for a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict [8].

Saudi Arabia combines its dominance in fossil fuels with active «green» initiatives, seeking to establish itself as one of the key voices in global climate discussions. The Kingdom is actively investing in renewable energy while maintaining control over global energy markets. Flagship projects – NEOM, the Saudi Green Initiative, and the Middle East Green Initiative – demonstrate the state's strategic commitment to sustainable development. Saudi Arabia also participates in climate diplomacy through platforms such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Gulf Cooperation Council for Sustainable Development [6].

The kingdom has no shortage of enthusiasm when it comes to initiating and supporting all kinds of environmental and a climate projects, as it is perhaps the most vulnerable country in the region to extreme weather conditions. Saudi Arabia is located in one of the driest and hottest regions in the world. Frequent sandstorms, water shortages, and a high probability of desertification limit the potential for agricultural development and increase dependence on food imports. At the same time, climate change, including annual temperature increases and reduced rainfall, intensifies environmental problems, causing internal migration and increasing the cost of adapting infrastructure to new climatic conditions.

The partnership in the field of green energy has become the best common ground between the EU and Saudi Arabia. The EU, which seeks to diversify its energy sources and reduce its dependence on Russian energy, sees the Kingdom as a reliable strategic partner in the development of renewable energy, hydrogen technologies, and clean infrastructure. In July 2025, a memorandum of understanding was signed in Riyadh between the Saudi company ACWA Power and leading European companies, including Edison S.p.A. (Italy), TotalEnergies Renewables SAS (France), Zhero Europe B.V. (Netherlands), and EnBW (Germany) – for the joint development of a large-scale chain for the export of renewable energy and green hydrogen from Saudi Arabia to Europe. During the same event, separate industrial partnership agreements were signed with technology providers such as Prysmian (Italy), GE Vernova, Siemens Energy (Germany), and Hitachi (France) to create high-voltage energy transmission corridors and infrastructure for export supplies [14].

Saudi Arabia has the potential to become a global leader in the production of green hydrogen, which is a key element of the 21st century energy transition. In 2020, the Kingdom launched the NEOM Green Hydrogen Company (NGHC) project, the world's largest renewable hydrogen production plant, worth over \$8.4 billion, which is expected to produce 600 tonnes of green hydrogen per day for export [23]. This direction is closely linked to the strategic goals of the European Union: within the framework of the EU Hydrogen Strategy adopted in 2020, the EU plans to import up to 10 million tonnes of green hydrogen by 2030. Saudi Arabia is one of the most promising suppliers, with plans to export up to 200,000 tonnes of green hydrogen to Europe annually by 2030 [19]. Moreover, thanks to its solar and wind resources, the Kingdom can produce hydrogen at the lowest cost in the world.

Despite significant investments in sustainable environmental and climate development, Saudi Arabia's role as the world's leading regulator of oil markets remains the foundation of its foreign policy. This dual strategy – maintaining dominance in the field of fossil fuels while actively promoting clean technologies – reflects the Kingdom's tendency to maintain a balance between hard and soft power.

Additionally, it is worth highlighting other components of the Kingdom's hard power. In pursuing its interests and foreign policy goals in the Middle East, Riyadh often uses instruments that are not always consistent with international law. This was particularly evident in the second decade of the 21st century, a period that saw growing instability, intraregional conflicts, and armed conflicts in the region. In this context, Saudi Arabia's use of hard power can be seen as a direct response to threats to state security and national interests [30].

One of the Kingdom's strongest tools of hard power is its military. Since establishing its own defence system, Saudi Arabia has established itself as a state with two distinct characteristics. On the one hand, it pursues a measured and cautious policy and rarely engages in direct military conflicts. On the other hand, it ranks among the world's largest arms importers, accumulating significant arsenals of modern military equipment. A strong economic model has enabled the Kingdom to invest billions of dollars in arms purchases from the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and other countries, securing Saudi Arabia's place among the countries with the highest defence spending in the world [30].

