

Japan and the Middle East: An Overview

Contemporary Review
of the Middle East
5(3) 181–198

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Private Limited

SAGE Publications
sagepub.in/home.nav

DOI: 10.1177/2347798918776711

<http://journals.sagepub.com/home/cme>



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Abstract

As an introduction to this special issue, this article examines the shaping of Japan's foreign policy; looking at how Japan has risen to the demand of the international community to assume more responsibility in conflict situations, circumventing a pacifist constitution that it had been dealt with. It then explains relations between Middle East and Japan and shows how the latter has been balancing its national interest in order to conform to its alliance with the United States. With more Asian powers having stake in the Middle East, Japan has become proactive about its role in the region. However, with limited hard power options, Japan would have to concentrate on its soft power capabilities and on using its economic strength to mark its presence in the Middle East.

Keywords

Shinzo Abe, energy security, US alliance, ODA, soft power, UN Charter, Article 9

The Middle East as a region has a fascinating history and has witnessed struggles, conflicts, and war through the ages. Its geostrategic location of being a gateway between the east and the West, along with abundant reserves of oil—the major energy resource for modern industrialization—has given it a position of strategic importance. However, peace and stability has eluded the Middle East because of politics that was not limited to the state actors of this region but also involvement of great powers, as well as international and regional organizations. Further, this region is the prime supplier of oil feeding modern industrial nations to enable their economy to grow. The geostrategic location necessitates its political stability for smooth flow of goods and commodities through “Sea Lanes of Communication.” Post-9/11, this region has been strife with uncertainties and in the midst of a changing world order, international power politics are being played out.

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Japan, a nation far removed from this region could have easily lived in isolation but for the fact that oil, a critical resource, is its major import. Moreover, as an ally of the United States, it has been involved in various issues that have emerged in this region. Major part of Japan's relations with the Middle East has been on one hand to support its alliance with the United States and on the other to ensure energy security. Changing power equations with a rising China and its growing involvement in the Middle East has resulted in Japan playing a more proactive role. Further, with the leadership in Japan aspiring for a more visible role in the international community and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe advocating "value-laden diplomacy" an active involvement in conflict resolution can be envisaged as the Middle East sees Japan as a more "even handed less biased power than the Western great powers" (Miyagi, 2014).

Given the growing interest of Japan in this region, this special issue on *Japan and the Middle East*, hopes to kindle interest of scholars to look at this relation from a multi-pronged angle and encourage interdisciplinary research. As a way of introduction, an overview of Japan's relations with the Middle East is discussed. While viewing a vast region through a colorful kaleidoscope is an immense exercise, the task was made easy by limiting it to events and developments in which Japan was involved. The article thus begins with positioning this region's geostrategic importance. Following this is the section on general features of Japan's foreign policy, where the direction of its foreign policy is discussed, highlighting the leadership concerns and the events which pushed and nudged Tokyo to involve itself with the international community in general and Middle East in particular.

Positioning Middle East

The Middle East is a geographic region, the definition of which changes depending on the user. The terminology used for the region also varies with the user and where the user is situated. The West has been using the term from a very Euro-centric approach to the world; another term used for the region by the West is Near East while an alternative usage from a non-Euro-centric perspective is that of "West Asia." George Unzoushric defines the term as "all those countries of Asia situated south of the Soviet Union and west of Pakistan and Egypt in Africa" (cited in Chaurasia, 2005, p. 1). The twenty-first century usage of the term can be understood as the region comprising of the nation states of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon, Yemen, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Qatar. Though the region as a whole includes many more countries such as the North African countries, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, this article restricts itself to the more traditional twenty-first century mapping.

The core reason for the strategic importance of the region lies in its location. The region lies at the meeting point of the three continents of Asia, Africa, and Europe making it one of the world's most ancient and most used trade route for traversing between these three continents. Two routes, one through the Persian Gulf and the other through the Red Sea became the easiest and shortest way for the European powers to establish their supremacy in the South and South East

Asian region. Discovery of the Cape of Good Hope route temporarily diminished the importance of the area as a trade route, but this was revived immediately after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. The route via the Middle East thus became the shortest water route between Europe and North America.

Apart from being a trade route, the region's primary importance arises from its abundance of oil resources. The history of Middle Eastern politics has revolved around oil, which makes it extremely significant for the oil-starved world and makes it the hot pot of international politics; oil is thus its wealth as well its misery. Oil is indisputably one of the most critical energy resources of the industrialized world and the Gulf region in the Middle East accounts for 65 percent of the world's proven resource. The Persian Gulf region alone accounts for 30 percent of the global supply (Ehteshami, 2013).

The safety and security of oil in the region depends on the safety and security of the two choke points: the Hormuz Strait in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb in the Gulf of Aden. Control over these choke points can change the regional geopolitics and this makes them of extreme importance for countries who seek the oil in the region and for countries who trade with countries like India, Japan, China, and the United States.

