

# Oil, Order and Alliances: Japan's constrained alignment in a fracturing Middle East

## ■ EARTH NEWS POLITICAL DESK

For decades, Japan's foreign policy has been defined by a careful balancing of competing imperatives. Bound by a security alliance with the United States, dependent on imported energy, and guided by a post-war commitment to pacifism, Tokyo has often sought stability through caution rather than confrontation. Yet moments of geopolitical upheaval have a way of exposing the limits of carefully calibrated strategies. The escalating conflict involving Iran, Israel and the United States, coupled with growing instability around the Strait of Hormuz, has once again placed Japan in an uncomfortable strategic position.

The crisis has revealed a central dilemma confronting Tokyo: how to remain a dependable ally of Washington while protecting its own economic interests and preserving a foreign policy identity rooted in restraint. The summit between Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi and US President Donald Trump on 19 March 2026 underscored the complexity of this challenge. At stake is not merely Japan's energy security but the broader question of how the country intends to navigate an increasingly fractured international order.

Few advanced economies are as vulnerable to disruptions in Middle Eastern energy supplies as Japan. More than 90 per cent of its crude oil imports originate from the region, and a substantial portion of these shipments passes through the Strait of Hormuz, one of the world's most strategically significant maritime chokepoints. Any prolonged disruption in the waterway would immediately reverberate through Japan's economy.

Recognising this vulnerability, Tokyo has turned to one of its most important strategic assets: its vast petroleum reserves. By late 2025, Japan had accumulated approximately 470 million barrels of oil, representing more than 250 days of domestic consumption. This reserve system, established in the aftermath of the 1973 oil crisis, remains among the largest and most sophisticated in the world.

The government's decision to release around 80 million barrels as part of a coordinated effort with the International Energy Agency demonstrates both preparedness and urgency. The move provides temporary relief to markets and reassures industries dependent on stable energy supplies. Japan is also exploring the use of jointly held reserves with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait stored on Japanese territory.

Yet the significance of these reserves lies not only in their size but also in what they reveal about Japan's strategic predicament. Stockpiles can

cushion shocks, but they cannot eliminate vulnerability. Oil reserves are finite. Once released, they must eventually be replenished, often at elevated prices and under less favourable market conditions. Moreover, reserves do little to address disruptions in transportation networks, rising shipping costs or mounting insurance premiums associated with conflict zones.

This distinction is crucial. Energy security is not merely about having sufficient barrels of oil in storage. It is equally about maintaining secure and predictable supply chains. Recent reports of Japanese-linked vessels being stranded amid regional tensions illustrate the operational realities of a conflict that extends beyond commodity markets. The Strait of Hormuz is not simply an energy corridor; it is an artery of global commerce. Any interruption carries consequences far beyond fuel availability.

It is against this backdrop that pressure from Washington has intensified. The United States has sought stronger support from allies to safeguard maritime routes and maintain freedom of navigation in the region. Earlier in March, President Trump reportedly encouraged Japan to play a more active role in escorting commercial vessels through the Strait before subsequently moderating that position. Meanwhile, US Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth urged Tokyo to support a US-led maritime security initiative aimed at protecting critical shipping lanes.

For many American policymakers, such requests appear reasonable. Japan is one of the principal beneficiaries of secure maritime trade routes and enjoys the protection of the US security umbrella. However, from Tokyo's perspective, the issue is far more complicated.

Japan's constitutional framework continues to impose significant restrictions on overseas military operations. Although successive governments have expanded the interpretation of collective self-defence and introduced security reforms over the past decade, Article 9 of the Constitution remains a powerful political and legal constraint. Public opinion also remains cautious regarding military involvement in conflicts beyond Japan's immediate security environment.

Consequently, the deployment of Japanese Maritime Self-Defence Forces into an active conflict zone remains politically contentious. The government has maintained that current developments do not constitute a "survival-threatening situation" that would legally justify the exercise of collective self-defence. This position reflects not merely constitutional caution but also a broader strategic calculation.