Saudi Arabia ranks high in global military power rankings, taking 24th place in the world according to the Global Firepower Index as of 2025. The country's army has about 480,000 military personnel, including numerous land, air, and sea forces. The kingdom's military power is reinforced by a substantial defence budget of over \$50 billion per year, one of the largest defence budgets in the world, which allows for regular upgrades of weapons and military equipment [1].

Military interventions as a demonstration of force. Over the past decades, Saudi Arabia has participated in military conflicts and taken a hard line in its relations with several countries in the region. For example, in Bahrain, the Kingdom used military force to suppress sectarian protests. In Yemen, Saudi Arabia launched Operation «Decisive Storm» with the aim of restoring government control after the Houthis seized the capital [22]. In addition, Riyadh played an active role in the Syrian conflict, supporting the opposition against Bashar al-Assad's regime, and took a tougher approach in its relations with Lebanon and the Hezbollah movement. There is a noticeable tendency for the Kingdom to resort to the use of harsh force, primarily military, where it perceives an Iranian threat.

Likewise, Saudi Arabia's strong economy is one of the most flexible tools for implementing its foreign policy. The Kingdom uses its economic potential as a means of soft power – through investments, humanitarian aid, loans, and trade agreements – and as an instrument of hard power, applying economic pressure, energy manipulation, or sanctions.

The blockade of Qatar in 2017 is perhaps the most vivid example of the Saudis using the economy as an instrument of hard power in the sphere of foreign economic and foreign policy interests. Under the pretext of fighting terrorism and Doha's allegedly close ties with Iran, Saudi Arabia imposed a series of restrictions, from closing the land border to severing trade and transport links. In effect, this was an attempt to force Qatar to change its foreign policy course and demonstrated how economic pressure can be used to achieve political goals [11].

Thanks to its leading role in worldwide oil exports, Saudi Arabia has made energy resources an integral part of its smart power strategy, which allows the state to broaden its influence and shape an unprecedented level of economic dependence even among the world's most powerful states, such as the United States. Control over oil quotas within OPEC+ allows the Kingdom not only to stabilise its own economy, but also to influence global energy markets by using oil as a tool of diplomatic pressure. By changing production levels, Saudi Arabia is able to exert economic pressure on consumer countries or competitors, balancing the interests of the United States, Russia, and China. This strategy turns oil into a form of «economic blackmail» – not through direct threats, but by demonstrating the ability to shift the balance of power in the global economy.

For instance, after Russia launched a full-scale war against Ukraine in 2022, contrary to the expectations of its Western partners, Saudi Arabia did not increase oil production to stabilise global markets but instead supported OPEC+'s decision to reduce it. This strategy effectively contributed to maintaining high oil prices, which strengthened Russia's position as an energy exporter and, at the same time, demonstrated the Kingdom's desire to preserve its autonomy from Western pressure [32].

In conclusion, it can be stated that the strategy of using smart power has become the new driving force behind Saudi diplomacy, replacing the aggressive, interventionist approach that characterised the 2010s. The current emphasis is on projecting soft power, while retaining powerful elements of hard power – economic and military might – that remain firmly integrated into its foreign policy. Saudi Arabia skilfully combines its dominance in the fossil fuel sector, leadership in OPEC, and manipulations of the global energy market in its own political interests (elements of hard power) with «green» initiatives in the field of energy and climate and large investments in renewable energy projects, both within its own country and abroad (elements of soft power). The Kingdom's sports diplomacy has become a phenomenon: the future hosting of the 2034 FIFA World Cup, the Formula 1 Grand Prix in Jeddah, and the multi-million dollar sponsorship of F1 by the state-owned company ARAMCO solidify Saudi Arabia's position as an influential player in world sport.

