

Murder in Turkey

Editorial

The murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi becomes more brutal and horrific every day. Since killing Khashoggi, Riyadh has engaged in a transparent and offensive attempt to cover up the crime. The question is how far other governments will go in the pursuit of a "realist" foreign policy, overlooking a crime to protect so-called national interests. The Saudi government may be called to some — but not much — account. Khashoggi was a long-time vocal critic of the Saudi government. As a contributing columnist for The Washington Post, he had a commanding position to level comments against Riyadh and it had attempted to co-opt or silence him, through inducements and intimidation. The plot to kill him was set in motion Sept. 28 when Khashoggi visited the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul to obtain documents so he could marry. He returned, as directed, on Oct. 2 for the paperwork. Unbeknownst to him, the day before a team of 18 agents had reportedly been dispatched to Turkey to murder him and dispose of the body. He went to the consulate with his fiancée, told her to wait outside and walked in to his death. Initially, the Saudis claimed that he left the consulate although there was no video of his departure — despite pictures of him entering. Allegedly, consulate video cameras were not working and their hard discs removed. When that story became implausible, the Saudi government conceded that Khashoggi had been killed, but as a result of a fist fight. Then it claimed he died because of a choke hold. Throughout the revisions, the Saudi government insisted that the death was an accident, "a rogue operation" about which the country's highest levels of leadership were not informed.

As damning facts have mounted, assertions that the death was accidental have been discredited. In addition to the presence of a hit team that included forensic specialists — able to kill and then clean up a crime scene — there was the coincidence that consular staff had been given the day off. The team also reportedly scouted locations to dispose of the body.

The Turkish government has hammered at the Saudi cover-up. It first leaked reports that it had a tape of the murder, including gruesome audio recordings of Khashoggi's dismemberment while he was still alive. On Tuesday evening, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan gave a speech in which he called the murder "planned" and "brutal," and called on Saudi Arabia to extradite the suspects to Turkey for trial. While he said that Riyadh should not try to blame "some security and intelligence members," he did not directly name Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the country's de facto ruler. Given MBS's reputation for hands-on management and control, few think such a high-risk, high-visibility act could have occurred without his explicit approval.

Most of the world has been skeptical or dismissive of the Saudi explanation. Yet as the evidence has mounted, even U.S. President Donald Trump has acknowledged the murder and his government has imposed sanctions against the alleged perpetrators. But he too has not involved the crown prince.

Trump's relationship with MBS may be closer than most world leaders, but it is of a kind. The world looks to Riyadh to play two critical roles: a stabilizer of world energy markets and a bulwark against Iranian expansion in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia is the world's largest oil producer and exporter. Japan imports 40.2 percent of its oil from the kingdom. Riyadh is also the regional counterweight to Iranian ambitions. The two governments are engaged in a deadly struggle for regional supremacy.

Those two geopolitical roles, and the considerable financial resources that the kingdom commands, have discouraged other governments from full-throated condemnation. The Group of Seven foreign ministers (Japan among them) Tuesday denounced "in the strongest possible terms" the killing, noted that "explanations offered leave many questions unanswered," and demanded "a thorough, credible, transparent, and prompt investigation by Saudi Arabia ... and a full and rigorous accounting of the circumstances" of the death and ensure that it never happens again. Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga said Tokyo "strongly condemns the murder" and hopes the truth behind the crime is quickly uncovered through the cooperation of governments involved.

Just as revealing has been the fate of this week's high-profile investment conference in Saudi Arabia, dubbed "Davos in the Desert." Many prominent government and business leaders pulled out, but hundreds still attended. MBS received a standing ovation when he arrived at the meeting, but he did not address the group.

Horrific as this murder was, it will unlikely change Saudi Arabia or the world's view of it. The king has shown continuing faith in MBS by putting him in charge of the reorganization of the country's intelligence service. The reluctance of world leaders to condemn him suggests that they will be happy to let the crisis wind down and blame underlings for the crime. That is appalling for a murder so brutal. Japan must speak up to condemn the killing and impose consequences.

A U.S.-China great power competition?

Asian nations are anxious about Trump's aggressive approach toward China

SATOHIRO AKIMOTO
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

In early October, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence delivered a remarkable broadside against China — one that could be remembered as an inflection point in the world's most consequential bilateral relationship. Asian capitals, including Tokyo, had better take a close look at it.

Speaking at the Hudson Institute, a conservative think tank in Washington, Pence slammed China with a laundry list of grievances: Beijing's militarization of the South China Sea, intellectual property theft, engaging in economic statecraft with neighboring countries, persecuting religious groups at home, the creation of a nationwide surveillance system, pressuring Hollywood to produce pro-China movies, meddling in the U.S. midterm elections — the list goes on.

For sure, Pence made a passing reference to U.S. President Donald Trump's vision for "America and China reaching out to one another in a spirit of openness and friendship." But overall, the vice president's speech is widely regarded as the toughest rhetoric against China's "whole-of-government approach" that is eroding America's interests and way of life.