The exports of a majority of the countries in the region, namely, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Bahrain, Iran, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates depend on the security of the Strait of Hormuz, a choke point with 21 miles being its narrowest opening. The only two countries who have alternate trade and access routes and sea lanes for their exports are Iran and Saudi Arabia because of their geographic location. The primary threat to the Hormuz Strait lies in the Shia–Sunni rivalry in the region and times the sectarian feud threatens to deny the passage to this Strait. Blocking the Strait would inflict immense economic damages on the countries that require access to the Strait for exporting and importing goods through it. While Shia-majority Iran threatens to plant naval mines to shut down and destroy the Hormuz Strait, Sunni-majority Saudi Arabia conducts naval drills in the region as a mark of dominance over the waters of the Strait.

The threat of piracy is what threatens the Gulf of Aden and the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb. At the narrowest point, the Strait is 18 miles wide with Yemen on one side and Eritrea and Djibouti on the other. Most of the oil and goods coming from the Persian Gulf region traveled to the United States and Europe through this Strait. Proximity to the pirate infested waters of Somalia is what poses a major threat which is also of crucial importance to the region and the world. Piracy is not the only threat. Like the Hormuz, this Strait is also hounded by the regional political tensions. The Iran-backed Shia Houthi rebels in Yemen have taken control of strategic ports along the western coast of Yemen. This instability has been compounded by the bombing of the rebel strongholds by Saudi Arabia with the support of Egypt.

Given the situation surrounding the two choke points of Hormuz, Strait and Bab-el-Mandeb, the countries in the region have tried to look for alternate solutions and mitigating mechanisms. Building alternate export routes has been one solution. Saudi Arabia has built a pipeline that carries oil from the fields in the east to refineries on its western coast. From the western coast, the oil is shipped through the Red Sea. Another instance of a mitigating strategy is the one taken by the United

Arab Emirates in building the Abu Dhabi Crude Oil Pipeline to circumvent the Strait of Hormuz and export from the Fujairah port directly. Despite these efforts, these pipelines will not serve as an adequate compensation for relieving the dependence on the Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf.

In the area around the Gulf of Aden, where piracy has been a threat, solutions have been found in the form of the Coalition Task Forces 150 and 151, deployed in the region which has key players like the United States and Japan as members. The larger region has also become a site for power play of outside powers which are increasing their regional presence. Evidence of this is the increasing presence of China in the region in Gwadar port in Pakistan and in Djibouti, and along the Eastern Coast of Africa; presence of India and Japan in Chabahar in Iran; presence of the United States and Japan in Djibouti. These countries also have immense stakes in the region. Until the shale gas, the United States, for example, imported 18 percent of its oil requirements from the Persian Gulf.

General Features of Japanese Foreign Policy

The end of the World War II witnessed a realignment of world order. A defeated Japan found itself devastated both economically and emotionally. The Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings not only ensured hasty surrender of Japan but also resulted in the emergence of the United States as the power in defining Japan's position in the world order. While accepting that Japan should be given freedom to conduct itself and allow it to keep the emperor system in place albeit stripping the emperor of all his power, it allowed full freedom to Japanese citizens and created a democratic system. However, Article 9 of the constitution stipulates:

Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes.

In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized.

The United States, thus laid the foundation for a pacifist identity as Japan not only denounced war but also forfeited rights to an offensive military. Article 9 thus became the defining principle for Japan's foreign and security policy.

The United States carried out the process of demilitarization, democratization, and deconstruction in the occupation period and established Japan as a democratic and peace-loving nation. The strain of occupying Japan followed by the war in the Korea Peninsula, began telling on the United States treasury and necessitated the United States to re-look at the arrangement. By virtue of the Treaty of San Francisco signed on 8 September 1951 (became effective 28 April 1952), Japan ended the state of war between itself and most other allied powers except Soviet Union and People Republic of China. Further, Japan was given the right to collective self-defense in accordance with the principles of the United Nations Charter. By signing the Treaty of Mutual

Cooperation and Security, Japan became a dependent ally of the United States. The agreement allowed for the United States to station its army, navy, and air-force troops in Japan (DiFilippo, 2002).

While the Article 9 and the San Francisco Treaty externally conditioned Japan's foreign policy, the Yoshida Doctrine became its guiding principle. Having compromised on becoming an "abnormal state," in 1952, when occupation period came to a formal end, Prime Minister Yoshida formulated a plan for recovery of Japan from the devastated state in which it found itself at the end of the World War II. The grand strategy designed by him, essentially comprised of a three-pronged strategy: reconstruction of domestic economy through emphasis on economic relations overseas; keeping a low profile in international relations; and reliance on United States for its security guarantees came to be known as the "Yoshida Doctrine." Concentration on economy and acceptance of pacifism became the core values of Yoshida Doctrine and outlined the course of Japan's role in international politics for almost two decades. By integrating military and economic dimensions, Yoshida put to rest fears of its neighbors of Japan turning expansionist.

