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Nuclear energy in Russian-Saudi relations

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Abstract. The paper examines Russian-Saudi nuclear energy cooperation, highlighting Saudi Arabia's nuclear ambitions and Russia's experience in nuclear programs development. It analyzes nuclear diplomacy on both international and national levels, emphasizing nuclear energy's contribution to sustainable development and global cooperation. The authors conclude that the partnership has not yet yielded practical results. The sides have established a strong foundation for future collaboration and long-term engagement, reflecting features of nuclear projects and their importance within global energy security.

Keywords: nuclear energy, energy security, sustainable development, Russia, Saudi Arabia

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Научная статья

Атомная энергетика в российско-саудовских отношениях

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Аннотация. Статья посвящена анализу российско-саудовского сотрудничества в сфере атомной энергетики, его формированию, особенностям и перспективам. Рассматриваются ключевые этапы развития российско-саудовского сотрудничества в этой сфере. Особое внимание уделяется влиянию глобальных тенденций и международной политической обстановки на сотрудничество стран. Работа построена на публикациях международных и национальных организаций энергетического сектора, концептуальных документах российских и саудовских государственных органов, а также публикациях в российских, саудовских и западных СМИ.

В статье оценивается значимость атомной дипломатии как инструмента международного сотрудничества. Авторы рассматривают международный и национальный уровни развития атомной дипломатии. Одним из ключевых факторов сотрудничества является опыт российской корпорации *Росатом*, реализующей проекты строительства АЭС за рубежом. В условиях санкций атомная энергетика становится инструментом укрепления международных позиций России. Для Саудовской Аравии сотрудничество в атомной сфере — часть стратегии *Видение 2030*, направленной на диверсификацию экономики и развитие новых технологических отраслей. Развитие атомной энергетики в королевстве ограничено отсутствием опыта эксплуатации АЭС, капиталоемкостью их строительства и необходимостью привлечения иностранных партнеров.

История сотрудничества России и Саудовской Аравии в атомной энергетике начинается в 2015 г. с подписания межправительственного соглашения о мирном использовании атомной энергии. В последующие годы достигнуты договоренности о научно-исследовательском взаимодействии, открыт офис *Росатома* в Саудовской Аравии. В декабре 2023 г. генеральный директор *Росатома* Алексей Лихачев принял участие в переговорах в Эр-Рияде, что подчеркивает значимость атомной повестки в двусторонних отношениях в условиях санкций.

Несмотря на достигнутые соглашения, строительство АЭС в Саудовской Аравии пока не началось. Королевство рассматривает широкий круг потенциальных партнеров, включая Францию, Китай и Южную Корею. В регионе уже есть успешный пример атомного сотрудничества: первый реактор в странах-членах ССАГПЗ был построен в ОАЭ с применением южнокорейских технологий.

Авторы считают, что российско-саудовское сотрудничество, несмотря на отсутствие практических результатов, заложило основу для будущего взаимодействия в атомной энергетике. Оно отражает долгосрочный характер ядерных проектов и их значимость в международной энергетической безопасности.

Ключевые слова: атомная энергетика, энергетическая безопасность, устойчивое развитие, Россия, Саудовская Аравия

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Introduction

The Russian Federation's relations with the Gulf states are characterized by the principle of stability and are directed towards cooperation in various domains [1]. The working visits of Russian President Vladimir Putin to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in December 2023 underscored the role of the Gulf states as promising partners for Russia amid international sanctions pressure [2, 3].

The negative international climate surrounding Russia has allowed the nuclear sector to emerge as a means of enhancing the country's prestige and the competitiveness of its national technologies [4]. Russia possesses unique expertise in the development of overseas projects related to the construction and operation of nuclear power plants (NPP). Currently, the Russian state corporation Rosatom is implementing 7 NPP construction projects abroad, two of which are located in the Middle East – in Turkey and Egypt [5]. It is also worth considering the long-standing negotiations between Russia and Saudi Arabia on the construction of a nuclear power plant [6].

As one of the leading states in the Gulf region, Saudi Arabia represents a compelling case for analyzing Russia's foreign policy instruments. At present, Russia and Saudi Arabia are actively developing an energy partnership based on Russia's membership in the *Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries+* (OPEC+) [7]. However, the similarity of their energy mix has historically limited the scope for energy diplomacy, allowing cooperation only in the field of conventional energy. Over time, however, their relations have expanded to include another component of energy policy – nuclear energy. As time passes, nuclear energy has become one of the priority areas of bilateral cooperation [8]. This willingness to cooperate in the nuclear sector has been demonstrated at the highest political level [7].