Tokyo understands that military participation in a conflict involving

Iran carries substantial risks. Japan has historically maintained relatively constructive relations with Tehran and has frequently sought to position itself as a diplomatic bridge rather than a partisan actor. Unlike many Western allies, Japan's engagement with the Middle East has traditionally focused on economic cooperation, development assistance and conflict de-escalation.

This preference for diplomacy is deeply embedded in Japan's post-war identity. While security realities have evolved, Tokyo continues to view international stability through the lens

of security strategy.

The Takaichi-Trump summit highlighted this delicate balancing act. While reaffirming the strength of bilateral ties, Tokyo carefully avoided commitments that might draw it into military operations. Instead, Japan expanded economic and logistical cooperation, signalling support for the alliance while preserving room for diplomatic manoeuvre.

Energy cooperation emerged as a particularly significant aspect of the discussions. Prime Minister Takaichi proposed a joint initiative to stockpile American crude oil in Japan, re-

Eastern suppliers. Even if imports from North America increase, Japan is unlikely to eliminate its reliance on Gulf energy in the foreseeable future.

Australia, meanwhile, offers a more immediately viable pathway toward greater resilience. As Japan's largest supplier of liquefied natural gas, accounting for roughly 40 per cent of imports, Australia provides a stable and politically reliable source of energy. Expanding partnerships with Canberra could reduce some of the risks associated with geopolitical instability elsewhere. However, diversification is inherently a long-term strategy. New

pointed in that direction.

Yet the response to the Middle East crisis suggests that caution remains deeply embedded in Tokyo's decision-making. Rather than embracing a more interventionist role, Japan is practising what might be described as constrained alignment. It supports the United States where necessary, contributes through economic and logistical measures, and seeks diplomatic solutions wherever possible.

This approach reflects both necessity and conviction. Japan recognises that its prosperity depends upon a stable international order governed by predictable rules. It has therefore been reluctant to endorse actions that risk further destabilising an already volatile region. Significantly, Tokyo has refrained from explicitly commenting on the legality of recent American and Iranian military actions, even as many Japanese policymakers privately view such developments as damaging to international law and the rules-based order.

That concern is neither abstract nor ideological. As a resource-poor trading nation, Japan has more to lose than most from the erosion of international norms governing commerce, navigation and conflict management. Stability is not merely a preference; it is a strategic necessity.

The months ahead are likely to test this philosophy. If tensions in the Middle East continue to escalate, Japan's room for manoeuvre will narrow. Strategic reserves will gradually diminish. Diversification efforts will remain incomplete. Pressure from allies may intensify, particularly if maritime security deteriorates further.

Tokyo's challenge will be to preserve the credibility of its alliance with the United States without compromising the principles and interests that have long guided its foreign policy. Achieving that balance will require diplomatic dexterity, economic foresight and political discipline.

For now, Japan's response illustrates the realities of middle-power statecraft in a turbulent era. It is neither fully aligned nor fully independent; neither passive nor confrontational. Instead, it occupies an increasingly difficult space between competing strategic demands.

Whether that approach remains sustainable will depend not only on decisions made in Tokyo, but also on the trajectory of a conflict whose consequences extend far beyond the Middle East.

In navigating this uncertain landscape, Japan is attempting to demonstrate that prudence can still be a form of strength. The question is whether a rapidly polarising world will continue to permit such careful balancing for much longer.

“As missiles fly over the Middle East and tensions grip the Strait of Hormuz, Japan finds itself confronting a familiar but increasingly difficult question: how to remain America's closest Asian ally without jeopardising the energy lifeline that powers its economy. Armed with one of the world's largest strategic oil reserves but constrained by a pacifist constitution and a preference for diplomacy, Tokyo is attempting a delicate balancing act. The unfolding crisis is not merely testing Japan's energy security; it is exposing the limits of alliance politics, strategic autonomy and the rules-based order on which Japan's prosperity depends.”

of rules, institutions and negotiated settlements. That perspective was evident in 2018 when Japan found itself navigating another difficult moment following the United States' withdrawal from the Iran nuclear agreement and the reimposition of sanctions on Tehran.