By disengaging from conflict, Japan was able to concentrate on economic recovery—termed as "coalition of domestic mercantile realist policy and pacifist foreign policy" (Das, 2015). Thus, began Japan's aid policy to the East Asian nations and South East Asian nations aimed at developing their infrastructure so as to enable Japan's growing multinational companies to benefit from low-cost economies. Further, Japan continued to assert that it would accept and abide by the United Nations Charter and use it as the base for international interactions. To the followers of Japan's foreign policy, this created acceptability and accorded respectability to it in the international system.

Thus, began Japan's foreign policy pegged on creating economic advantage from its relations with other nations in the form of developing markets, securing resources for its industrial activities and contributing to peace and prosperity of its immediate neighborhood through aid and loans. This guaranteed Japan's national security "through alignment with the leading superpower" and established Japan's reputation as "a responsible country" (Edstrom, 2004) leading to economic prosperity and Japan emerging as the second largest economy in the world. Yoshida's vision of using economic strength to harness political advantage was achieved.

Yet another dimension that was added to the Japanese foreign policy was the enactment of the three non-nuclear principles. Introducing it in the Budget Committee in the House of Representatives on 11 December 1967, Eisaki Sato, the 39th prime minister of Japan said:

My responsibility is to achieve and maintain safety in Japan under the Three Non-Nuclear Principles of not possessing, not producing and not permitting the introduction of nuclear weapons, in line with Japan's Peace Constitution.

Pursing this in the Diet with an affirmative resolution and culminating in Japan signing the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1972, he ensured that Japan, having achieved economic wealth and possessing the capability of going nuclear voluntarily, also developed a consensus to act maturely. While receiving the Noble Peace Prize in 1974, he said "I have no doubt that this policy will be

pursued by all future governments” (Sato, 1974), thus giving it permanency. Having established the ground rules, Japanese foreign policy sailed on the trajectory of close cooperation with United States in both security and economics, promoting free trade system in tune with its economic interest and working within the umbrella of UN and other international cooperation organizations such as the UNICEF, World Bank, IMF, etc.

In the early 1970s, developments in the international scenario caused Japan to reconsider its approach of conducting its foreign policy in both areas of security and economics. From the summer of 1971, the United States under President Richard Nixon announced a set of policies which raised concerns in Japan regarding its alliance with the United States. For some time, as the Communist Party got grip of the mainland China, Japan’s government aligning with the United States became unacceptable at home because of the fear of an antagonistic neighbor. But the Japanese premiers continued their support to the United States policy decisions as at no cost did they want to jeopardize their close association. When Nixon announced his plan to visit People’s Republic of China, without any consultation or even notification to its government, Japan saw this as a betrayal of the alliance whereby Tokyo had to depend for its national security (Miyagawa, 1987).

Following this, Nixon announced his New Economic Program, which included the abandonment of the Bretton Wood system putting an end to the gold standard. This move brought a major increase in the international value of the yen, thus causing exports from Japan to become costly and thus putting a “brake” in their economic growth. Other measures like imposition of textile quota and removing preferential treatment status resulted in Japan’s loss of faith in the United States. On the international front, the failure to ensure Taiwan keeping its membership which Japan had co-sponsored, resulted in Japan realizing that it was necessary for it to start a course of action which would enable it to become independent of the “strategic alliance” that it had pursued with the United States so far.

While it was looking at options to gain some independence from its alliance with the United States, the “oil shock” from the Middle East in 1973, resulted in Japan facing trade deficit for the first time since 1960 and gave further impetus to reconsider its complete subservience to the United States in international politics. Accordingly, a shift from a United States-dependent foreign policy was envisaged and it necessitated for the first time for the leadership in Japan to find ways and means to address the nation’s interest over that of the alliance. Thus, in its annual bluebook, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs mentioned that Japan must,

... of its own accord, make positive contributions to the peace and prosperity of the world through its economic strength and political influence. It is only by pursuing an active diplomacy in a global perspective that Japan can find the way to ensure veritable peace and prosperity in the rigorous international environment in the coming years ... it is also important to promote dialogues and to maintain stable relations with nations possessing different economic, social and political systems, particularly to promote further friendly relations with such neighboring countries as China and the Soviet Union, which play an important role in the international community. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Japan, 1978)

However, the yearly document continued to mention that friendly Japan–United States relation is the “cornerstone” of its foreign policy.

Economic relations continued to be a priority and it was well established that Japan’s contribution to the international community could be best achieved by economic management both at domestic front and adjustment to structural changes of the world economy. Since 1973, securing energy became critical due to the uncertainty imposed by politico-socio environment in the Middle East and thus the bluebook for diplomacy mentions the efforts to be made to not only save energy but also work toward “international cooperation to solve long-term energy problems.”

