Mideast Meets Far East: Why the Next U.S. President Can't 'Pivot to Asia'

by David Pollock **(/experts/david-pollock)**

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Saudi Arabia's national day last week passed almost unnoticed in the U.S. media. But in Japan, where I happened to be, the papers carried fulsome congratulatory official messages and advertisements by major local companies. In turn, Saudi Arabia's ambassador to Tokyo published an op-ed praising their bilateral relationship as "one of the most important" in the world, noting that Japan ranks third among all of Riyadh's trading partners while Saudi Arabia is in Tokyo's top ten.

The warm tone echoed that of "mutual admiration" comments in the media of both countries earlier this month, when Prince Muhammad bin Salman visited Japan. The contrast with the chilly and often downright hostile tone in recent Saudi and U.S. media treatment of each other could not be sharper. It stands out all the more in light of Japan's conspicuous mention as a key ally, by both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, at the end of their first debate on September 27.

What binds Saudi Arabia with Japan, of course, and increasingly separates it from the U.S., is oil. Saudi Arabia is by far the world's largest exporter of it; Japan is one of the largest importers. Indeed, Japan's economy, third largest on earth after the U.S. and China, is almost totally dependent on energy imports, especially from the Middle East. And while some other major economies are diversifying their energy sources, Japan's dependence on Mideast oil and gas has only intensified since its abrupt move away from nuclear power, in the wake of the Fukushima earthquake/tsunami/meltdown five years ago.

But lately, what also binds these strange bedfellows together is a common concern that the U.S. may be trying to shift away from its historic role as protector of international energy routes and infrastructure, literally the lifeblood of

their economic survival. My conversations with a cross-section of Japanese officials and experts from their National Security Council, Foreign Ministry, Defense Ministry, and leading universities and corporations convinced me of one unexpected insight: For the U.S. to advance its East Asian alliances and interests, it must also maintain its security umbrella over Mideast energy supplies.

As Japan's Mideast watchers see it, no one else can do the job. In this view, they join most Arab experts and officials, who openly admit that their own relative weakness, internal preoccupations, and regional rivalries with Iran and with each other render them all unfit to safeguard their energy patrimony on their own. Ironically, then, even the Obama Administration's professed "pivot to Asia" requires a strong foothold in the Middle East. The current team has very belatedly and grudgingly come around to that realization. The next U.S. Administration would be well advised to remember the recent past so as not repeat that mistake.

Moreover, Japan's Mideast concerns are broadly shared among other Asian giants, whether friends or rivals of the United States. Regarding heavy dependence on Mideast oil and gas tankers, China, India, and South Korea are not exactly in the same boat as Japan, but pretty close. And not one of those countries is volunteering to take over the leading American position in guarding those essential Mideast energy exports.

Moreover, when it comes to another Mideast "export," radical Islamic terrorism, many major Asian countries are already much more embroiled than Japan ever was, or could ever likely become. That list starts with China and India and extends to Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and more.

Yet even Japan is potentially vulnerable to this threat. The experts I spoke with in Tokyo do not feel insulated from Mideast terrorism, notwithstanding their distant geography and distinct, highly homogeneous demography coupled with strict immigration controls. As one Japanese official told me, his country is home to just 100,000 Muslims, overwhelmingly peaceful immigrants from Southeast Asia, out of 127 million people altogether. Nevertheless, as a major trading nation, significant numbers of Japanese business people, journalists, and others are constantly traveling around the globe, possibly at risk from terrorism.

Two of those Japanese travelers were kidnapped and later killed by IS in Syria not long ago. At the time, the author was privileged to discuss the matter with a Japanese official involved in the futile negotiations to rescue them, who pointed out that this tragic episode captured enormous public and media interest and fully engaged his government at the most senior levels. As Americans know only too well, it can take just a small number of hostages or beheadings abroad to generate huge domestic political pressures and national security crises.

Also like the U.S., Japan continuously hosts significant numbers of visitors from abroad. In addition to business travelers, the country is a surprisingly robust tourist destination, especially for other Asians or Australians. In August alone, for example, foreign arrivals numbered around three million, putting Japan in the same major league as Spain or other vacation hotspots more familiar to Westerners.

Given these numbers and today's global networks, the possibility of terrorist contagion is real. All over Tokyo and Kyoto's massive public transportation systems, I saw the same "see something, say something" notices that have become so depressingly prevalent around the U.S. ever since September 11, 2001. In this context, the Japanese experts I met were already seriously concerned about security for the Tokyo Olympics, four years down the road.

In this arena, unlike the energy one, Japanese and other Asian policymakers are not of one mind about what they want from Washington. Some privately blame U.S. action or inaction – in Iraq, Syria, or Libya lately, and in Afghanistan and Pakistan long before – for compounding rather than confronting the terrorist challenge. Others note a connection not often made in the West: terrorism is a threat not just to individuals, but also to international energy resources, as in Libya or Iraq right now. Regardless, no one I spoke with now believes that an American withdrawal from the Middle East would improve the picture. Rather, they hope to cooperate closely with an active American

approach to addressing the problem, fully aware that no single nation can cope with this increasingly diffuse threat.

To be sure, Japan and other Asian countries are less interested in the Middle East than in issues closer to home, from North Korean missiles to Chinese maritime claims to international trade treaties. At the same time, some of the most thoughtful people there argue, correctly, that a successful American policy toward East Asia presupposes strong U.S. leadership in what they call West Asia, or what we call the Middle East. They want the U.S. to help protect the flow of energy resources, reassure them of its commitments to allies, and deal effectively with Mideast-inspired terrorist threats. Thus they do not see U.S. engagement in the Middle East as a distraction, but as an essential supporting pillar of their own security, economic, and other ties to Washington. If the U.S. still wants to be a world leader, it would do well to heed this sage advice.

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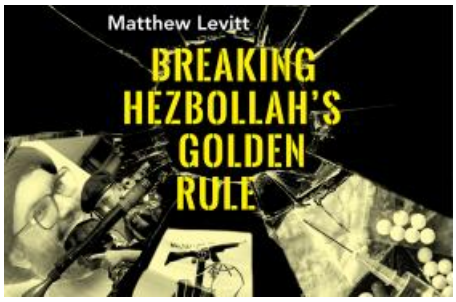

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