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Saudi King, Large Entourage Tour Asia

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Tour comes amid strains with U.S., as kingdom seeks to broaden its alliances

The Saudi king is leading an entourage of up to 1,500 people on a monthlong tour through Asia in a bid to strengthen ties with a region the kingdom sees as an increasingly valuable economic partner and a hedge against an unpredictable U.S. government.

By Margherita Stancati and Nicolas Parasié in Riyadh and Yantoultra Ngui in Putrajaya, Malaysia

The monarch, accompanied by senior princes, religious leaders, ministers and military officials, began in Malaysia, where on Monday he agreed to invest \$7 billion in a petrochemical project and signed other joint ventures.

From Malaysia, King Salman's group is to travel to Indonesia, Brunei, Japan, China and the Maldives. The logistical feat of transporting, lodging and feeding them involves 459 tons of cargo, including two electric escalators to help the entourage on and off airplanes, two Mercedes Benz S600s and vast amounts of halal food, a Saudi official said.

King Salman's Asia tour comes at a delicate time for relations with Washington, Riyadh's most important strategic partner. The decades-old alliance was strained under President Barack Obama over



Saudi Arabia's King Salman and Malaysia's Prime Minister Najib Razak arriving for a signing ceremony in Putrajaya on Monday.

foreign policy, especially after the former president's outreach to Iran, Saudi Arabia's rival.

While the U.S. remains a vital ally, the souring of ties pushed the kingdom to accelerate efforts to become more self-sufficient, broadening and deepening its alliances beyond the West.

Saudi Arabia enthusiastically welcomed the election of President Donald Trump, who has vowed to take a hard-line

against Iran. But Mr. Trump's regional policy is still far from clear, and a key bone of contention in U.S.-Saudi ties—a bill that would allow families of the 9/11 victims to sue Saudi Arabia—remains unresolved.

In a telling sign, King Salman's Asia tour is happening before an expected visit to Washington to meet Mr. Trump.

"Saudi Arabia's foreign policy is becoming more active and confident," said Abdullah

al-Shammari, a Saudi analyst and former career diplomat. "Despite the good mood with the Trump administration, Saudi Arabia is sending a message to Washington that 'Yes, you are our friend. But we also have alternatives.'"

The stops in Indonesia and Malaysia reflect the kingdom's desire to deepen ties with the Muslim-majority countries. Officials will discuss business opportunities in sectors like tourism and pilgrimages from

there to the holy Islamic sites in Mecca and Medina. Saudi Arabia said it issues as many as 3,200 visas a day just for Malaysians to travel to Saudi Arabia for the year-round Umrah pilgrimage.

In Indonesia, the Saudis will visit the Istiqlal Mosque, the biggest in Southeast Asia, and later pause for a break in Bali.

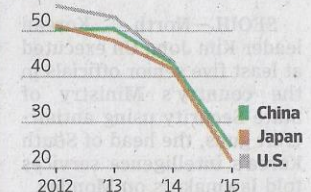
Meanwhile, China and Japan are together with the U.S. the biggest buyers of Saudi oil—each spending more

Big Guns

A Saudi delegation is visiting several Asian nations including China and Japan, which are increasingly overtaking the U.S. as Riyadh's biggest oil buyers amid falling prices.

Saudi Arabia's top three export markets

\$60 billion



Note: Currency conversions at current exchange rates
Source: Saudi Arabia's General Authority for Statistics

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

than \$20 billion in 2015.

But as the kingdom pushes to diversify its economy beyond oil following the slump in crude prices that began 2014, Saudi Arabia is hoping to attract foreign investment. From China and Japan it hopes to draw interest in sectors including logistics, transportation, construction and financial services, said a person familiar with the agenda.

A Japanese government official said Saudi Arabia's aim of reducing its dependency on oil will be discussed when King Salman meets with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on his March 12-15 visit.

—Anita Rachman in Jakarta, Indonesia, and Alastair Gale in Tokyo contributed to this article.