Nuclear energy in Russia-Saudi relations remains a relatively new and insufficiently studied phenomenon that requires thorough academic analysis. The relevance of this topic necessitates an examination of the factors shaping the contemporary Russian-Saudi nuclear cooperation, as well as its characteristics and prospects.

Materials and methodology

The study's source base comprises publications and statistical data from specialized international and national organizations in the energy sector, conceptual policy documents from Russian and Saudi governmental bodies, as well as publications in Russian, Saudi and Western media. Some of the sources from these categories are introduced into academic discourse for the first time.

The export of Russian nuclear technologies has primarily been examined in the context of Russian-Chinese and Russian-Iranian cooperation. Additionally, Rosatom's construction of nuclear power plants in the Middle East, particularly in Egypt and Turkey, has received considerable scholarly attention [9, 10]. The authors consider these areas

of Russia's nuclear diplomacy as well-established. However, Russian-Saudi cooperation in the field of nuclear energy has not been widely analyzed in academic literature, largely due to the absence of agreements between the two countries on NPP construction.

Nevertheless, the issue of Saudi Arabia's nuclear program and Russia's potential role has been addressed by several scholars. K.P. Dudarev argues that nuclear energy could become the most significant and promising area of cooperation between Russia and Saudi Arabia, highlighting Rosatom's experience in NPP construction as a key competitive advantage. The author suggests that Saudi Arabia's efforts to diversify its energy mix create a complementary relationship between the two economies [11. P. 160, 165]. I. Rodina provides a comprehensive analysis of the Kingdom's nuclear program, examining both its historical background and its contemporary significance within the *Vision 2030*. She shares a similar perspective, affirming Rosatom's potential as a key player in Saudi Arabia's energy market [12. P. 27–33]. Conversely, A.A. Boyko approaches Saudi Arabia's nuclear program from a military perspective and asserts that Rosatom does not hold a competitive position in the Saudi market [13. P. 68]. Overall, existing scholarly works emphasize the strategic nature of the ongoing negotiations between Russia and Saudi Arabia, as well as the Kingdom's long-term objective of reducing its reliance on fossil fuels.

From a theoretical perspective, nuclear energy as an area of international cooperation can be classified under several key directions within International Relations studies. As one of the sources of electricity generation, nuclear energy is considered as a part of a state's broader energy policy and diplomacy, within which it formulates its vision for the development of conventional, renewable, and nuclear energy [14]. A. Wenger, R.W. Orttung, and J. Perovic argue that energy has already been established as a domain of cooperation in world politics [15]. A prominent scholar in Russian energy diplomacy, S.Z. Zhiznin, associates energy diplomacy with ensuring national energy security and emphasizes that it serves as an instrument for implementing foreign policy goals through established mechanisms and institutions [16].

As noted above, energy – and nuclear energy in particular – is not an isolated sector devoid of traditional mechanisms of interaction. A number of scholars classify nuclear energy under economic diplomacy. D.A. Khryapin and D.B. Kalashnikov consider the development of nuclear energy to be a task of economic diplomacy [17]. Similarly, N. Bayne and S. Woolcock argue that nuclear energy constitutes only a component of economic diplomacy [18]. Their position is based on the economic benefits associated with nuclear energy projects. However, despite the ecological safety of nuclear power plants and their long-term economic advantages, many states remain hesitant to invest in nuclear energy primarily due to economic considerations: nuclear power plant construction is capital-intensive, entails a lengthy implementation process, and does not yield immediate economic returns [19].

D.A. Mirgorod and E.F. Parubochaya identify nuclear energy as intersecting with several research domains: general energy policy, military affairs, the concept of "hard and soft power," and economic diplomacy. Moreover, they distinguish nuclear diplomacy as an independent research domain. The researchers also acknowledge the military dimension of nuclear diplomacy. Currently, this concept has increasingly been viewed in terms of cooperation rather than confrontation [4]. Chinese researchers Yu Jianhua and D. Ichen highlight similar areas within the study of general energy policy while also emphasizing the environmental dimension [20]. Overall, the authors largely agree on the classification of nuclear energy studies within International Relations research. This study follows the premise that nuclear diplomacy constitutes an independent research field, though its analysis must consider various factors arising from conventional areas of study.