Overtime, Japan’s participation in international community increased in the form of aid and loans both at bilateral and multi-lateral levels and Japan gained prominence through use of economic tools to further their political agenda in South East Asia and Middle East Asia. The overpowering presence of Japan in many areas of economic activity in South East Asian countries resulted in apprehension among these nations about Japanese encroachment, specially, given the past history of Japanese colonialism. Realizing the historical antagonism that was rearing sentiments in the ASEAN countries, Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda in his visit to ASEAN region stated that “even though Japan had the capability to rearm and to produce nuclear weapons, it steered clear of resurrecting its military past. Fukuda used Article 9 of the 1946 constitution to reassert Japan’s pacifist stance post-War” (Wolf, 2001). To the Southeast Asian countries in general and ASEAN nations in particular, this statement served as a psychological reassurance to the memories of Japanese aggression in the World War II. Henceforth, this became known as the “Fukuda Doctrine” and integrated as one of the principles of the Japanese foreign policy.

Just as the world balance changed with the collapse of Soviet Union and end of the Cold War, the test to Japan’s initiation toward an independent approach to its foreign policy came in the form of the Gulf War of 1991. Japan was criticized for following “a checkbook” diplomacy, and internationally it was felt that as the second largest economy of the world, Japan had to take more responsibility. While Japan defended its minimal involvement citing its pacifist constitution, it also realized that it was important to gain domestic consensus in favor of contributing beyond monetary aid.

Thus, began a new era in Japanese foreign policy, where the world which denied it a status of “normal state” after the World War II, was pushing it to play a more active role in international conflicts. Japan took a step toward this when in 1992 it created a “peacekeeping law” providing a legal framework for international peacekeeping activities, although limiting the self-defense force from engaging in actual combat. Since then, it has been incorporated under the UN-centered policy as one of the pillars of its foreign policy.

Unfortunately, as Japan weaved its diplomacy circumventing the pacifist constitution, the mainstay of their foreign policy, that is, its economic power started to decline as a result of which Japan slipped into deep recession in the 1992 and has continued to struggle to get its act together. Further, the hegemonic power enjoyed by the United States after the demise of the Soviet Union was slowly replaced

by multilateralism. A rising China became a concern for Japan as the balance of power in East Asia was constantly put to test as the United States receded from playing an active role in this region. Moreover, North Korea and its nuclear program has become a great cause of anxiety. While East Asia finds itself in a situational power struggle, the Middle East Region has become the world's conflict zone since the 1990s. One crisis after another has marred this region resulting in chaos and uncertainty in most countries of the region. All these has necessitated the Japanese leadership to reconsider its role and to re-orient its domestic as well as foreign policies to contribute toward peace and stability of the world and regain lost territory in the international community.

While Japan battled its economic decline and gave way to China as the second largest economy, politically too, it went through a period of uncertainty as the long-ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) lost grounds and faced defeat at the hands of Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). However, DPJ regime was short lived and did not leave any dent in policymaking. Junichiro Koizumi's regime initiated certain shifts in its foreign policy (Yoshitsu, 2009) by forging bilateral relations beyond South East Asia, namely, India and African nations.

However, it was Abe who in his first tenure (2006–2007) gave the concept of “Confluence of the Two Seas” and followed it up in the second and third tenures (2012; and 2017–) by bringing about significant changes in policies of political, economic, and strategic realms. Popularly known as the “Abe Doctrine,” it manifests itself in key areas of operations. It began with reviving the economy through the “three arrows”—money easing, fiscal stimulus, and growth strategies through structural reform. Further, working toward making Japan a more “normal state” by revision of the constitution and interpretation of its self-imposed defense ban on right to self-defense. In the area of international relations, Abe's significant initiative of “value-oriented diplomacy” and “proactive contribution to peace,” linked defense and development has seen creation of new platforms within bilateral relations as well as multilaterals.

While the economy has seen realization of two arrows resulting in nominal change and awaits the more difficult “structural change,” with respect to security, Abe has been able to pass the bill of selling military weapons and equipment to other countries. According to Christopher Hughes, the “Abe Doctrine” promotes a “more assertive, high-profile, and high-risk foreign and security policy for Japan” (Hughes, 2015).

The pattern of Japanese foreign policy is slowly changing from total conformation to the United States due to the strategic alliances to a more neutral stand in the international community ensuring protection of its own interest, and to a more assertive and proactive stand in peace building exercise. Each incremental change that Japan has made can be linked to events in Middle East, be it ‘oil shock’ of 1973, the Gulf War of 1990–1991, or the more recent Syrian crisis. Thus, a narrative of Japan's interest in the Middle East and its shift from reactive to proactive approaches becomes imperative as a way of introducing the complexities of Japanese–Middle Eastern relations.