Today's crisis presents a similar dilemma, albeit under more volatile circumstances. Excessive alignment with Washington's military approach risks entangling Japan in a conflict that directly threatens its energy interests. Conversely, maintaining too much distance from the United States could weaken an alliance that remains the cornerstone of Japan's national se-

lecting an effort to deepen energy ties with Washington while simultaneously diversifying supply sources. Such proposals are driven by more than commercial considerations. For Washington, strengthening energy ties with Japan reduces dependence on the Middle East and reinforces strategic coordination among allies. For Tokyo, American energy resources offer an opportunity to broaden procurement options without fundamentally disrupting existing relationships in the Gulf.

Nevertheless, diversification remains easier in theory than in practice. Geography, infrastructure and market realities continue to favour Middle

infrastructure projects require years of planning and investment. Supply contracts cannot be rewritten overnight. In the meantime, Japan remains exposed to developments in a region increasingly marked by confrontation and uncertainty.

The broader implications extend beyond energy. At its core, the current crisis raises questions about the future character of Japanese foreign policy. For years, observers have debated whether Japan is gradually moving towards a more assertive strategic posture.

Expanded defence budgets, revised security doctrines and growing concern about regional threats have all

# The Limits of long-distance Human Rights Advocacy

## ■ EARTH NEWS POLITICAL DESK

In an age when political discourse increasingly rewards dramatic declarations over nuanced understanding, public figures carry an even greater responsibility to ensure that their words are grounded in facts rather than fashionable narratives. That responsibility becomes particularly significant when they speak about communities beyond their own borders. A misplaced assertion from an influential politician can shape international perceptions, reinforce stereotypes, and reduce complex social realities to simplistic talking points.

Few politicians embody the aspirations of progressive politics in the United States as prominently as Congresswoman Ilhan Omar. One of only two Muslim women ever elected to the United States Congress, Omar has become a symbol of resilience and representation. Born in war-ravaged Somalia, she spent part of her childhood in a refugee camp in Kenya before rebuilding her life in America. Her remarkable journey eventually led her to become the first African refugee and the first woman of colour to represent Minnesota in Congress. Throughout her political career, she has championed universal healthcare, economic justice, climate action, and the rights of immigrants and minorities.

Such a life story naturally commands admiration. Omar has frequently projected herself as a politician unafraid to challenge entrenched power and defend vulnerable communities. Yet public admiration should never place any leader beyond scrutiny. Democratic societies thrive not by manufacturing heroes but by evaluating public figures through the consistency and credibility of their actions.

It is against this backdrop that Omar's recent suggestion that Indian Muslims are

in the "eighth stage of genocide" deserves careful examination. The statement was not merely provocative; it represented an extraordinary claim demanding equally extraordinary evidence. Instead, it appeared to echo a familiar tendency among sections of Western political discourse to interpret distant societies through fragmented reports, selective narratives, and social media conversations rather than through a comprehensive understanding of local realities.

No honest observer would deny that Indian Muslims, like many other communities, face challenges. Questions surrounding discrimination, communal tensions, equal opportunities, and representation remain legitimate subjects of public debate. Equally, internal inequalities within the Muslim community itself continue to demand attention. Muslim women continue to advocate for greater social and economic participation, while disadvantaged social groups within the community seek broader recognition and justice.

These concerns deserve serious discussion. However, acknowledging social problems is vastly different from characterising the world's largest democracy as a society approaching genocide.

Such language not only exaggerates reality but also trivialises one of humanity's gravest crimes. Genocide is not a rhetorical device to amplify political messaging. It is a legal and historical category associated with systematic attempts to annihilate entire populations. Applying that label casually diminishes both the suffering of genuine victims across history and the credibility of legitimate human rights advocacy.

India's Muslim population itself offers perhaps the strongest rebuttal to such sweeping characterisations.

