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Obama's Middle East Grand Strategy

An Inspired Game of Geopolitics or a Reckless Enterprise?

by DEEPAK TRIPATHI
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President Obama is on a diplomatic offensive on several fronts in the Middle East. The six-month interim agreement between the major world powers, five permanent members of the UN Security Council and the European Union, and Iran to restrain its nuclear program is being described as the most important development in their relations since the Iranian Revolution. The agreement has set off a rapprochement between Tehran and Washington, raising hopes that much more is to follow.

The French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius has suggested that the European Union may lift some sanctions on Iran as early as December. A new round of peace talks on Syria has been announced for next January. President Bashar al-Assad says his government will attend, but the participation of several opposition groups is in doubt.

In Afghanistan, a tribal grand assembly has recommended that President Karzai sign a security pact with the United States, before the end of the year, as the Obama administration wants. However, Karzai insists on a firm American commitment to stop night raids on Afghan homes, a

“correct and dignified” presidential election and stability, without which he will not sign the security pact. He says that he wants to leave the signing to his successor after the April 2014 election. Then there are the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, slow and protracted as they have been for decades. Obama’s diplomacy on so many fronts is a sign of incredible ambition, and requires great energy and deftness.

These matters, with their ramifications for the region, deserve careful assessment. President Obama has embarked on a far-reaching enterprise hoping for great rewards, but there are high risks, too. Why should he want such a radical change course? His game plan is worth examining.

Years of cold war and economic sanctions have had dire consequences for the Iranian economy, but it would be wrong to claim that Washington has emerged unhurt. The United States lost access to Iran, a major energy source and a large market for American corporations. Anarchy rules Libya, and terror overflows to other countries of the region, after the West’s miscalculation in overthrowing the Gaddafi regime. Libya’s oil production has been disrupted. Iran has become more important as a source of energy.

The loss of influence in Tehran had made the United States overly dependent on Saudi Arabia and Israel. Both benefited greatly by consistently playing the Iran card in their dealings with successive US administrations since the 1979 Iranian Revolution. America’s capacity to shape events diminished in Syria and Lebanon, where Iran’s influence is considerable. Following the 2003 US invasion and Saddam Hussein’s overthrow, Iraq moved close to Iran, and there is a pro-Tehran government in Baghdad. The Shia uprising in Bahrain, where the US Fifth Fleet is based, has to be controlled by the emirate’s rulers from the Sunni minority with an iron fist.

Iran’s help to the Americans in the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, the Taliban regime’s removal, and Hamid Karzai’s installation in power, had promised an era of hope for relations between Washington and Tehran. That hopeful era proved short-lived when President George W. Bush’s administration changed its tune. In particular, the Iranians felt betrayed by Bush’s description in January 2002 of their country being one of the “axis of evil” along with Iraq and North Korea. Despite Iran paying a very high price since the 1979 revolution, there has been a price paid by successive American administrations, too, including in terms of credibility lost. When the political environment is polarised sharply, the room for manoeuvre is limited severely.

Is President Obama out to craft a new US grand design in the Middle East in the remainder of his second term? It requires a radical realignment of American policy. Washington would have to build a new road to Tehran, linking Iran to Syria, Lebanon and Afghanistan. The road to Israel

and Saudi Arabia would take a second place. It is this prospect which makes both Israel and Saudi Arabia, and the Israeli government's supporters in the US Congress, nervous.

Has Obama got what it takes to overcome the hurdles? Obama's opponents can thwart his Middle East plan, individually or collectively. Israel's prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu is the biggest obstacle. While all eyes were focused on Syria, and on talks in Geneva with Iran, the Americans and the Iranians were holding secret negotiations without Netanyahu knowing about the clandestine US-Iranian dealings. This is a remarkable happening, which has infuriated Netanyahu.

The Israeli prime minister looks isolated on the international stage, but his support in the American Congress could still wreck the deal with Iran, whose cooperation is going to be vital for stability in Afghanistan during and after most NATO troops are withdrawn by the end of 2014. There are two main reasons why Tehran's cooperation is necessary. First of all, it is going to fall upon Afghan government forces to deal with the Pashtun Taliban's resurgent activity in the south and east; so the north and west close to the border with Iran must be kept at peace. Furthermore, non-Pashtun minorities with close links with Iran are overrepresented in the Afghan armed forces. With only a few thousand American troops left in the country, it will be essential that the Afghan military remains together.

The next six months are going to be most decisive. At the end, we will know whether Iran's agreement with the major world powers has a long-term future. We will also find out how far pro-Israel jingoists and war hawks such as New York Senator Chuck Schumer succeed in turning their threat of sabotaging Obama's Middle East plan into reality. Speaking at a children's charity fundraiser, Schumer spoke of working in Congress to impose more crippling sanctions against Iran and 'defeat' the Arab world and Palestinians.

The next few months will also tell whether President Rouhani of Iran, backed by the supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei, can prevail over conservative opponents in his own country. And how events unfold in Afghanistan affecting Obama's dispute with President Karzai over the US-Afghan security pact. Above everything else, the most important question is whether Obama will drive his project hard enough for it to have a long life. Or it is destined to be another 'big idea' which gets buried in the sands of the Middle East.