Nevertheless, the theoretical studies have not addressed the classification of nuclear energy within the framework of sustainable development research. Nuclear energy fulfills a fundamental objective of states by contributing to the effective and long-term provision of energy security [21]. In this regard, nuclear energy can be considered a tool for achieving sustainable development. This direction is gaining additional relevance within the emerging field of sustainability science, which lies at the intersection of political, economic, and environmental research [22].

Based on the theoretical analysis of nuclear energy as an area of international cooperation, as well as the research objectives, it is possible to identify the theories, concepts, approaches, and methods necessary for a comprehensive study of the subject. The research draws upon the concept of sustainable development, which has become highly institutionalized at the international level and has already generated a substantial academic discourse [22]. The study also employs institutional and systems approaches, which are essential for understanding global energy policy as a network of organizations, practices, and trends shaping contemporary cooperation in the nuclear sector [23, 24]. The primary research tool is the case study method, driven by a focus on the specific field and its significance in the bilateral relations. Additionally, the research utilizes general scientific methods, as well as predictive method to identify the key stages of Russia-Saudi nuclear cooperation, analyze the current state and future trajectory of this partnership, and track its evolution over time [25].

Thus, from a theoretical perspective, the study of international cooperation in nuclear energy can be understood as a multifaceted field encompassing socio-economic, historical, and political dimensions. The scientific novelty of this research lies in its original methodological approach, which synthesizes theoretical frameworks and introduces new sources into academic circulation. Moreover, most studies on nuclear diplomacy do not integrate their analysis with the concept of sustainable development, further distinguishing the present work as a unique contribution to the field.

The Global Level of Nuclear Diplomacy Development

The integration of nuclear energy into national and global economies is a key factor in shaping energy security and

achieving sustainable development at both national and international levels. *The International Energy Agency (IEA)* – a specialized international organization that facilitates energy cooperation and analyzes the structure of the global energy sector — asserts that "Nuclear energy can help make the energy sector's journey away from unabated fossil fuels faster and more secure" and "The policy landscape is changing, opening up opportunities for a nuclear comeback [in the global economy]" [26. P. 7].

Nuclear energy serves as a guarantor of global energy security, as it is not dependent on the continuous large-scale extraction of fossil resources. Moreover, the operation of nuclear power plants is not affected by natural and climatic conditions, which is particularly important in the context of climate change [27].

Specialized reports and research highlight the positive role of nuclear energy. The IEA's annual report *Electricity – 2025* notes a record-high share of nuclear energy in the global energy mix. Additionally, the agency emphasizes "nuclear power generation will reach a new high in 2025 and continue to rise steadily over the following two years, setting further records [28]. Out of 31 nuclear reactors whose construction began since early 2017, 17 are of Russian design [26. P. 17].

A distinctive feature of the current global energy policy is the strong integration of the nuclear agenda into the activities of international organizations. The case of intensified international nuclear cooperation is collaboration within United Nations institutions. *The UN* recognizes nuclear energy as a pathway toward sustainable "green" development [29]. *The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)* serves as a UN partner in achieving the *Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)* established by the global community under the *United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* [30]. Notably, both Saudi Arabia and Russia have signed and ratified this agreement [31].

The implementation of cooperative projects for the peaceful use of nuclear energy provides significant benefits to the international community. These advantages are reflected in the following anticipated outcomes:

- Greening the global energy sector and achieving the SDGs. According to the IAEA, nuclear energy contributes to achieving 9 SDGs by addressing key challenges primarily through the use of accessible and environmentally friendly electricity sources [27].

- Enhancing comprehensive security in the Middle East by reducing dependence on fossil fuels (primarily on oil and natural gas) and increasing the role of non-fossil and zero-carbon energy sources. Weakening the reliance on fossil fuels and reducing competition for these resources strengthens national economies, lowers the risk of confrontation among key actors, and promotes green development (a combination of economic, energy, and environmental security) [32].

Thus, at the international level, nuclear energy is positioned as a factor in the safe and environmentally sustainable generation of electricity. Nuclear energy directly contributes to sustainable development, following security demands and raising decarbonization trends. In this process, Russia as a leader in nuclear power plants construction plays a central role.

