

Bin Laden Feature: Why The Significance of His Death May Be in East Asia

Saturday, May 7, 2011 at 7:25

Scott Lucas in Australia and the Pacific, China and East Asia, EA Global, Osama bin Laden, Sean Foley



Sean Foley, a professor at Middle Tennessee State University and author of [The Arab Gulf States Beyond Oil and Islam](#), offers this essay for EA:

Osama Bin Laden's death marks a turning point in America's relationship with the global community. For a decade, he and his organization, al-Qaeda, have had an unrivaled place in the collective imagination of Americans and in Washington's global outlook.

But the long-term significance of his death may not be in the Middle East or South Asia. Instead, it will be in East Asia and the Pacific Rim, reflecting a critical change in American foreign policy.

Over the past two years the Obama Administration has worked to re-orient the nation's attention away from the Middle East and Afghanistan and towards the East. While the strategic shift in part reflects the President's close ties to Hawaii and Indonesia, it is also consistent with two shifts in the global balance of power after 2001: the rise of China and Asia's emergence as the centre of the world economy. A senior U.S. diplomat told *The New Yorker* this month that Americans have been on a "Middle East detour" for ten years when our future "will be dominated utterly and fundamentally by developments in Asia".

Shifting the US focus to Asia has not been easy because the worldview of its people has been shaped for a decade by Bin Laden, his ideas, and actions. Americans supported major military operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere to prevent another September 11 terrorist attack at home and to counter the threat that Bin Laden and his followers posed to the world and to America's allies. The absence of a clear US victory in any of these campaigns only heightened Americans' fears about the potency of Islamic terrorism and the prospect of another attack on US soil.

The demise of Bin Laden provides the Obama Administration with an opportunity to recalibrate foreign policy towards Asia. Not only was this a clear victory for the US military, it also supposedly showed that the nation's financial and personal sacrifices since 2001 had been worthwhile. It removed the best-known symbol of Islamic terrorism from the public arena, answering a question that many had asked privately but felt uncomfortable asking publicly: is the

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US still a global superpower if one man responsible for the death of thousands of Americans, Osama Bin Laden, remains free‘?

As the recent events in the Arab world show, the Middle East can dominate US foreign policy without warning --- even without Bin Laden playing a leading role. But an immense global shift has already begun, which presents many new opportunities and dangers for Washington. While China and Asia’s other large economies will be important in the future, there will also be opportunities for Washington in Asia’s Muslim nations, whose worldview is not necessarily the same as Muslim societies in the Middle East.

Ultimately, how Americans respond to Muslims in Asia and to the other challenges of a global order based in the region will shape the destiny of the US long after Osama Bin Laden has faded from public view.

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