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With Its Foreign Policy, The Obama Administration Is Turning Hypocrisy Into An Art Form

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The U.S. backed military regime in Cairo is killing more supporters of ousted President Mohamed Morsi. Yet Washington continues to proclaim its inability to see a coup, so America's aid money still flows. The Obama administration is turning hypocrisy into an art form. Unfortunately, the rest of the world is not fooled.

The great foreign policy illusion in Washington is that the U.S. government controls international events. Thus, the administration proclaims that it must continue to hand \$1.55 billion annually to the generals in Cairo to preserve its influence. Yet when did America last exercise influence in Egypt?

Washington has provided almost \$75 billion in foreign "aid" over the years, most of it since the 1978 Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel. The peace has been kept, but Egypt always had the most to lose from another war with Israel.

Beyond that, Cairo has consistently ignored American advice. Presidents Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak were authoritarians who made no pretense of promoting democracy or protecting human rights. When the revolution upended Mubarak, the administration successively backed the dictator, urged a negotiated departure, and supported his overthrow. The Egyptian people demonstrated not the slightest interest in what Washington desired.

President Barak Obama and his aides counseled the new Egyptian leader, President Morsi, to be inclusive, but he arrogated power to himself while failing to reform the economy. Then the administration unsuccessfully warned military commander Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Sisi against staging a coup.

Since then Washington has urged the military ruler not to target the Muslim Brotherhood and risk driving it underground. He responded by shooting even more pro-Morsi demonstrators. “None of us can quite figure this out,” one administration official told the Wall Street Journal: “It seems so self-defeating.” Actually, it’s quite easy to understand: Gen. al-Sisi has taken Washington’s measure and sees no reason to pay the slightest attention to its wishes. American officials will do nothing other than wring their hands.

After all, they explain, if President Obama acknowledged the obvious, that a military coup had overthrown an elected government, and applied the law, which requires the cut off of U.S. aid, Gen. al-Sisi might ignore American advice. Oh, right.

It would have been better years ago had American officials simply shut up and done nothing. No money would have been wasted. Washington’s impotence would not have been demonstrated. The U.S. would not be complicit in decades of military rule.

Alas, Egypt is not the first instance in which the U.S. government has managed to look stupid while spending a lot of money. In fact, that is far more the rule than the exception for Washington.

For decades the U.S. government has given tens of billions of dollars a year in economic assistance. Recipients cashed American checks and continued to wreck their economies by following dirigiste policies. The World Bank and other multilateral development banks were even worse. Washington was the largest single contributor to these organizations yet they routinely underwrote the most monstrous regimes, such as Nicolae Ceausescu’s Romania and Mengistu Haile Mariam’s Ethiopia.

A lot of foreign “aid” was walking around money for the secretary of state, as in Egypt. The theory was simple: Hand the local despot a fistful of cash and he’d do what you asked. However, governments in the pay of Washington quickly learned that U.S. officials hated to admit failure and end assistance. Thus, recipients could safely ignore whatever conditions American officials placed on the money.

About all this U.S. “aid” achieved was to strengthen corrupt thugs and rent military bases. This policy was particularly embarrassing during the Cold War, with more than a few dictators on America’s payroll. In such cases, Washington officials cheerfully talked about the importance of democracy while ostentatiously backing autocracy.

The policy continues today, though the hypocrisy is not quite so flagrant or widespread. In Central Asia and the Middle East, in particular, U.S. administrations routinely subsidize tyranny. The U.S. expresses outrage when Russia and Ukraine fall short of Western democratic standards but quietly accepts far worse repression in other former Soviet republics such as Kazakhstan and

Uzbekistan. The Obama administration lauded the “Arab Spring” while supporting repression in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and now Egypt.

Washington’s plans for Iraq were even more fantastic. America was going to fight a war for democracy by installing as that nation’s president a corrupt Iraqi exile with no domestic support. The Shia nation was expected to become a long-term U.S. client, providing military bases for use against next door Shia Iran. The Bush administration even figured the Muslim state would recognize Israel. War architects planned to impose American values and mores on another people in another land. U.S. policy was a disaster in almost every way.

So, too, in Afghanistan, where the Bush and Obama administrations so far have spent nearly 12 years attempting to build Western-style democracy in the artificial country which has never known liberal rule. Washington has attempted to achieve this end by underwriting a government noted mostly for its extravagant corruption and incompetence. Indeed, the U.S. improbably believes it can improve governance in Kabul by delivering bags of cash to President Hamid Karzai.

American officials have spent two decades prattling on about self-determination in the Balkans while dismantling Yugoslavia, always freeing minority ethnic groups from ethnic Serb rule while leaving ethnic Serbs subject to the control of other, no less violent ethnic groups. When Russia later backed Abkhazia and South Ossetia in separating from Georgia, Washington reversed course to express shock and horror at the threat to the latter’s territorial integrity, even after Tbilisi foolishly started a short-lived war with Moscow.

Much ink recently was spilled about preserving American credibility after President Obama suggested that Syrian use of chemical weapons was a “red line” for intervention. Yet U.S. officials routinely draw meaningless red lines. Washington has spent years insisting that it was absolutely unacceptable for North Korea and Iran to acquire nuclear weapons—even as their programs have, it seems, proceeded apace. Successive American administrations futilely insisted that Israel halt new settlements on Palestinian land in the West Bank, which make it ever more difficult to negotiate a peace agreement. U.S. diplomats circle the globe issuing instructions here, there, and everywhere, only to be routinely ignored.

Washington’s delusions have proved particularly grand when addressing significant powers. American officials lecture China and Russia what to do regarding such nations as Iran, North Korea, and Syria, without effect. Although the U.S. is a notorious fiscal wastrel the Obama administration has publicly instructed the Europeans how to fix their economies. America belongs to neither the Eurozone nor European Union, but America’s president has offered his opinion on how to manage the former and why Turkey should be included in the latter. In none of these cases has Washington earned much return on its abundant bluster.

Will U.S. officials never learn?

The answer apparently is no. Just look at Egypt, where American policy combines equal parts hypocrisy and futility. Washington officials are never content to just shut up and stay home.

The U.S. remains wealthy and powerful, but still cannot micro-manage the globe. Every new administration, irrespective of party, ignores this reality. The outcome is always the same: values sacrificed, money wasted, credibility lost, reputation damaged. If President Obama wants to leave a positive foreign policy legacy, he should do and say less abroad.