Japan's Interest in the Middle East

Political

As a resource-poor nation, Japan's relations with the Middle East hinges on oil and 80 percent of total oil imports by Japan comes from this region. A look at the literature on Japan's foreign policy toward the Middle East shows a constant dilemma of whether to ascertain secured "oil flow" or to align with the United States for its security in East Asia. As such, Japan is arguably "caught" between its "dual dependency" on the United States and on the Middle Eastern oil (Carvely, 1985). Thus, much of the literature explored how the MOFA maintained a balance between economic security relations with the Middle East and its military security relations with the United States. This "balancing act" has been explained through the lenses of domestic political structure (Inoguchi, 1991; Pekkanen & Krauss, 2005), resource diplomacy (Lesbirel, 2013; Yoshitsu, 1984), soft versus hard policy instruments (Miyagi, 2011, 2014; Rynhold, 2002), and Japanese role in collective self-defense (George, 1993, Miyagi, 2014).

Japan's policy toward the Middle East has gone through three distinct phases. The Arab oil boycott in 1973 was the beginning of Japan's involvement in the Middle East as its national interest was compromised. Until then, the world was divided between support for Israel and for Palestine and since the United States was a strong supporter of Israel, Japan as a dependent ally had conformed to this position. For the first time, the oil shock of 1973 exposed Japan's vulnerability and registered a slowdown of its economy, due to rise in cost of production. Therefore, ensuring stable oil flow became the prime concern for Japan for its economic prosperity, and to secure energy resources from regional oil producers who were supportive of the Palestine cause.

Thus, Japan for the first time stepped out of the shadow of the United States and urged for comprehensive peace and supported Palestinian rights by tilting in a limited fashion toward political support of Arab states which were suppliers of oil. Use of development assistance program for the Gulf and the Middle East states engulfed in the Arab-Israel conflict, contributing to United Nations Relief and Work Agency for Palestine and United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon were in line with Japan's foreign policy tool of ensuring stability through economic engagement. Japan's contribution to this region continued to increase to almost 10 percent of the total world contribution. However, unlike in the East and Southeast region, where majority of aid and loans was granted at bilateral level, in the Middle East region, it was by way of an international agency, namely United Nations, keeping in line with its guiding principle of "abiding by UN Charter."

Then came the phase of neutrality. Having achieved certain international standing as the largest donor country to the developing world, the leadership in Japan saw itself as playing a role in resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict and thus thought it best to distance itself from both sides and assume neutrality. The 1980s saw Japanese diplomacy engaging in trying to understand the nature of conflict and help resolve it. Thus, in 1988, the Foreign Minister Sosuke Uno made a state visit

to Egypt, Syria, and Israel to engage in a dialogue over the issue of Middle East peace. According to Miyagi,

[Japan's] ambition to play an international role on the issue has remained unchanged up to the present time, with the Japanese government acting unobstructively to buttress the Arab side on the issues such as Palestinian rights, while yet maintaining diplomatic contacts and economic and other ties with Israel. (Miyagi, 2011, pp. 10–11)

Japan's position of neutrality can be gleaned from the fact that during the Iran–Iraq war of 1980–1988, when the United States was supporting Iraq, Japan refused to break diplomatic and economic ties with Iran and the then Foreign Minister Shintaro Abe played a positive role in mediating between the two states and also worked at placing Iran's grievances at the UN General Assembly. While drafting the cease fire resolution, Japan viewed that isolation of Iran would be detrimental to the stability of the region and urged for a conciliatory approach.

In the post-Cold War period, Japan shifted its position to being pro-United States. In the Kuwait crisis 1990–1991, Japan for the first time expressed open support to the United States-led coalition, and while it was under pressure to send its troops, Japan used its card of pacifism and contributed United States \$13 billion amounting to 16 percent of the whole cost of the war. Drawing flak for using “checkbook diplomacy” from international community, it helped the political circle in Japan to debate on the continuation of the Article 9 of the constitution, paving way for future involvement. Its pro-United States stand manifested itself when its self-defense force participated in the “War on Terror” in Afghanistan between October 2001 and January 2010. The proactive approach was markedly visible when Japan gave early political support for the United States-led coalition war on Iraq in 2003, even without UN approval and then following it up by participation of its self-defense force in post-war reconstruction between 2004 and 2006.

Discussion of Japan's Middle East relations is incomplete without discussion of two burning issues in contemporary Middle East, namely, Iran and its nuclear issue and the Syrian crisis.

Japan–Iran Relations

Japan's policy toward Iran was for long considered an aberration to its common line of actions vis-à-vis the Middle East. Japan and Iran have both maintained a friendly and strategic relationship since the establishment of their diplomatic relation (1929), with the exception of the period of World War II. The rapid industrial growth of the post-war Japan had included rapid expansion of heavy industries. These industries, in turn, relied heavily upon imported oil. Japan, after abandoning coal and exhausting the possibilities of hydroelectric power development by the mid-1960s, came to rely on oil for over 70 percent of its total energy needs (Yoshi Tsurumi, 1975). Iran was the third largest supplier of crude oil and the Japanese–Iranian relation was largely dominant in the energy sector.

