



**Japan's View on the U.S. Middle East Policy**  
Stimson-CIGS Next Generation Roundtable Series  
July 1, 2021

SUMMARY

*Panelists*

Ellen Laipson

Dr. Masaki Mizobuchi

Yuki Tatsumi (moderator)

On July 1, 2021, the Stimson's Japan Program hosted a roundtable via WebEx Meeting to discuss changes in the United States' Middle East policy from the Japanese perspective. Yuki Tatsumi, director of the Japan Program, moderated the roundtable with Ellen Laipson (Distinguished Fellow and President Emeritus, Stimson Center) and Dr. Masaki Mizobuchi (Associate Professor, Hiroshima University) joining as guest speakers. The discussion began with Tatsumi introducing both of the speakers, followed by questions.

Tatsumi opened with a question for Laipson on the policy changes she recognized between the Trump and Biden administrations in the Middle East. Laipson answered by stating that Biden believes in using diplomacy cooperatively to solve global issues. Both administrations wanted to reduce entanglements in the region, though their approaches differed. The decision to leave Afghanistan has led to the fear that China and Russia will be able to spread their influence there. President Biden, however, will not be ending security engagement in the region in a way that diminishes American influence, including supporting diplomacy to end the surge in conflict in Gaza. There will not be a total reversal of President Trump's activities in the region, like the movement of the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, but there will be reviews and adjustments in the approach to Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Iran. Laipson noted as an example that Trump's maximum pressure campaign against Iran was not effective, but other administrations' policies were not successful either. The current Biden Administration is trying to show that they are not soft on Iran but still willing to support the nuclear deal with Iran.

Tatsumi asked Mizobuchi how such changes are perceived by Japan. Mizobuchi answered by stating that the Middle East is a vital source of energy resources for Japan, particularly oil and natural gas. Based on this fact, and the growing importance of a carbon free society, there is an increasing need for Japan to diminish reliance on these fuels, though there is resistance in Japan to using nuclear power after the 2011 disaster. From Japan's point of view, though supporting democracy is important, stability in the Middle East is more important than situations leading to conflict or terrorism. International organizations, similar to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations or the European Union, must be created to preserve mechanisms for dialogue along the lines of division in the Middle East, though it will be difficult. The U.S.

should decrease its military presence and focus on building diplomatic channels and international institutions in the region.

Tatsumi observed that the United States and Japan diverge in their approaches to the Middle East, with their differing focuses on human rights and stability. She asked this creates challenges for U.S.-Japan cooperation in the Middle East. Mizobuchi noted that Japan's constitutional restrictions make it difficult to engage in military activities overseas, so the Self-Defense Forces can be deployed to the region only in a humanitarian, peacekeeping, or intelligence gathering capacity. Instead, Japan can expand its diplomatic work in the region by cooperating with the United States. Separately, Chinese companies are making headway in the Middle East through trade and infrastructure, but U.S. companies have a more difficult time in the region due to anti-U.S. sentiment. The Japanese government can take the initiative to improve economic cooperation in the region, to the benefit of both Japan and the United States.

Laipson commented that there are cynical views of the U.S. in the Middle East, regarding the U.S.'s supposed commitment to human rights. She observed that the U.S. has been more focused on security than values in the Middle East for the past few decades. In terms of institution-building, the United States has found countries in the Middle East, the Gulf Cooperation Council as one example, to lack the willingness to work multilaterally. Rather, countries prefer to work bilaterally with the United States. Economic integration and regional institutions are important, but the political will is not quite there for broad regional support. American companies are reluctant to get involved in the Middle East because they too worry about instability. As for Japan, it has played an important role as an aid donor and in economic development, which contributes to the positive image of Japan in the region. There should be a U.S.-Japan strategy for cooperation to counterbalance China's activities in the region. The Biden administration had some advisors believing that the Middle East was not a competition space between the U.S. and China, but now that is changing, and Japan can play a larger deescalating diplomatic role.

Tatsumi then opened the floor to questions from the audience. The panelists were asked whether they believed the United States get involved in the talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia and if Japan could play a mediating role between regional rivals. Mizobuchi stated that the Japan does not have many resources for foreign policy in the Middle East, but the government could play a mediating role. The issue is that Japan's government is preoccupied with its domestic politics, especially the Olympics and COVID-19. Laipson added that Iraq could play a stronger regional role, as it did when facilitating the talks Tatsumi mentioned, indicating a shift in the center of gravity of the region. There can be a regional conversation to set red lines for behavior, which would be progress. Laipson noted that the United States probably favors these developments between Iran and Saudi Arabia, but there is not necessarily a role for the U.S. The latest bombing against the militia attacking American forces puts Iraqis in a tough position as well. While the U.S. remains deeply interested in the developments, it can let the process play out among regional actors.

Mizobuchi was asked about his view of the free trade agreement between Israel and Japan. Mizobuchi stated that the agreement itself is important and may be concluded in the near future. Several Japanese companies operating in Israel are in high-tech industries like 5G, which makes the agreement key for Japan.

The panelists were then asked if Japan and the U.S. could support a “Free and Open Middle East,” similar to the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) concept. Laipson noted that in there was a backlash against Western democracy-oriented programs for the region following Arab Spring. The Biden administration will likely use strong language on human rights, but action on the ground will be indirect. Mizobuchi agreed, noting that the biggest differences between the Middle East and East Asian or Western European countries is that also do not share the same values, norms, or interests. He added that the United States might be a mediator and leader in this area, while Japan would not be able to lead such a project.

The panelists were asked to evaluate the relationship between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and China. Mizobuchi observed that many Chinese companies are present in the UAE, where people have a good impression of China and Chinese goods, indicating a strong bilateral relationship. Laipson said that the UAE perceives itself as a global player with strong ties to Asia through business. There should be no confusion that the UAE has any preference towards Western nations. The dilemma for the United States is technology transfer to China by third countries. In a similar example, the U.S. pressured Israel to not purchase a Chinese air defense system 25 years ago. Previously, the U.S. could rely on the quality of American products to sell, but today China offers surveillance and monitoring equipment that countries do want.

In the final question, Mizobuchi was asked whether he believed that the Biden administration’s hard-nosed stance toward China and expectations for allies to align with the U.S. would be problematic for Japan in the Middle East. Mizobuchi answered that China’s economic activities in the Middle East create concerns for the United States, but stability remains Japan’s top priority. The question is whether China and the U.S.’s rivalry could threaten that stability.

Tatsumi thanked the panelists and audience for their participation and ended the roundtable.