Shifting Alliances

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The media discourse in recent months has focussed heavily on the burning question of who will succeed Biden as president after the election in November. However, after all the forecasts and assessments, it is certainly a wise approach to keep an eye on the long-term strategy of the US. For several years now, a change in American foreign policy interests has been apparent, with a steady shift towards the Indo-Pacific to counter Chinese influences.

States such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are now also experiencing this development. Even though American arms exports to the Middle East remain at a high level and accounted for around 52% of all exports into that region between 2019 and 2023, it is becoming apparent

that certain traditional partner states in the Middle East are now shifting more towards alternative powers and that the US is no longer sufficient as their sole security guarantor.

Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE are increasingly expanding their cooperation with Russia and China. For this reason, Saudi Arabia has joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) as a dialogue partner. Saudi-Chinese defence deals have also been a topic of discussion in recent months, possibly in order to distance Saudi Arabia from its historical dependence on the USA as a security guarantor. Since the Quincy Pact of 1945, the American basis for Saudi security has been regarded as immovable. These new cooperations are less anti-Western moves than steps toward greater autonomy as part of Gulf states' diversification strategies. The accession of the UAE, Egypt, Iran to the BRICS and Saudi Arabia's interest in this organisation is just another sign of this trend.

But why are Saudi Arabia and other countries in the Middle East no longer satisfied with the American security guarantees, despite the high level of arms exports and troop contingents in the region? One important reason is that the US has disappointed Saudi Arabia on several occasions, for example through a lack of support in Syria and the resumption of negotiations on the Iran nuclear deal. The rapid withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan under President Biden and the restriction of arms sales have also weakened Saudi confidence in the American security partnership.

This could also explain Saudi Arabia's ambivalent behaviour with regard to the war in Ukraine. Diplomatic initiatives and votes in the United Nations continue to be held in favour of the Western stance of Ukraine's sovereignty. However, military arms deals and business with Russia and China are intended to create a strategic partnership with them and prevent a one-sided American alignment.

Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia is increasingly balancing on a knife-edge with this policy, as it concludes new military agreements with Russia and China on the one hand and continues to receive US security guarantees on the other. This could be potentially threatening for Saudi Arabia in the future if there is sanctioning behaviour on the part of the USA, similar to the situation with Turkey and the F-35 dilemma. In the worst-case scenario, Saudi Arabia's military support would then no longer be sufficient to guarantee its own regional security.

The example of Saudi Arabia in the Middle East makes it clear that politics in this region is being driven more by its own dynamics, and that it increasingly no longer matters which American president holds the Oval Office.