After the Islamic revolution in 1979, Iran has positioned itself against the United States and hence, Japan has been constantly balancing between the United States pressure for policy cooperation and Iran's counter-pressures. Japan's strong support for Iran during the Iran–Iraq war was also conditioned by its oil interest where the Iran–Japan Petrochemical Company (IJPC)¹ a joint venture between the government of Iran and Japan's conglomerate Mitsui was put at risk. However, when the United States increased pressure on Japan to send its marine self-defense force as support to the United States-led coalition, Japan declined in view of strong public opinion against military participation and compromised by agreeing to temporary suspension of relations and acceptance of anti-Iranian sanctions.

Yet another venture was the development of Azadegan Oil Field² and this was aimed to be completed by 2013 providing Japan with 260,000 barrels of oil per day by the second stage of the project.³ However, in October 2010, Japan withdrew from this lucrative project. Official Spokesperson Kazuhiko Itano stated that, "If we had kept the stake in the project and became a target of USA's sanctions, we may not be able to use United States financial institution ... Our understanding is that we don't have to pay a penalty to Iran" (Inajima, 2010). Thus, in spite of strong economic interest, Japan's policy is highly influenced by its alliance with the United States.

Japan's stand on Iranian nuclear development program, since it was brought to the UN Security Council was to strictly comply with the Western demand, that is, seeking Iran's compliance to remove international suspicion over its intention to manufacture nuclear weapons. At the same time, it was pursuing a more liberal view in accepting Iran's right to peaceful use of nuclear energy. Japan's strong sentiment on nuclear issue is embedded in the three non-nuclear principles adopted in its foreign policy and thus its engagement with Iran on this issue was non-negotiable and Japan as chairman of the UN Security Council committee for sanctions on Iran in 2009 and 2010, saw adoption of UN resolution 1929. Realizing that the nuclear issue was a major hindrance to its oil diplomacy with Iran, Japan continues to work on Iran to comply with the UN Security Council demands while at the same time maintaining high-level engagement in areas of international affairs, business contacts, and cultural exchanges (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Japan, 2018). With the election of Hassan Rouhani as president of Iran in 2013, Abe has stepped up to mend the frayed relations and lifting of sanctions on Iran (2016) has been welcomed, though the Japanese business approach has been cautious.

Syrian Crisis

Japan's concern over the Syrian crisis is no different from that of other countries. Its position is to mitigate the conflict and prevent its spill over to rest of the region, especially the Gulf, as it may affect the energy concerns. Japan took a relatively mild approach to the Assad regime's repression of demonstrations until late April 2011. Japan then onwards positioned itself with the West seeking the Assad regime to step down. It involved itself in implementing sanctions in line with

Western states, declaring the Syrian Ambassador as *persona non grata* (2012). Japan proactively supported the six-point proposal (May 2012) and hosted the “Friends of Syria” meeting in Tokyo (2012). Extending support through humanitarian aid has been the main stay of its contribution. When the Syrian opposition forces disintegrated and Friends of Syria forum took a militarist approach, Japan distanced itself and concentrated on sanctions and followed the UN approach to diplomacy.

However, on the question of hosting the Syrian refugees, Japan has shown little interest and in 2016, when the refugee crisis was intensifying, it accepted only 28 refugees out of 10,901 applicants (Ministry of Justice, Government of Japan, 2016). Though facing criticism for this internally as well as from the international community, Yamagata (2017) concludes that it is a fight between “state identity” versus “national identity” as Japanese have a long history of considering themselves a one “homogenous” group. The beheading of two Japanese citizens by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in January 2015, led to a strong national outrage and Prime Minister Abe called for revision of the pacifist constitution, a renewed attempt which has been a major point on his strategic agenda. In a limited way, Japan has differed from the Western intervention in Syria, in particular with respect to providing arms and refrained from following the United States in its attempt to launch a limited war on Syria.

Economic Relations

Economic relations consist of trade, foreign direct investment, and aid. Given that the region is the major supplier of oil, trade relations is mainly about securing crude oil. However, a constant volatile environment in this region due to strife has resulted in little foreign direct investment. On the other hand, official development assistance (ODA) is rather high as Japan uses aid as a tool for marking its presence and using it to create its identity, maneuver political situations and leverage business.

Unlike the trade statistics for other regions, the most conspicuous feature of trade between Japan and the Middle East has been the asymmetrical dependence in favor of the latter as it is the major partner in crude oil. While Japan does export some manufactured goods to the Middle East, the bulk of the trade is in oil. As highlighted in Table 1, Japan relies on Middle East oil imports and its reliance generally declined since the mid-1970s due to policy of seeking alternative suppliers, alternative energy sources, and becoming a fuel-efficient nation. With China and Indonesia curtailing export of crude oil, Japan’s dependence on Middle East oil imports again rose steadily. The export dependence of the Middle East upon Japan remained relatively stable apart from two short periods during the 1980s and 2000s. The Fukushima disaster (2011) led to reorientation from nuclear energy back to oil and on the average, Japan is 3.4 times more dependent on imports from Middle East than Middle East on its export to Japan.