Previous U.S. administrations maintained cautious optimism about China — that if it is engaged, the world's most populous country would eventually open up, embrace democratic values and become a "responsible stakeholder" in world affairs.

Those wishful days are over, Pence declared. Washington will adopt a harder line to demand changes from China, rather than hoping that Beijing would one day change its behavior. The U.S. "will not be intimidated and will not stand down," Pence thundered.

Pence's call to stand up to China's economic and military statecraft should not be seen as a cursory complaint for short-term consumption among Washington's chattering class. Rather, it is a result of long-term inter-agency efforts to devise a grand new approach toward China.



U.S. Vice President Mike Pence slams China at the Hudson Institute in Washington on Oct. 4. Pence's speech signaled a firmer U.S. pushback against Beijing as trade anxiety weighs on the looming midterm congressional elections. REUTERS

The basis of this line of thinking is the Trump administration's National Security Strategy which was released last December, in which China was portrayed as the champion of "the repressive visions of the world," whose "dominance risks diminishing the sovereignty of many states" in the region.

Washington's wrath with China is likely to remain for years to come. That's because such views are not confined to the Trump White House; it is a view that is increasingly gaining bipartisan support in Capitol Hill. Senators and congressmen from committees on foreign relations, the armed services, economy and trade, among others, agree that China's aggressive ways must be met with American resolve.

For example, Sen. Corey Gardner, chairman of the Subcommittee on East Asia, the Pacific and International Cybersecurity, along with lawmakers like Democrat Ed Markey and Republican Marco Rubio, are proposing a bill called the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act. The bill is designed to prevent a Chinese hegemon by funding diplomatic and military efforts to "demonstrate U.S. commitment to a free and open Indo-

Pacific region and the rules-based international order."

Furthermore, America's harder line against China is not just limited to Washington; it is increasingly being shared by the private sector. Both the public and private sectors, particularly in the areas of economy, trade, technology, innovation, have been careful not to openly antagonize China for business concerns. That has changed, and U.S. industries are taking off their kid gloves.

With all of this taken together, Pence's speech indicates that the U.S. intends to engage in "great power competition" with China. That leads to the question: what would be the fallout of America's competition with China, and will Asian countries suffer collateral damage?

At first, it sounds like a good idea for many Asian nations that the United States is finally getting tough with China and uphold international liberal values like the rule of law, democracy, sovereignty, basic human rights and a robust civil society.

But Asia is a diverse region with diverse concerns. Some nations have serious territorial disputes with China. Some nations face

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direct military threats of China. Some are under economic influence of China. Some nations are suffering from environmental deterioration originating from China. Some are concerned with religious, social and political freedom in China.

There is a general belief among many Asian nations that China at present can't play the role which the U.S. has played in the liberal democratic order in the postwar period.

Yet at the same time, Asian nations are anxious about America's new aggressive approach to China. While the U.S. is literally thousands of kilometers away from China, Asian countries are geographically in striking distance of Beijing's wrath.

For another, Asia's relationship with China is complex and more nuanced, and is even beneficial mainly in terms of trade and investment for Asian countries. While the U.S. is determined to confront China, Asian nations would prefer a non-confrontational and even cooperative way to deal with Beijing. In short, Asian nations are almost in unison that they can't afford to make an enemy out of China.

A worrisome sign is that should tension between the two superpowers escalate, Washington could create a situation in which Asian nations would be forced to choose between the U.S. and China. This is the situation that Asian nations want to avoid at all cost. So if the U.S. takes an overly hostile stance to China, there is no guarantee that they would choose America over China, in spite of sharing common liberal values like rule of law, democracy and human rights.

Washington would do well to take a more nuanced approach to Asian nations to gain support for its harder stance against China.

Pence declared that he would, on behalf of the president, would deliver the message that "America's commitment to the Indo-Pacific has never been stronger" at the ASEAN and APEC summits next month. To that end, Asian nations, including Japan, would welcome a renewed American commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific with open arms — so long as Washington's muscular rhetoric is not just about tough talk, but with the smarts that allows for a nuanced approach to deal with China.

Satohiro Akimoto is president and founder of Washington Insights, a geopolitical risk analysis and consulting firm. Previously he was senior vice president and general manager at Mitsubishi Corp.'s Washington office.

The need for a U.S. policy pivot toward Iran

Closer ties with Tehran can help Washington once again become a power broker in the Middle East

UWE BOT
NEW YORK
THE GLOBALIST

Following the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, there is a profound need for a fundamental rethink of U.S. policy toward the Middle East. It is deeply ironic that continuing U.S. loyalty to the murderous Saudi princes is partially being justified with some instability in the world's oil market. That instability is largely the consequence of the ill-fated U.S. move to impose as many sanctions as possible on Iran.

By having ties with both Saudi Arabia and Iran, the U.S. has far more influence on their actions abroad.

By shutting Iran's access to the global oil market, the Trump administration is trying to get Iran's economy to crater. The hope is for regime change. Calling this policy approach a failure is not to put the ayatollahs' regime in any rosy light. One cannot do that. Rather, the point that must be made is that the Saudis are no better and, in some ways, even worse.

