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## US casts eye on Asia in post-Osama world

By Sean Foley

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The death of Osama bin Laden provides the Obama administration with an opportunity to recalibrate United States' policy towards a new focus on Asia, writes SEAN FOLEY

OSAMA bin Laden's death marks a critical turning point in the United States' relationship with the global community.

For more than a decade, Osama, al-Qaeda, the Middle East and South Asia have had pivotal roles in US foreign policy and the collective imagination of Americans.

But the long-term significance of his death will most likely not be in the Middle East or South Asia, where public and official reaction to it has been muted. Instead, Osama's death is likely to have its greatest impact on the nations of Asia and the Pacific Rim, including Malaysia.

Over the past two years, the Obama administration has worked to reorient the nation's attention away from the Middle East and Afghanistan and towards Asia.

While the strategic shift in part reflects the president's close personal ties to Hawaii and Indonesia, it is also consistent with two shifts in the global balance of power during the past 20 years: the rise of China and Asia's emergence as the centre of global commerce.

The emergence of China began with free market economic reforms in the late 1970s and accelerated greatly in the 1990s and early 21st century.

Between 2000 and 2007 alone, China's economy grew by 187 per cent and contributed more to the expansion of international trade than the far larger US economy. In 2010, China's economy surpassed that of Japan to become the second largest in the world.

A year later China surpassed the US as the largest manufacturer in the world, while China's central bank accumulated US\$1 trillion (RM3 trillion) worth of US public debt.

Malaysia and other Asian nations mirrored China's growth. In 1990, the economies of China, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, South Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam accounted for approximately seven per cent of global gross domestic product.

By last year, these economies accounted for 16 per cent of world GDP. The volume of seaborne trade that annually uses the Straits of Malacca illustrates the importance of Asia to the world economy.

While Egypt's Suez Canal handles 10 per cent of the world's seaborne commerce and oil trade, the Straits of Malacca accounts for a quarter of global seaborne trade and nearly as much of seaborne petroleum trade.

The Obama White House is fully conscious of these changes. The president, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and other senior officials have all visited Asia.

This month, US National Security Adviser Thomas Donilon told the influential weekly *The New Yorker* that the US was "overweighted" in the Middle East and Afghanistan but was "underweighted" in Asia. Another senior US official told the *New Yorker* that Americans had been on "a Middle East detour" for a decade but that their future would "be dominated utterly and fundamentally by developments in Asia".

Although Americans are aware of the rise of China and the future economic power of Asia generally, their attention has focused instead on the seemingly overwhelming danger confronting their nation since 2001: Islamic extremist terrorism.

Americans supported military operations in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere to prevent another Sept 11 terrorist attack at home and to counter the threat that Osama and his followers posed to US allies and the world. The absence of clear American victories in those campaigns had heightened fears among some Americans about terrorism and Osama and that another Sept 11 attack could still take place on American soil.

The demise of Osama, however, provides the Obama administration with an opportunity to further recalibrate US policy towards a new focus on Asia. Not only was the operation a clear victory for the US military and the US intelligence community, but it also validated the financial and personal sacrifices made by millions of Americans in the war on terror since 2001.

In addition, the operation removed the most well-known symbol of religious extremism and terrorism from public view and seemingly answered a question that some Americans had asked privately but were uncomfortable to say publicly: was the US still a superpower on the world stage if one man accused of masterminding the death of thousands of Americans, Osama, remains free?

As the recent events in the Arab world show, the Middle East can dominate US foreign policy without warning -- even when Osama plays no clear role and his message of violence is discredited by peaceful and democratic activists in Arab states. While Washington in 2011 began to withdraw US forces from Iraq and discussed withdrawing them from Afghanistan, it found itself involved in another military conflict in a Muslim country in the Arab Middle East: Libya.

But an immense global shift has already begun, which presents a host of new opportunities and dangers for the US. After all, America is as much a Pacific nation as an Atlantic one. America once had colonies in the region and still has significant cultural, economic and military ties to Asia. Close to 17 million of its citizens are of Asian ancestry.

Five states -- Alaska, California, Hawaii, Oregon and Washington -- face Asia and the Pacific Ocean. California, the largest US state by population and by economic output, has a vibrant Asian American community, and exports billions of dollars of goods and services annually to Asia.

According to US Commerce Department statistics, six of California's top 12 overseas markets are in Asia: China, Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and India.

While there will be important opportunities in these six economies in future years for Californians and other Americans, there will also be vast opportunities in Malaysia and other Asian nations with large

Muslim populations.

Not only are these nations already important trading partners (Malaysia is the US's 19th-largest trading partner), but they also have growing influence among Muslim communities in Africa, Europe, the Middle East and elsewhere.

A number of leading figures in the Muslim world today, such as Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, spent significant time in Malaysia or Indonesia. Muslims and Islam will remain key aspects of US foreign policy for many years to come. Osama's death will not change that.

Nonetheless, how Americans respond to the challenges of a global economy centred in Asia will shape the destiny of the United States long after Osama has faded from public view.

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