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Obama's Rollback Strategy: Honduras, Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan (and the Boomerang Effect)

by Prof James Petras
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The recent events in Honduras and Iran, which pit democratically elected regimes against pro-US military and civilian actors intent on overthrowing them can best be understood as part of a larger White House strategy designed to rollback the gains achieved by opposition government and movements during the Bush years.

In a manner reminiscent of Ronald Reagan's New Cold War policies, Obama has vastly increased the military budget, increased the number of combat troops, targeted new regions for military intervention and backed military coups in regions traditionally controlled by the US . However Obama's rollback strategy occurs in a very different international and domestic context. Unlike Reagan, Obama faces a prolonged and profound recession/depression, massive fiscal and trade deficits, a declining role in the world economy and loss of political dominance in Latin America, the Middle East, East Asia and elsewhere. While Reagan faced off against a decaying Soviet Communist regime, Obama confronts surging world-wide opposition from a variety of independent secular, clerical, nationalist, liberal democratic and socialist electoral regimes and social movements anchored in local struggles.

Obama's rollback strategy is evident from his very first pronouncements, promising to reassert US dominance ('leadership') in the Middle East, his projection of massive military power in Afghanistan and military expansion in Pakistan and the destabilization of regimes through deep intervention by proxies as in Iran and Honduras.

Obama's pursuit of the rollback strategy operates a multi-track policy of overt military intervention, covert 'civil society' operations and soft-sell, seemingly benign diplomatic rhetoric, which relies heavily on mass media propaganda. Major ongoing events illustrate the rollback policies in action.

In Afghanistan, Obama has more than doubled the US military forces from 32,000 to 68,000. In the first week of July his military commanders launched the biggest single military offensive in decades in the southern Afghan province of Helmand to displace indigenous resistance and governance.

In Pakistan, the Obama-Clinton-Holbrooke regime successfully put maximum pressure on their newly installed client Zedari regime to launch a massive military offensive and rollback the long-standing influence of Islamic resistance forces in the Northwest frontier regions, while US drones and Special Forces commandoes routinely bomb and assault villages and local Pashtun leaders suspected of supporting the resistance.

In Iraq, the Obama regime engages in a farcical ploy, reconfiguring the urban map of Baghdad to include US military bases and operations and pass off the result as “retiring troops” to their barracks”. Obama’s multi-billion-dollar investment in long-term, large-scale military infrastructure, including bases, airfields and compounds speaks to a ‘permanent’ imperial presence, not to his campaign promises of a programmed withdrawal. While ‘staging’ fixed election between US-certified client candidates is the norm in Iraq and Afghanistan where the presence of US troops guarantees a colonial victory, in Iran and Honduras, Washington resorts to covert operations to destabilize or overthrow incumbent Presidents who do not support Obama’s rollback policies.

The covert and not-so-invisible operation in Iran found expression in a failed electoral challenge followed by ‘mass street demonstrations’ centered on the claim that the electoral victory of the incumbent anti-imperialist President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was a result of ‘electoral fraud’. Western mass media played a major role during the electoral campaign exclusively providing favorable coverage of the opposition and negative accounts of the incumbent regime. The mass media blanketed the ‘news’ with pro-demonstrator propaganda, selectively presenting coverage to de-legitimize the elections and elected officials, echoing the charges of ‘fraud’. The propaganda success of the US-orchestrated destabilization campaign even found an echo among broad sections of what passes for the US ‘left’ who ignored the massive, coordinated US financing of key Iranian groups and politicians engaged in the street protests. Neo-conservative, liberal and itinerant leftist ‘free-lance journalists’, like Reese Erlich, defended the destabilization effort from their own particular vantage point as ‘a popular democratic movement against electoral fraud.’

