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MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

The Asia Pivot

by Jon B. Alterman

Much of the talk about the U.S. "Pivot to Asia" has one thing wrong: it is not a pivot away from the Middle East. That is not to say that some in the Obama administration don't wish they could pivot away from the Middle East, or that the U.S. Central Command isn't exhausted from fighting wars for more than a decade. Both are true. Instead, it is to say that Asia's ties to the Middle East are growing vigorously, and a U.S. commitment to Asian security necessarily means the United States inherits Asia's growing interests in the Middle East. The United States cannot pull out of the Middle East. Rather, its increasing engagement with Asia means that it is increasingly getting pulled into the Middle East, although from the other side.

The United States fought two land wars in Southwest Asia over the last decade. During that period, several things happened. One is that East Asian economies largely recovered from the financial crisis of the late 1990s and took off. China was the big story, clocking double-digit rates of growth. India unshackled its economy from decades of socialism and grew an average of more than seven percent per year. South Korea boomed and became the fifteenth-largest economy in the world, and Indonesia grew at more than five percent annually. Japan's modest growth through this period was an outlier, but that low growth was on a much higher base: Japan is still the world's third-largest economy.

Amidst all that economic growth, China's increasing visibility in Asian affairs alarmed several of its neighbors, who set about looking for an outside power to balance against China. While few in the United States seek a confrontation with China, many of China's neighbors seek a greater U.S. presence in Asia to deter China from staging a confrontation with them. The strategic desire in the region for a greater U.S. presence, combined with economic interests, brings the United States in further.

Finally, while Asia grew, Europe lost steam. After two decades of spectacular change spurred by the rise of the European Union project and the fall of Communism, Europe's financial crisis draws most of its energies inward. That crisis, combined with an insistence that EU foreign policy rely on consensus,

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Gulf Roundtable on Iran's Regional Strategy

Mohsen Milani, professor of politics at the University of South Florida, and Karim Sadjadpour, senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, participated in a Gulf Roundtable luncheon entitled "Iran's Regional Strategy" at CSIS on December 20, 2012. Milani and Sadjadpour agreed that Iranian influence in the region was at its highest between 2006 and 2010, and they argued that popular protests in the Middle East have awkwardly put Iran on the side of a tyrannical regime in Syria. Both speakers stressed Syria's importance to Iranian regional posture and strategy, and they evaluated Iran's mindset toward Syria and the Arab Gulf countries. You can read a full summary of the event HERE. ■

Keeping it Cool

Chocolate is a cheap luxury, but all the bars add up. Chocolate confectionary sales in the Middle East are expected to grow 61 percent over 2011-2016, reaching $5.8 billion. That is just a fraction of the more than $100 billion global chocolate retail market, but it is a growing chunk of it.

While that's good for chocolatiers, chocolate is a difficult product for the Middle East. Vendors complain about the expense and difficulty of keeping chocolate from melting in the Gulf's balmy air, where temperatures can reach an average high of 109 degrees Fahrenheit in summer. Other easily spoiled foods are a growing part of regional diets, too. GCC consumption of dairy products is only about a quarter of that of major dairy-consuming countries such as Switzerland, but it is rising sharply and has much more room to grow. Total imports of meat to the GCC increased 131 percent in the last decade to reach 1.79 million tons in 2010. Growing populations and rising incomes explain part of this shift, but a large measure is a more basic and enduring change in dietary patterns.

Refrigerating food throughout the transportation chain is energy-intensive, and the need to refrigerate food comes on top of some of the fastest-growing energy use in the world. The more domestic energy consumption grows, the more it squeezes energy exports.

In the future, innovations such as solar-powered refrigerated vehicles could help. In the meantime, a little bit of oil goes into every bar of chocolate. Luckily for consumers, it doesn't affect the taste. ■

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has hampered European participation in solving key international crises and made a leading European role in global affairs far harder to conceive. The United States has robust bilateral relationships with several countries, and in absolute terms, Europe and the United States remain deeply intertwined. Yet, with the rise of U.S. economic and strategic relationships in Asia, the U.S.-European relationship seems destined to diminish in relative terms.

The United States has long partnered with Europeans on Middle Eastern diplomacy, but Middle East interests are by no means a European preserve. Asian countries importing millions of barrels of oil a day have a keen interest in regional stability and energy security, and they increasingly pursue diplomacy to further those goals. U.S. diplomacy is similarly concerned with stability and energy security. While the United States imports relatively little energy directly from the Middle East, all of its Asian allies import it in growing amounts and use it to manufacture goods that they sell to the United States. In this way, *indirect* U.S. imports of Middle Eastern oil remain robust. In addition, oil (and to a lesser extent, gas) are globally traded commodities, so a price spike in one place affects prices globally. U.S. production can affect where the specific barrels of U.S. oil consumption come from, but it has much less effect on the price of those barrels. For that reason, the United States cannot turn away from the Middle East. Instead, it will increasingly turn to the Middle East from the other side of the world.

So what does this all mean? First, a focus on Asia means that U.S. strategy will place a premium on securing the sea lanes that go from the Middle East past the Indian subcontinent and into East Asia. As the United States engages more with the Middle East in an Asian context, it may also come to see the Middle East in increasingly mercantile terms, emphasizing energy security and trade and perhaps putting less emphasis on norms of behavior. Asian countries' growing economic engagement with the Middle East makes them vital partners in any diplomatic efforts to reward or punish states for their behavior, so at the very least, the United States will have to coordinate more of its Middle Eastern policies with Asian countries.

Second, and following from that, the United States will need to find some solution to what is currently a "free rider" problem in Middle Eastern security. That is to say, the United States spends billions of dollars annually to preserve the security of the Gulf, while contributions from energy-consuming nations are sparse. Indeed, many of the largest energy importers, such as China and India, continue a robust trade with Iran while the United States is seeking to restrict Iran's trade in order to persuade the country to abandon its proliferation activities. China and its allies have sold arms and technology to Iran that could diminish regional security. Seen from Washington, some of the parties that benefit most from the security the United States helps provide both fail to contribute and simultaneously take actions that undermine it. That cannot go on indefinitely.

Third, the United States is likely to see the pan-Asian sea lanes as more of a unit, swapping troops and materiel back and forth between West Asia and East Asia. Such a move would diminish U.S. reliance on its shrinking military presence in Europe, and it will probably affect U.S. bases on the East Coast of the United States. Sailing and flight times are often shorter across the Indian Ocean than they are across the Atlantic and through the Mediterranean, and there is little danger of disruption if, for example, passage through the Suez Canal becomes problematic.

Much of the criticism of the U.S. "Pivot to Asia" has revolved around the idea that the United States is turning its back on traditional allies. Seen more properly, the Asia pivot reflects the necessity for a new dynamism in U.S. strategy. A half-century competition against the Soviet Union called for the United States to dig in against an entrenched foe. The new enemies are harder to discern and harder to fight. The next half-century will require an ability to shift and adapt—to pivot, and pivot again, in a fast-changing world. ■ 01/10/2013

Links of Interest

Reuters quoted Jon Alterman in "Inquiry harshly criticizes State Department over Benghazi attack."

The Los Angeles Times quoted Haim Malka in "Protracted unrest, instability ahead for deeply divided Egyptians."

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