National Level of Nuclear Diplomacy Development. The Russian Federation

Russia is also experiencing trends toward low-carbon economic development through the use of nuclear energy, alongside measures to enhance international cooperation in this field. The development of the energy sector has been outlined in several strategic policies. The first of these, *the Energy Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation*, emphasizes the development of the country's current fuel and energy complex in accordance with the principles of sustainable development, while also highlighting the importance of nuclear energy in the context of exporting cutting-edge Russian technologies [33]. Another key policy, *The Energy Strategy of the Russian Federation for the period up to 2035*, is a governmental program that prioritizes the deployment of next-generation nuclear power plants. In addition to its technological objectives, the strategy underscores the significance of international nuclear cooperation [34].

The primary policy guiding Russia's international nuclear development is the State Program *Development of the Nuclear Energy and Industrial Complex*. According to this program, the state corporation *Rosatom* – the leading governmental entity in the nuclear sector – is tasked with strengthening its position as a global leader in the nuclear energy market. Furthermore, Russia aims to intensify efforts toward a "green economy" through promoting nuclear energy and the international expansion of civilian nuclear power under the *Construction of Nuclear Power Plants Abroad* initiative [35].

All of these policies take into account the current international environment, in which many sectors of the Russian economy have been affected by sanctions. Notably, Russia's nuclear sector has not been subjected to any international sanctions, distinguishing it from other strategic industries [6].

Thus, for Russia, cooperation in the field of civilian nuclear energy serves both as a means of enhancing the global competitiveness of its technologies and as a diplomatic tool for establishing international partnerships amid sanctions.

The Russian Federation is witnessing an increasing emphasis on international collaboration in nuclear energy, while reinforcing the role of its nuclear industry as a strategically significant component of the economy on the path toward "green development".

National Level of Nuclear Diplomacy Development. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's nuclear program is not a fundamentally new phenomenon and has traditionally been linked to the military dimension of the Kingdom's foreign policy. From the 1960s until 2006, the country's nuclear ambitions were primarily driven by the pursuit of nuclear weapons, with no significant connection to the peaceful use of nuclear energy [36]. The lack of practical experience in the commercial operation of nuclear facilities remains a major challenge for Saudi Arabia.

The analysis of global energy policy trends and Saudi Arabia's contemporary foreign policy highlights several economic and political advantages that could distinguish the state from other subregional and regional actors:

- Saudi Arabia's policy of developing a diversified energy base through the integration of new energy sources, and its readiness to implement long-term, capital-intensive projects;

- The country's aspiration to strengthen its image as a future technological leader in the Middle East by introducing unique, cutting-edge technologies;

- Prospects for the development of other high-tech and energy-intensive industries in Saudi Arabia based on nuclear energy, such as data centers and new computing capacities for AI technologies;

- The country's experience in successful political balancing between cooperation with both the United States and China, which positively influences its perception by the Russian government [37. P. 69];

- The presence of uranium ore deposits in Saudi Arabia and plans for its extraction and enrichment [38, 39]. While Saudi Arabia has the potential to develop uranium mining sites, this requires not only investment but also the use of foreign technologies. China has been particularly successful in the Saudi uranium market, having been engaged in uranium exploration in the Kingdom since 2017 [40]. Given the current sanctions environment, the authors believe that Russia is unlikely to compete for similar projects.

The Kingdom continues to draw upon its oil and gas resources, whose role in the national economy has only strengthened over time. As of the end of 2024, oil and petroleum products accounted for 64.8% of Saudi Arabia's total exports. Since 2023, this figure has stabilized and has not fallen below 63.8% [41]. The most recent data (2022) of the *IEA* reveals that Saudi Arabia relies on oil (64.2%) and natural gas (35.7%) in terms of total energy supply [42]. Nevertheless, efforts are being made to integrate civilian nuclear energy into the country's energy mix and contribute to sustainable development. The primary national initiative in this regard is *Vision 2030*, a project aimed at diversifying energy sources, promoting environmental sustainability, and decarbonizing the economy [43]. Currently, Saudi Arabia has only one small-scale nuclear reactor, which is not yet in commercial operation and is used exclusively for research purposes [44].

Thus, for a long time, Saudi Arabia's nuclear program was driven by aspirations to acquire nuclear weapons. Only recently has the country shifted its focus toward the development of civilian nuclear energy as part of its broader economic diversification strategy.

Russian-Saudi Nuclear Partnership

The history of nuclear diplomacy in Russian-Saudi relations is relatively recent, yet it has firmly established itself on the bilateral agenda. Saudi Arabia's interest in cooperating with Russia in the nuclear energy sector is largely driven by *Rosatom's* extensive experience in implementing nuclear power projects in politically unstable regions – in the Middle East and North Africa [45].