The right/left cheerleaders of US destabilization projects fail to address several key explanatory factors:

1. None, for example, discuss the fact that several weeks before the election a rigorous survey conducted by two US pollsters revealed an electoral outcome very near to the actual voting result, including in the ethnic provinces where the opposition claimed fraud.
2. None of the critics discussed the \$400 million dollars allocated by the Bush Administration to finance regime change, domestic destabilization and cross border terror operations. Many of the students and ‘civil society’ NGO’s in the demonstrations received funding from overseas foundations and NGO’s – which in turn were funded by the US government.

3. The charge of electoral fraud was cooked up after the results of the vote count were announced. In the entire run-up to the election, especially when the opposition believed they would win the elections – neither the student protesters nor the Western mass media nor the freelance journalists claimed impending fraud. During the entire day of voting, with opposition party observers at each polling place, no claims of voter intimidation or fraud were noted by the media, international observers or left backers of the opposition. Opposition party observers were present to monitor the entire vote count and yet, with only rare exception, no claims of vote rigging were made at the time. In fact, with the exception of one dubious claim by free-lance journalist Reese Erlich, none of the world’s media claimed ballot box stuffing. And even Erlich’s claims were admittedly based on unsubstantiated ‘anecdotal accounts’ from anonymous sources among his contacts in the opposition.

4. During the first week of protests in Tehran, the US, EU and Israeli leaders did not question the validity of the election outcome. Instead, they condemned the regime’s repression of the protestors. Clearly their well-informed embassies and intelligence operative provided a more accurate and systematic assessment of the Iranian voter preferences than the propaganda spun by the Western mass media and the useful idiots among the Anglo-American left.

The US-backed electoral and street opposition in Iran was designed to push to the limits a destabilization campaign, with the intention of rolling back Iranian influence in the Middle East, undermining Tehran’s opposition to US military intervention in the Gulf, its occupation of Iraq and , above all, Iran’s challenge to Israel’s projection of military power in the region. Anti-Iran propaganda and policy making has been heavily influenced for years on a daily basis by the entire pro-Israel power configuration in the US. This includes the 51 Presidents of the Major America Jewish Organizations with over a million members and several thousand full-time functionaries, scores of editorial writers and commentators dominating the opinion pages of the influential Washington Post, the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times as well as the yellow tabloid press.

Obama’s policy of roll back of Iranian influence counted on a two-step process: Supporting a coalition of clerical dissidents, pro-Western liberals, dissident democrats and right-wing surrogates of the US. Once in office, Washington would push the dissident clerics toward alliances with their strategic allies among pro-Western liberals and rightists, who would then shift policy in accordance with US imperial and Israeli colonial interests by cutting off support for Syria, Hezbollah, Hamas, Venezuela, the Iraqi resistance and embrace the pro-US Saudi-Iraqi--Jordan-Egypt clients. In other words, Obama’s roll back policy is designed to relocate Iran to the pre-1979 political alignment.

Obama’s roll back of critical elected regimes to impose pliant clients found further expression in the recent military coup in Honduras. The use of the high command in the Honduras military and Washington’s long-standing ties with the local oligarchy, who control the Congress and Supreme Court, facilitated the process and obviated the need for direct US intervention—as was the case in other recent coup efforts. Unlike Haiti where the US marines intervened to oust democratically elected Bertrand Aristide, only a decade ago, and openly backed the failed coup against President Chavez in 2002, and more recently, funded the botched coup against the

President-elect Evo Morales in September 2008, the circumstances of US involvement in Honduras were more discrete in order to allow for 'credible denial'.

The 'structural presence' and motives of the US with regard to ousted President Zelaya are readily identifiable. Historically the US has trained and socialized almost the entire Honduran officer corps and maintained deep penetration at all senior levels through daily consultation and common strategic planning. Through its military base in Honduras, the Pentagon's military intelligence operatives have intimate contacts to pursue policies as well as to keep track of all political moves by all political actors. Because Honduras is so heavily colonized, it has served as an important base for US military intervention in the region: In 1954 the successful US-backed coup against the democratically elected Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz was launched from Honduras. In 1961 the US-orchestrated Cuban exile invasion of Cuba was launched from Honduras. From 1981-1989, the US financed and trained over 20,000 'Contra' mercenaries in Honduras which comprised the army of death squads to attack the democratically elected Nicaraguan Sandinista government. During the first seven years of the Chavez government, Honduran regimes were staunchly allied with Washington against the populist Caracas regime.

