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A new normal in US-Saudi ties will have to wait for next American president

BY M.K. BHADRAKUMAR

APRIL 15, 2016

It should come as total surprise if an erudite scholar-statesman like US President Barack Obama never held in his palm Mao Zedong's classic philosophical essay *On Contradictions*.



U.S. President Barack Obama (R) meets with Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz in the Oval Office of the White House in this file photo

Obama may not have a dialectical mind, but his extensive interviews with Jeffrey Goldberg of the *Atlantic* magazine testify to his awareness that subjectivity must never be used in the investigation of contradictions.

However, the big question that remains unanswered as Obama embarks upon his visit to Saudi Arabia next week will be whether he realizes the cardinal difference between the principal contradiction and the principal aspect of a contradiction.

This is crucial to the outcome of his visit to Riyadh since the principal contradiction in the US-Saudi relationship will not change even after Obama presidency becomes history. Perhaps, the major and minor contradictions that have bedevilled the relationship can be resolved temporarily, while new ones are certain to keep emerging.

The fundamental contradiction ever since the US-Saudi relationship was launched in 1943 in great secrecy is that it involved two countries that were and still are poles apart in almost all respects.

What brought them together then was that one was a big guzzler of oil while the other had oil in great abundance and could supply it at very low price. The avaricious guzzler simply held the supplier in a tight embrace through the Cold War era, notwithstanding the plain truth that they were not made for each other.

While this principal contradiction has continued, many major and minor contradictions kept appearing through the next several decades – starting with the creation of Israel and the Arab-Israeli wars. They continued through the 1973 oil embargo on President Richard Nixon and the 2000 Camp David Accord and the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.

The ensuing war on terror morphed into the US' invasion of Iraq, which resulted in the Shi'ite empowerment in that country and in turn paved the way for the re-emergence of Iran as a regional force, thus phenomenally transforming the balance of power in the region.

Into the middle of this appeared the Arab Spring. Indeed, the principal contradiction is that Saudi Arabia has been a medieval monarchy surviving in a republican era of modern history. It is quintessentially about the potential existential threat to the House of Saud if democracy works in a major Arab country such as Egypt or Iraq.

Now, the principal contradiction also has the ability to develop and influence other secondary or subordinate contradictions. Thus, the focal point of the US-Saudi divergence today happens to be Iran.

In reality, though, if the \$95-billion worth American weaponry pumped into Saudi Arabia during the Obama presidency still cannot raise the Saudi comfort level, it is because Washington cannot give the House of Saud the guarantee of unconditional support in the event of democracy knocking at the gates in the Kingdom's oil-rich Shi'ite-dominated Eastern Province.

The US' refusal to rescue Hosni Mubarak was the defining moment. However, this principal contradiction has taken the form of myriad secondary contradictions. They range from the Obama administration's engagement of Iran instead of confronting the "satanic Safavid regime"

(as the Wahhabist clerical establishment in Saudi Arabia demanded) to the Obama administration's prevarication over the regime change agenda in Syria.

They also relate to Saudi oil policies aimed at preserving the Saudi market share (which factor in the North American shale revolution as a fierce competitor) and the inevitable shift in the US' regional and global priorities toward the Asian continent or the 'rebalance strategy' to counter China's rise (which Saudi Arabia interprets as weakening US security commitments in the Persian Gulf).

Again, while the US and Saudi Arabia have common interest in countering terrorism and in intelligence cooperation, the Saudi espousal and export of its literalist Wahhabist interpretations of Islam that underpins extremist Islamist groups, including the Islamic State, remains as a major contradiction.

All of the above have exacerbated mutual distrust and exposed the fault lines in the US-Saudi relationship. However, neither Washington nor Riyadh can afford an open break, either.

Washington cannot overlook that it has been the petrodollar system, which came into being ever since the collapse of the Bretton Woods gold standard in the early seventies (whereby Saudi Arabia began standardizing oil prices in dollar terms), that helped elevate the US dollar to the world currency, and is till today the very basis of the US' prerogative to enjoy persistent trade deficits and establish its global economic hegemony.

Besides, the petrodollar system also provides the United States' financial markets with a source of liquidity and foreign capital inflows through petrodollar "recycling." On the other hand, Saudi Arabia is critically dependent on US military support and it is in the self-interest of the ruling elites to maintain cordial relations with the US establishment. It is unthinkable that the Saudi regime would ever think of alienating an incumbent American president.

In the current circumstances, with just about eight months more to go in office, Obama's main endeavor will be to cement his historic presidential legacy, which has been the Iran nuclear agreement. Obama will expect the Saudis to refrain from steps that might undermine the nuclear agreement.

On his part, Obama can be expected to reassure his hosts that the US will continue to provide for their external security and underscore the importance of the relationship with the GCC.

However, the principal contradiction will remain. Washington cannot be expected to swoop in to bail out the Saudi regime, if a need arises as it happened in Cairo, which is the main source of the angst in the Saudi mind. It is simply not within the US' capacity to indefinitely play the role of regional policeman.

The Asia-Pacific is the top priority in the US foreign policy, since it is in that region that American pre-eminence in the world order is going to be tested. Most certainly, a 'new normal' will have to be found in the US-Saudi relationship, which is endemic to periods of transition. But that will have to wait for the next American president.