Ever since the oil shock of 1973, Japan has work steadily toward reducing its dependence on oil by introducing bureaucratic, legal, and budgetary mechanisms

Table 1. Crude Oil Import from Middle East 2011–2016 (yen in million)

Year	Saudi Arabia	United Arab Emirates	Qatar	Kuwait	Iran	Oman	Total Oil Imported from All Countries	Total from 6 ME Countries
2011	3,737,136	2,637,897	1,185,332	756,827	971,202	252,569	10,811,780	9,540,963
2012	4,023,281	2,671,482	1,294,239	918,989	625,545	346,316	11,570,685	9,879,852
2013	4,521,818	3,254,074	1,787,041	1,021,584	670,715	301,219	13,527,332	11,556,451
2014	4,599,872	3,381,035	1,531,535	997,926	648,305	188,741	13,297,108	11,347,414
2015	2,707,518	2,137,552	667,772	607,211	387,076	55,421	8,184,755	6,562,550
2016	1,953,358	1,404,433	511,328	339,500	355,676	Nil	5,531,894	4,563,995

Source: Statistical Yearbook of Japan 2018.

to facilitate alternative energy such as nuclear, liquefied natural gas, and renewable energy. While acting on both demand and supply side to bring down reliance on oil, it also acted on oil stockpiling. Thus by 2000, Japan had emerged as a more clean and green nation with a significant increase in nuclear energy. The Fukushima disaster of 2011 brought back the debate of use of nuclear power and safety concerns, complete shutdown of nuclear facility resulted in Japan reverting to oil from the Middle East region. Japan's export to the Middle East consists of the conventional items such as automobiles, machinery, computers, electronic goods, and plastic items. The major consumer of the Japanese products is the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

ODA has been the major component of the Japanese contribution to this region. Given that the Middle East is poor in basic natural resources and has been constantly facing turmoil in form of conflicts and war, the region has had skewed development with some countries lacking in basic amenities of clean water, health, and infrastructure. Japan's major disbursement of ODA has been through the international agencies, namely, UN, Red Cross, etc. Its development assistance has often been conditioned by the United States operations in the region. However, another major consideration has been providing assistance for rebuilding the countries devastated as a consequence of conflict or war.

Japan ODA to the Middle East, 2011–2015

Major share of the ODA from Japan has been directed to countries which are facing serious humanitarian challenges. Understandably, Table 2 shows that Iraq has been consistently getting maximum amount as peace process under UN is

Table 2. Disbursement of Japanese ODA to the Middle East (yen in millions)

Country	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Algeria	225	214	238	239	173
Egypt	37,629	3,450	3,104	7,922	58,015
Iran	1,051	928	887	896	2,637
Iraq	1,525	68,859	41,767	22,792	17,938
Jordan	2,179	14,723	18,888	4,082	28,567
Lebanon	258	115	1,244	223	787
Libya	199	43	78	21	Nil
Morocco	24,744	12,173	9,896	1,104	19,088
Palestinian territories	3,053	4,171	3,045	4,187	2,370
Syria	860	1,411	3,068	1,025	1,237
Tunisia	2,258	912	12,622	50,120	556
Turkey	18,766	746	43,955	1,294	1,825
Yemen	901	1,333	651	837	962

Source: MOFA, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/oda/data/index.html>

underway. Jordan has seen a significant increase in its share as it faces refugee challenges. Official Development Program in these countries is dove-tailed to United Nation's directives and concentrates on health, water, and sanitation.

Given a thumbnail sketch of Japanese–Middle East relations, it is imperative to ask how capable is Japan in playing a significant role in bringing about peace and stability that had eluded this region. The orientation of Japan is based on the need to keep good relations with Arab and Islamic states on which its uninterrupted supply of oil is dependent and on the other hand sustain the alliance with the United States on which it is dependent for its military security. Having limited hard power, which it has been progressively extending, by carrying out changes in its legislation, hence allowing participation of self-defense force in peacekeeping activities, post-war reconstruction, anti-piracy of coast of Somalia, and more recently opening up its defense market and establishing NSG, Japan has moved from begin a reactive to a proactive participant.

Japan has restrained itself from direct combat operations and projected itself as a non-militarist state, therefore relied on aid as an economic means to promote stability. The constraints imposed by the pacifist constitution has been for long circumvented by economic means, but with budgetary constraints due to economic downturn, Japan is trying to use its soft power. With no historical baggage in the Middle East, it has an image of an economically strong nation which is peace loving and pursues a nuclear-free international system, implementing soft power through cultural exchange, language learning, traditional sports, and promotion of its culture and its management systems.