Obviously no military coups ever occurred or could occur against any US puppet regime in Honduras. The key to the shift in US policy toward Honduras occurred in 2007-2008 when the Liberal President Zelaya decided to improve relations with Venezuela in order to secure generous petro-subsidies and foreign aid from Caracas. Subsequently Zelaya joined 'Petro-Caribe', a Venezuelan-organized Caribbean and Central American association to provide long-term, low-cost oil and gas to meet the energy needs of member countries. In more recent days, Zelaya joined ALBA, a regional integration organization sponsored by President Chavez to promote greater trade and investment among its member countries in opposition to the US-promoted regional free trade pact, known as ALCA.

Since Washington defined Venezuela as a threat and alternative to its hegemony in Latin America, Zelaya's alignment with Chavez on economic issues and his criticism of US intervention turned him into a likely target for US coup planners eager to make Zelaya an example and concerned about their access to Honduran military bases as their traditional launching point for intervention in the region.

Washington wrongly assumed that a coup in a small Central American 'banana republic' (indeed the original banana republic) would not provoke any major outcry. They believed that Central American 'roll-back' would serve as a warning to other independent-minded regimes in the Caribbean and Central American region of what awaits them if they align with Venezuela.

The mechanics of the coup are well-known and public: The Honduran military seized President Zelaya and 'exiled' him to Costa Rica; the oligarchs appointed one of their own in Congress as the interim 'President' while their colleagues in the Supreme Court provided bogus legality.

Latin American governments from the left to the right condemned the coup and called for the reinstatement of the legally-elected President. President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton, not willing to disown their clients, condemned unspecified 'violence' and called for 'negotiations'

between the powerful usurpers and the weakened exile President – a clear recognition of the legitimate role of the Honduran generals as interlocutors.

After the United Nations General Assembly condemned the coup and, along with the Organization of American States, demanded Zelaya's re-instatement, Obama and Secretary Clinton finally condemned the ousting of Zelaya but they refused to call it a 'coup', which according to US legislation would have automatically led to a complete suspension of their annual (\$80 million) military and economic aid package to Honduras. While Zelaya met with all the Latin American heads of state, President Obama and Secretary Clinton turned him over to a lesser functionary in order not to weaken their allies in Honduran Junta. All the countries in the OAS withdrew their Ambassadors...except the US, whose embassy began to negotiate with the Junta to see how they might salvage the situation in which both were increasingly isolated – especially in the face of Honduras' expulsion from the OAS.

Whether Zelaya eventually returns to office or whether the US-backed junta continues in office for an extended period of time, while Obama and Clinton sabotage his immediate return through prolonged negotiations, the key issue of the US-promoted 'roll-back' has been extremely costly diplomatically as well as politically.

The US backed coup in Honduras demonstrates that unlike the 1980's when President Ronald Reagan invaded Grenada and President George Bush (Papa) invaded Panama, the situation and political profile of Latin America (and the rest of the world) has changed drastically. Back then the military and pro-US regimes in the region generally approved of US interventions and collaborated; a few protested mildly. Today the center-left and even rightist electoral regimes oppose military coups anywhere as a potential threat to their own futures.

Equally important, given the grave economic crisis and increasing social polarization, the last thing the incumbent regimes want is bloody domestic unrest, stimulated by crude US imperial interventions. Finally, the capitalist classes in Latin America's center-left countries want stability because they can shift the balance of power via elections (as in the recent cases in Panama, Argentina) and pro-US military regimes can upset their growing trade ties with China, the Middle East and Venezuela/Bolivia.

