Erosion of strategic power – Saudi Arabia

What is the issue?

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There is a possibility of incremental erosion of Saudi Arabia's strategic power with the death of a dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

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What is the khashoggi case?

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- Jamal Khashoggi is a well-known journalist and critic of the Saudi government.
- He went into self-imposed exile in the US last year and from there, he criticised the policies of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman through his monthly columns in the Washington Post.
- He recently visited the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, from where he was disappeared.
- According to Saudi Arabia, a general despatched a 15-member team to Istanbul to confront Khashoggi as there is a general order in the Kingdom to bring back dissidents living abroad.
- Inside the consulate, a fight erupted between Khashoggi and the security men, and the journalist died when he was put in a chokehold.
- Riyadh also claims that the crown prince was unaware of the operation.
- However, Turkey says that there is strong evidence to suggest the "savage" killing of Khashoggi was planned days in advance.
- It says that three teams of 15 Saudi nationals arrived in Istanbul on separate flights in the days and hours leading up to the murder.
- It also added that the group had removed the security cameras and

surveillance footage from the consulate building prior to Khashoggi's arrival.
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- The journalist was tortured and killed on the consulate premises and that his body was then removed.
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- They claim to have audio and video evidence to support this claim, but these have not yet been made public.
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How Saudi Arabia is functioning under the crown prince?

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- Saudi Arabia has declared Prince Mohammed bin Salman(MBS) as the kingdom's crown prince in 2017.
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- After moving to the front of the line to the throne, MBS has promoted himself as a social and economic reformer who could lead the Salafi kingdom to the 21st century.
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- But the reality has been more complex, wherein MBS appears to be reckless and power-hungry.
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- He has launched some reforms in the process of centralising huge powers in his hands.
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- The way Khashoggi was murdered has been a shock even to supporters of the Crown Prince.
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- Riyadh maintains that it was a rogue operation that went bad, which is a feeble argument which even his ardent supporters would find hard to buy.
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- The perpetrators didn’t think of the diplomatic consequence and they are used to getting away with disastrous policy decisions.
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- MBS had initially promised his people to loosen the grip of the conservatives on culture and liberalise the economy further to make it less dependent on oil.
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- But this was the means towards power and influence in the larger power struggle within the palace.
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- MBS may have allowed women to drive and cinema halls to open, but he has

also gone after every potential rival in the palace.
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- Severe actions were carried out last year in the name of fighting corruption and to take control over all arms of the security establishment.
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- While the important targets were confined to a luxury hotel for weeks, dozens of other critics and clerics were incarcerated in unknown places.
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What are his actions in the foreign policy arena?

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- MBS’s vision is of a stronger monarchy that uses fear at home and maintains an aggressive foreign policy.
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- However, most of his foreign policy decisions have been counterproductive.
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- As Defence Minister, he has been the main architect of the war on Yemen, which has yielded a humanitarian catastrophe.
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- Yet, Saudi Arabia has never been held accountable for its actions, while it holds the support of U.S.
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- The same recklessness was visible in Riyadh’s blockade last year against neighbouring Qatar.
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- It said Qatar was supporting terrorism in the region and made a host of demands for the blockade to be lifted, including shutting down the Al Jazeera television station and severing ties with Iran.
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- But the ties remain tense as Qatar has rejected the demands.
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- Saudi Arabia detained Lebanon’s Prime Minister Saad Hariri in Riyadh, from where he announced his resignation last year.
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- However, on his return to Lebanon after certain weeks, he was again made his entry to the office of the Prime Minister.
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- Saudi Arabia also recalled its Ambassador to Canada and froze new trade and investment after Canada raised concerns over the arrests of women rights activists in the Kingdom.
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What does it imply?

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- The Saudis have not been perturbed about the results of their actions and they are not strategic in dealing with foreign countries.
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- The crown prince, despite promises of reforms, appears to be extremely intolerant of any criticism and his responses are disproportionately aggressive.
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- He also continues to enjoy a sense of impunity, with the solid support from the U.S. administration.
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- Saudi Arabia may still get away as the U.S. is unlikely to sacrifice its strategic relationship with the Kingdom.
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- The latest khashoggi episode also shows that the misadventures of the Crown Prince are hurting Saudi Arabia geopolitically.
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- In Yemen, the Saudis have still not won over the Houthi rebels.
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- When Qatar rejected Saudi demands, Riyadh did not have an alternate plan to deal with the country.
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- At a time when Sunni Gulf monarchies are supposed to stand in unity against Iran, Saudi Arabia’s hostility towards Qatar has only created new rifts within West Asia.
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- It has lost the Syrian civil war and its military and monetary investments there have been in vain.
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- The Khashoggi case is a public relations disaster for a country which wants to be the leader of the Sunni world.
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- Thus, there has been an incremental erosion of Saudi Arabia’s strategic power under MBS and the Kingdom will have to deal with it soonest.
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Source: The Hindu

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