To my knowledge, in contrast to the Saudis, Iran has not sent terrorists to attack the U.S. via a sophisticated mass murder.

Viewed in a historic light, clinging to the murderous regime of the Saudi princes is tantamount to clinging to the murderous regime of the Shah of Iran in the 1970s.

The U.S. foreign policy doctrine to stick with ruthless dictators for sometimes very narrow policy reasons was purportedly introduced by President Franklin D. Roosevelt when he allegedly said about Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza in 1939 that "Somoza may be a son of a bitch, but he is our son of a bitch."

Sticking with Somoza or the shah, for that

matter, was a disastrous miscalculation back then. And it will be proven disastrous now in the Saudi case.

Indeed, relentless support of Somoza for too long brought us the communist dictatorship of Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua. Sticking with the shah was what enabled the disastrous turn of events in favor of Iran's religious extremists back then. We are bound to experience a replay now.

Admittedly, the Saudi chaos is difficult to understand, but U.S. submission to the Saudis neither makes for a strategy nor does it serve the security interests of the United States.

Undoubtedly, a U.S. foreign policy that engages with Iran and its ayatollahs would be complicated to execute. Opposition in the U.S. Congress to such policy-pivot would be virulent.

Israel's current government would be furious and the ayatollahs themselves might not be too receptive. But the worse option is to continue to do what is deemed "easy."

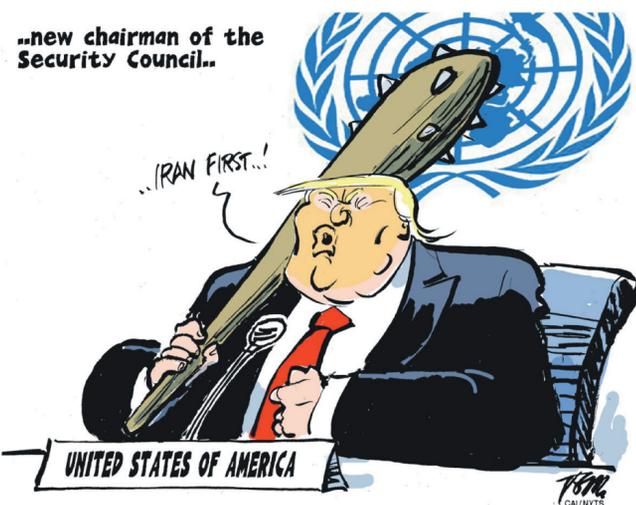
The rapprochement with Iran should be gradual. Viewed with an open mind, it is incomprehensible how the president of the U.S. claims that he has fallen in love with Kim Jong Un, the unstable North Korean dictator, but cannot bring himself to engage with the Iranian leadership.

While Iran is hostile toward the U.S. and the state of Israel, its leadership is not insane (although brutal and unforgiving to dissidents) and it does not possess nuclear weapons. This is unlike Kim, whose nuclear arms can reach U.S. territory.

There would be three major benefits to better relations with Iran: First, the U.S. would prepare the ground for the post-ayatollah era, an era that will come one day and probably within a generation, while a Saudi evolution to a more humane society is light-years away.

The U.S. would not support the Iranian

..new chairman of the Security Council..



regime, but as a first step establish some normality between the countries. This increases leverage on Iran, even though this benefit should not be oversold.

Second, this strategy would send a serious message to Saudi Arabia, telling the House of Saud that it is no longer "business as usual." The pressure would make it infinitely clear that Saudi Arabia must do far more to contain the terrorism that has its roots in the fundamentalist extremism taught by Saudi-funded teachers across the world.

Third, the U.S. would re-establish itself within the region as a power broker. By having ties with both Saudi Arabia and Iran, the U.S. has far more influence on their actions abroad. Any violation of international law would have a price tag attached to it. This is how power politics works.

The fact alone that the U.S. would seek closer relations with Iran, Saudi Arabia's major adversary in the region, would deal a big blow to Saudi ambitions.

If this move does not happen, and happen soon, the U.S. will in effect remain a money-driven enabler of Saudi extremism at home and abroad. Witness the constant, shameful emphasis on U.S. defense sales.

The U.S. has not wisely used its immense

potential power in the Middle East for decades under Democrats and Republicans alike. Worse, the U.S. has failed to act in its own best security interest.

There was only one brief interlude, at the end of the Obama administration when there was some hope of a U.S. course correction. Trump moved with lightning speed to shut down that opportunity for more normality in the bilateral relationship.

Narrow corporate interests — defense and oil — have trumped the safety of Americans and many people in other Western democracies. Maybe a new foreign policy approach should not be based on corporate lobbying, but instead be grounded in one key motto: "American lives matter."

That would be a proper way to finally act on the real fallout from the Saudi-sponsored 9/11 mass murder.

And it would be a proper way to acknowledge, however indirectly, the U.S. role in stunting an indigenously developed Iranian democracy, when it shaped the demise of Mohammad Mossadegh via a coup back in 1953.

Uwe Bott is the chief economist of The Globalist Research Center.