

MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

The Middle East Turns East

by Jon B. Alterman

As the United States struggles to understand the paradigm shifts underway in the Middle East, one shift has received almost no attention, and it should. After more than two centuries of the United States viewing the Middle East from the perspective of an Atlantic power, the United States increasingly views the region from the perspective of a Pacific power as well. The shift has profound implications for the United States, the Middle East, Europe and Asia.

For centuries, it made sense for the United States to view the Middle East across the Atlantic. Americans were descendents of Europeans, ties with Europe were strong, and Atlantic distances to the region are shorter. With U.S. political and economic power long concentrated on the eastern seaboard, it would have been strange to see the Middle East any other way. U.S. missionaries, traders and businessmen all went through Europe to get to the Middle East, and often saw the Middle East as properly the Europeans' bailiwick.

With a fundamentally Western approach to the Middle East came a fundamentally Western set of concerns: helping establish a post-colonial order, actively mediating inter-state conflicts, and securing the Eastern Mediterranean and the Suez Canal. The Cold War pushed the United States further eastward, prompting a growing U.S. expansion into the Gulf to protect the flow of oil into Western markets, but the Western prism was ever-dominant.

Over the last decade, however, the balance has begun to shift. As the economies of Asia grow, their energy demand grows apace, and Asian countries themselves are reaching more deeply into the Middle East. China is the major driver of growth here, but it is no coincidence that the United Arab Emirates embraced a Korean bid for their first nuclear power plant, nor a coincidence that the Koreans decided to offer extremely attractive terms to the Emiratis. Asian firms are winning multi-billion dollar construction contracts throughout the region, and Chinese oil companies are among the most deeply involved in Iraq. Meanwhile,

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The Rhythm of Revolution

It started in Tunisia. Protests in early January called for "the fall of the government." Yet when members of the *ancien regime* moved to preserve the status quo following Ben Ali's departure, the emboldened protestors realized their battle was with an entire political system. Their modified chant, "Ash-sha'b, yurid, isqat an-nizam!" ("The people want the fall of the regime!"), spread almost instantly to Egypt, and soon became synonymous with the "Arab Spring."

As Matthew Triplett of the music and current affairs blog "bethefoodoflove" observes, the driving "clap, [rest], clap, [rest], clap, clap, clap" rhythm is a staple of protest chants across many cultures, from the anti-Vietnam movement's, "Hell, no, we won't go!" to Latin America's ubiquitous, "¡El pueblo, unido, jamás será vencido!" ("The people, united, will never be defeated!"). Yet more important than the chant's global rhythm was its local resonance. Numerous commentators, including Elliot Colla of Georgetown University, have noted that being in modern standard Arabic gave the chant a pan-Arab accessibility which made it easily transferable across borders.

In Syria, the chant took on an almost symbiotic relationship with the protests. Demonstrations in Dar'a following the detention of a group of youths for painting the slogan on a wall escalated into the confrontations that became the catalyst for unrest throughout the country. In Libya, it has even spawned a joke. "The people want the fall of the regime!" chant the protestors. "Thank God my name is not Regime," says Gaddafi. ■MB

CSIS Releases Second Gulf Analysis Paper

The CSIS Homeland Security and Counterterrorism Program published a Gulf Analysis Paper on the challenges and opportunities facing coordinated GCC action against piracy in the Arabian Sea. Organized piracy has become a threat to regional trade and maritime security in the Arabian Sea, costing the global economy between \$7 and \$12 billion per year. While the international community has largely driven the piracy debate, it is the GCC states that have the most to lose if the problem goes unaddressed. As pirates expand their reach and deepen their expertise, the GCC states will increasingly need to institute law enforcement and security mechanisms that address the issue on land and at sea. To read the analysis paper, click [HERE](#). ■

Gulf investment in Asia is reaching the hundreds of billions of dollars, covering everything from refineries to real estate.

History and practice still connect the Middle East to the Atlantic world, and the Middle East's existing ties overwhelmingly stretch westward. Even so, the region clearly sees its future less intimately tied to the West, and more closely connected to the growing states of the Pacific.

One could argue that the United States is making a similar shift, ever more embracing its identity as a Pacific power as much as an Atlantic one. Ports on the West Coast of the United States bustle with activity, and the U.S. Pacific Command is the largest of all of the U.S. combat commands—responsible for half the world's surface area and sixty percent of its population. Senior U.S. officials visibly devote an increasing amount of their energy to Asia, and the transition is aided by a president who grew up in Indonesia and Hawaii.

An increasing U.S. orientation toward the Pacific is also turning the United States toward seeing the Middle East through Asian eyes. The U.S. Navy secures the increasingly busy sea lanes that connect the Middle East and Asia, utilizing a blue-water capacity that no other country possesses. And as the United States prosecutes two land wars in Asia, U.S. warships sail out of the West Coast for deployments off Iraq and Afghanistan, just as they also sail from the East Coast.

Asians' focus on the Middle East is different from Westerners'. Asian states don't especially feel the ties and burdens of their past history with the Middle East, which are especially thick for Europe in North Africa and the Levant. A more Asian focus on the region will mean a further shift in focus from the "traditional" areas of international concern in the Middle East toward the Gulf, and give the Gulf an even greater voice in regional affairs.

At the same time, Asia's reliance on the United States for energy security will create greater incentives for Asian states to cooperate in U.S. diplomacy in the Gulf, or at least to not disrupt it. Japan has already trimmed its activities in Iran; it is hard to imagine China really standing up for Iran given China's deep interest in stability and security. Yet, Asian states tend not to share the Western insistence on improving human rights in foreign countries, professing a policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states. The U.S. ability to build sanctions against human rights violators is likely to diminish, even if the impulse to advance human rights continues unabated.

In addition, Asians' rising reliance on the Middle East will require a different set of relations with the United States and with each other, especially in the Indian Ocean. Whereas European countries have long talked of burden sharing on issue of global security—even when the reality falls short of the rhetoric—many Asian countries feel no special need to contribute substantially to the global commons. Going forward, such an arrangement will be unsustainable as Asian states face their own growing trade and the United States faces a series of sustained budget challenges. Given regional rivalries, especially but not limited to the Chinese rivalry with India, the United States will need to play a role guiding the growing involvement of Asian powers within a broad cooperative framework.

The shifts underway in Asia underline the United States' role as the world's only truly global power. While current U.S. commentary bemoans diminishing U.S. global influence, the fact is that only the United States can view the Middle East through both an Atlantic and Pacific lens. For those who advocate a U.S. pullback from the Middle East, the news is not good. It is hard to imagine how the United States can continue its growth as a major Asian power without maintaining a strong position in the Middle East. ■5/17/2011

Links of Interest

The Washington Post quoted Jon Alterman in "'Tireless Advocate' George Mitchell Resigns As Middle East Peace Envoy As U.S. Refocuses on Region."

USA Today quoted Jon Alterman in "Experts note differences in U.S. approach in Syria, Libya."

ABC News quoted Jon Alterman in "Iranian President Linked to Black Magic, Summoning Genies."

CNN featured Jon Alterman on "The Situation Room" on May 10, 2011.

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