While the aforementioned discussion has been a discourse of the Japan–Middle East relations with United States–Japan alliance in the background, in this decade, China has emerged as a contender in this region. Even though China has taken a non-interventionist approach to this region and refrained from taking positions on regional conflicts, its interest has gone beyond energy resource as it looks forward to investment opportunities and commercial interest. With its ambitious project of One Belt One Road initiative, the Middle East region can play a crucial role of rebalancing of the Chinese economy and could emerge as a place where one can earn recognition and power. China's interest is significantly comparable to Japan's own interest and thus China becomes a competitor in both the economic and the political arena. With the advantage of having done good work by way of humanitarian aid, development assistance and an ideology of "value-based democratic system," the role that Japan will identify for itself would be toward "conflict resolution" rather than just "conflict containment."

In-depth and compelling contributions have been made to this issue by scholars from both Japan and the Middle East. The subject under discussion is contemporary and addresses concerns that are complex, opening up new dimensions that will encourage scholars to debate and research in future. As is predictive, three of the articles look at bilateral relations between Japan and countries such as Israel, Iran, and Jordan. However, each author addresses diverse concerns that are particularly relevant to Japan's relations vis-à-vis the aforementioned countries in the Middle East. Each of the country studied plays a significant role in this region and thus makes this issue a special one.

Meron Medzini's article *From Alienation to Partnership: Israel–Japan Relation* examines Israel–Japan relations from 1952 till date. Israel, a densely populated Jewish nation and surrounded by an Arab-dominated region, has been in conflict with Palestine and its other Arab neighbors and has concentrated on overcoming its regional isolation. This has been done through developing better relationships with Azerbaijan, Cyprus, Greece, and other Balkan states. Israel has also improved its ties with China and India rapidly. China–Israel trade ties have grown exponentially with exports to China marking almost 4.3 percent of its exports and commercial and diplomatic ties with India have also grown substantially. The current political dispensation in India has taken a very overt shift in its political relationship displaying closeness with Israel, a position that was earlier occupied by Palestine. Israel has come a long way in its relationship with its Arab neighbors. There is evidence of the Arab countries getting tired of Iran's antics and its bid to create instability. This advancement of Arab relations with Israel is witnessed in the low-key reaction to Trump's declaration of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. This change of attitude is also evident with respect to Japan and Meron Medzini questions' this marked warmth and friendship that exists between Japan and Israel and probes the factors that led to this shift.

Iran is one of the key players in the Middle East and Japan has been maintaining a strong bilateral relation dating back to 1929. After the World War II, Japan revoked its relation with Iran and attempted at having a parallel relationship to enable it to secure energy, while aligning to United States alliance. The 1979 Islamic revolution obligated Japan to support the United States because of the strategic alliance and since then Japan has been balancing its act between the two. With respect to the nuclear program of Iran, it was far easy for Japan as it is guided by the "Three Non-Nuclear Principles." Thus, agreeing with the West on the Iranian compliance of not manufacturing nuclear weapons, Japan supported the Iranian right to use the nuclear energy for "peaceful purposes." This complex subject is dealt by Mari Nukki in *Japan–Iran Relations since 2015 Iran Nuclear Deal*. She addresses Japan's negotiation of its relations with Iran under the backdrop of United States antagonistic position under Donald Trump.

In his *The Diversity of Japan's over Sea Development to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan: A Case Study of the Role of Security*, Takuro Kikkawa focuses on a very small country with a critical crunch of natural resources. Jordan plays a very important role in determining the geopolitics of the Middle Eastern region and its importance lies primarily due to its proximity to the Arab–Israeli conflict. Its importance also lies in the fact that it is the only Arab country after Egypt to have made peace with Israel. Its role lies in the political stability in the country which is a rare and holds additional responsibility of hosting refugees from many nations. Kikkawa draws attention to this unique factor and points out that new Japanese ODA approach toward enhancing image of Japan and help deepen its relations in this region.

Any discussion involving Japan and its relation is incomplete without adding the dimension of China. China with its economic and military strength has

drawn attention of the international community. Its motive behind claiming stake in the Middle East is comparable to that of Japan. As Yoram Evron in his article, *The Implications of China's Belt and Road Initiative for Japan's Involvement in the Middle East* states, it would be intriguing to see how the Belt and Road Initiative of China will affect Japan and its interests in the Middle East. Further will it result in a confrontation over BRI between these two Asian powers' interaction with Middle East? An extensive bibliography is compiled by Swati Arora.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. This was a joint venture between Japan and Iran to secure Japan's energy needs. However, with Islamic revolution in Iran followed by Iran Iraq war and internal conflict, this project was abandoned.
2. On 18 February 2004, a joint statement was released by National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC), Inpex Corporation (INPEX) and Naftiran Intertrade Co. Ltd (NICO). It stated, for integrated appraisal and development operations of the Azadegan Field.
3. Iran was to provide about 6 percent of the total 15 percent of oil imported via Japanese companies at that time.

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