Comprising approximately 14 per cent of the country's population, Indian Muslims

constitute the third-largest Muslim population in the world. They are neither politically invisible nor socially isolated. They participate actively in elections, hold public office, shape public debate, contribute to business, academia, literature, cinema, sports, and the armed forces, and remain deeply woven into the country's national identity.

Their contribution to India's development is impossible to overlook. Former President APJ Abdul Kalam continues to be celebrated as one of the nation's most respected scientists and statesmen. Industrialist Azim Premji transformed Indian enterprise while dedicating enormous resources to education and philanthropy. Muslim officers have served with distinction in the armed forces, intelligence agencies, and police services. Millions of ordinary citizens—teachers, doctors, artisans, entrepreneurs, engineers, labourers, and professionals—contribute daily to India's economic and social fabric.

These realities hardly depict a community on the brink of extermination. Nor are Indian Muslims voiceless spectators waiting for international figures to articulate their concerns. They vote, organise politically, challenge governments, engage with the judiciary, participate in civil society movements, and exercise constitutional freedoms alongside fellow citizens. Their concerns are debated within Parliament, the media, universities, and the courts. The existence of problems does not erase the democratic avenues available to address them. This is precisely why external commentary must be informed rather than performative.

International attention towards minority rights should never be discouraged. Constructive criticism often strengthens democracies by encouraging accountability. However, such criticism commands respect only when it reflects careful study, consis-

tency, and intellectual honesty. Sweeping pronouncements based on partial understanding risk reducing living communities into political symbols rather than recognising them as citizens with agency.

Perhaps the more troubling aspect of Omar's intervention lies not merely in what she said about India but in the apparent inconsistency with which she applies her principles. Human rights cannot be defended selectively. A politician genuinely committed to protecting minorities should display equal concern for persecuted communities irrespective of geography or political convenience. Yet critics have frequently questioned Omar's relative silence regarding the systematic discrimination faced by religious minorities in neighbouring Pakistan. Constitutional barriers continue to prevent members of minority communities from occupying the country's highest political offices, while reports of forced conversions, abductions, and violence against minority women remain persistent concerns documented by numerous international organisations.

Similarly, many observers recall Omar's response during exchanges involving journalist Aarti Tikoo Singh, who highlighted the suffering of both Kashmiri Muslims and displaced Kashmiri Pandits. Rather than engaging equally with the experiences of all affected communities, the discussion appeared to shift towards questioning the journalist herself. What remained notably absent was meaningful empathy for the Pandits, a minority that experienced mass displacement from its ancestral homeland.

Consistency remains the ultimate test of moral credibility.

When concern for human rights appears contingent upon political narratives rather than universal principles, even well-intentioned advocacy begins to lose its persuasive

force. Victims do not become more or less deserving of compassion depending on their nationality, religion, or political utility.

This is not an argument against international engagement with India's democratic challenges. On the contrary, every democracy benefits from informed global scrutiny. External voices can highlight issues that domestic institutions may overlook, encourage reforms, and reinforce universal values of equality and justice.

However, those voices must first invest the effort to understand the societies they seek to criticise. They must distinguish between structural challenges and sensational claims. They must recognise the diversity within Indian Muslim experiences rather than portraying over 200 million people as passive victims awaiting rescue from abroad.

Ultimately, Indian Muslims do not require validation from international politicians to establish either their struggles or their achievements. They seek what every democratic citizen seeks—equal opportunity, constitutional protections, dignity, and justice. Their aspirations are rooted not in victimhood but in active citizenship.

The conversation surrounding minority rights in India deserves seriousness rather than slogans. It requires evidence rather than exaggeration, empathy rather than selective outrage, and intellectual consistency rather than ideological convenience.

When international leaders speak with humility, informed understanding, and equal compassion for every persecuted community, irrespective of borders or political alignments, their voices enrich the global conversation on human rights. Until then, dramatic declarations may generate headlines, but they do little to illuminate the far more complex realities lived by millions every day.