From Russia's perspective, Saudi Arabia represents a promising market for the future development of economic projects. While for Saudi Arabia, Russian nuclear energy projects serve as a means of diversifying its energy sources, for Russia, they offer an opportunity to expand

into new markets amid sanctions. The sanctions pressure on Russia led to the cancellation of the NPP construction project in Finland in 2022 [46]. However, this case allowed Rosatom to redirect its freed-up organizational resources toward emerging markets in Asian countries. Beyond the purely economic benefits of a potential NPP project in Saudi Arabia, Russia could strengthen its role as a technological power, whose advancements in nuclear energy and the energy sector remain at the forefront.

The history of cooperation in this area began in 2015 when the two countries signed an intergovernmental *Agreement on Cooperation in the Field of Peaceful Use of Nuclear Energy*. According to Rosatom, this agreement "for the first time in the history of Russian-Saudi relations creates a legal basis for cooperation between our countries in the field of nuclear energy, opening prospects for oncoming traffic business initiatives on both sides of a wide range of areas" [47].

Since 2017, Rosatom has been engaged in dialogue with the Saudi side regarding the construction of the first NPP in the Arab country. In 2017, Rosatom and King Abdullah City for Atomic and Renewable Energy signed *Programme for Cooperation in the peaceful use of nuclear energy* [48]. The document envisioned the creation of joint research centers and reaffirmed the commitment to nuclear power plant construction as outlined in the 2015 Agreement. These agreements led to the establishment of a Rosatom branch in Saudi Arabia in 2019. In December 2023, Rosatom's Director General, Alexey Likhachev, was part of the Russian delegation at negotiations in Saudi Arabia [49]. This event highlights the growing importance of nuclear energy in bilateral relations.

Despite the extensive negotiations between the states, there are challenges that countries need to overcome to continue a productive dialogue in the nuclear sector:

- Sanctions imposed by the European Union, the United States, and other countries on Russia's energy sector [50, 51]. Although Rosatom remains one of the few state corporations not subject to sanctions, there is a risk of increasing sanctions pressure on this strategic sector of the Russian economy.

- The concentration of institutions around traditional energy. Currently, the energy dialogue between Russia and Saudi Arabia is primarily focused on the oil sector within the OPEC+ [52].

The history of Russian-Saudi nuclear cooperation demonstrates an increasing focus on Russia's nuclear diplomacy in the Middle East. Additionally, a solid legal foundation has been created for future practical cooperation.

One of Saudi Arabia's key economic trends is the restructuring of the national energy sector and the introduction of new industries alongside the oil sector [53. P. 23]. While traditional energy in Saudi Arabia continues to thrive, the development of nuclear energy faces significant challenges. Saudi Arabia, as a regional power, has not become a leader in the scientific and technological sector and does not possess a set of technologies that would be essential for Russia under sanctions. For Russia, Saudi Arabia serves as a means to overcome international sanctions and market losses. Other effects, such as strengthening its role in the region, are secondary. The authors admit that the likelihood of sanctions expansion on Russia's nuclear sector by the European Union, the United States, and other countries remains low, given Rosatom's critical role in global nuclear cooperation. The renewal of the Russian-American dialogue can lead to the cancellation of the sanctions, thereby fostering positive developments in nuclear diplomacy between Russia and Saudi Arabia [54].

Since the beginning of the Russian-Saudi nuclear partnership, several framework agreements have been signed, but none have yet resulted in the construction of a nuclear power plant in the country. Saudi Arabia remains dependent on oil and gas resources, and the Vision 2030 strategic plan for economic diversification has not yet met expectations [41, 42].

Despite the positive dynamics in nuclear diplomacy within Russian-Saudi relations, it is premature to speak of firm agreements between the two countries. To construct its first nuclear power plant, Saudi Arabia is considering a wide range of potential partners, including France, China, and South Korea. Furthermore, the first nuclear power plant among *Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)* member states was built in the UAE using South Korean technology [55].

An analysis of nuclear diplomacy in Russian-Saudi relations suggests that, while the partnership has not yet yielded concrete results, it has laid a potential foundation for future cooperation. The case of the Russian-Saudi nuclear partnership reflects the long-term nature of nuclear projects and their significance in global energy security.

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