Saudi Arabia has created for itself an image of a somewhat controversial but undeniably influential and flexible actor that skilfully adapts its diplomatic tools to achieve its foreign policy interests. The authoritarian regime remains a fundamental vulnerability of Saudi diplomacy: limited political freedoms, reputational blows such as the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, and Mohammed bin Salman's autocratic style of decision-making periodically complicate relations with the US and the EU. This remains a factor that many partners perceive as a threat and a reason to more carefully assess the risks and benefits of cooperation with the Kingdom. At the same time, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has become a catalyst for rethinking Saudi Arabia's global role. The Kingdom has gone beyond its traditional behaviour as a «pro-Western ally» by choosing neutrality, which allows it to influence Moscow, Kyiv, Washington, and Beijing simultaneously. Support for pro-Ukrainian resolutions at the UN is combined with a reluctance to put economic pressure on Russia through OPEC+, and humanitarian aid to Ukraine coexists with a strategic partnership with the Kremlin in the energy sector. Ultimately, within the concept of smart power, the Kingdom has made an unprecedented breakthrough – from religious and ideological leadership to a multi-level system of influence that combines energy and climate diplomacy, sports diplomacy, cultural branding, humanitarian diplomacy, and peacekeeping initiatives. As a result, Saudi Arabia's smart power has become not just a synthesis of soft and hard power, but a strategic formula for its new international influence – moderate and flexible.

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РОЗУМНА СИЛА ЯК ІНСТРУМЕНТ ЗОВНІШНЬОЇ ПОЛІТИКИ САУДІВСЬКОЇ АРАВІЇ

Леся Дорош

*Національний університет «Львівська політехніка»,
Інститут гуманітарних і соціальних наук,
кафедра політології та міжнародних відносин
вул. С. Бандери, 12, 79013, м. Львів, Україна
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8558-8525>*

Анастасія Терешкевич

*Національний університет «Львівська політехніка»,
Інститут гуманітарних і соціальних наук,
кафедра політології та міжнародних відносин
вул. С. Бандери, 12, 79013, м. Львів, Україна
<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-3228-8431>*

Досліджено особливості зміни позиціонування Саудівської Аравії на міжнародній арені, коли зовнішньополітична активність Королівства стає дедалі більш самостійною та багатовекторною, а використання інструментів жорсткої та м'якої сили – більш поміркованим, що свідчить про перехід до використання інструментів розумної сили. Ідеться про нішеву дипломатію (за М. Чазізом та К. Лутмар), яка активно реалізується через спортивну дипломатію, релігійний вплив, гуманітарну допомогу, посередництво у конфліктах, енергетичне домінування та фінансову щедрість. Стверджується, що подвійна стратегія збереження домінування у сфері викопних енергоносіїв поряд із активним просуванням чистих технологій відображає характерне на сьогодні для Королівства розумне дотримання балансу жорсткої та м'якої сили. Проаналізовано ключові напрями реалізації інструментів м'якої сили Саудівської Аравії: релігійну дипломатію, спорт як ключовий інструмент національного брендингу, консолідації влади та розширення глобального впливу, гуманітарні ініціативи та посередницьку дипломатію як елемент саудівської «дипломатії допомоги» тощо. Наголошено на мілітарній могутності країни, коли країна стабільно посідає високі позиції у світових рейтингах військової могутності, є найбільшим імпортером озброєнь у світі, накопичуючи значні арсенали сучасної військової техніки. Доведено, що Саудівська Аравія вміло поєднує своє домінування у сфері викопного палива, лідерство в ОПЕК та маніпуляції на глобальному енергетичному ринку у власних політичних інтересах (інструменти жорсткої сили) із «зеленими» ініціативами у сфері енергетики та клімату та великими інвестиціями у проекти з відновлювальної енергетики як у межах власної країни, так і за кордоном (інструменти м'якої сили). Стверджується, що у межах концепції розумної сили Королівство зробило безпрецедентний прорив – від релігійно-ідеологічного лідерства до багаторівневої системи впливу, що поєднує енергетичну та кліматичну дипломатію, культурний брендинг та спортивну дипломатію, гуманітарну дипломатію та миротворчі ініціативи.

Ключові слова: Саудівська Аравія, Vision 2030, розумна сила, м'яка сила, жорстка сила, зовнішня політика.

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