Obama's global roll-back strategy includes building offensive missile bases in Poland and the Czech Republic, not far from the Russian border. Concomitantly Obama is pushing hard to incorporate Ukraine and Georgia in NATO, which will increase US military pressure on Russia's southern flank. Taking advantage of Russian President Dimitry Medvedev's 'malleability' (in the footsteps of Mikail Gorbechev) Washington has secured free passage of US troops and arms through Russia to the Afghan front, Moscow's approval for new sanction against Iran, and recognition and support for the US puppet regime in Baghdad. Russian defense officials will likely question Medvedev's obsequious behavior as Obama moves ahead with his plans to station nuclear missiles 5 minutes from Moscow.

Roll-Back: Predictable Failures and the Boomerang Effect

Obama's roll-back strategy is counting on a revival of right-wing mass politics to 'legitimize' the re-assertion of US dominance. In Argentina throughout 2008, hundreds of thousands of lower and upper-middle class demonstrators took to the streets in the interior of the country under the leadership of pro-US big landowners associations to destabilize the 'center-left' Fernandez regime. In Bolivia, hundreds of thousands of middle class students, business-people, landowners and NGO affiliates, centered in Santa Cruz and four other wealthy provinces and heavily funded by US Ambassador Goldberg, Agency for International Development and the National Endowment for Democracy took to the streets, wrecking havoc and murdering over 30 indigenous supporters of President Morales in an effort to oust him from power. Similar rightist mass demonstrations have taken place in Venezuela in the past and more recently in Honduras and Iran.

The notion that mass demonstrations of the well-to-do screaming 'democracy' gives legitimacy to US-backed destabilization efforts against its democratically-elected adversaries is an idea promulgated by cynical propagandists in the mass media and parroted by gullible 'progressive' free-lance journalists who have never understood the class basis of mass politics.

Obama's Honduran coup and the US-funded destabilization effort in Iran have much in common. Both take place against electoral processes in which critics of US policies defeated pro-Washington social forces. Having lost the 'electoral option' Obama's roll-back looks to extra-parliamentary 'mass politics' to legitimize elite effort to seize power: In Iran by dissident clerics and in Honduras by the generals and oligarchs.

In both Honduras and Iran, Washington's foreign policy goals were the same: To roll-back regimes whose leaders rejected US tutelage. In Honduras, the coup serves as a 'lesson' to intimidate other Central American and Caribbean countries who exit from the US camp and join Venezuelan-led economic integration programs. Obama's message is clear: such moves will result in US orchestrated sabotage and retaliation.

Through its backing of the military coup, Washington reminds all the countries of Latin America that the US still has the capability to implement its policies through the Latin American military elites, even as its own armed forces are tied down in wars and occupations in Asia and the Middle East and its economic presence is declining. Likewise in the Middle East, Obama's destabilization of the Iranian regime is meant to intimidate Syria and other critics of US imperial policy and reassure Israel (and the Zionist power configuration in the US) that Iran remains high on the US roll-back agenda.

Obama's roll-back policies in many crucial ways follow in the steps of President Ronald Reagan (1981-89). Like Reagan, Obama's presidency takes place in a time of US retreat, declining power and the advance of anti-imperialist politics. Reagan faced the aftermath of the US defeat in Indo-China, the successful spread of anti-colonial revolutions in Southern Africa (especially Angola and Mozambique), a successful democratic revolt in Afghanistan and a victorious social revolution in Nicaragua and major revolutionary movements in El Salvador and Guatemala. Like Obama today, Reagan set in motion a murderous military strategy of rolling-back these changes in order to undermine, destabilize and destroy the adversaries to US empire.

Obama faces a similar set of adversarial conditions in the current post-Bush period: - Democratic advances throughout Latin America with new regional integration projects excluding the US; defeats and stalemates in the Middle East and South Asia; a revived and strengthened Russia projecting power in the former Soviet republics; declining US influence over NATO military commitments, a loss of political, economic, military and diplomatic credibility as a result of the Wall Street-induced global economic depression and prolonged un-successful regional wars.

Contrary to Obama, Ronald Reagan's roll-back took place under favorable circumstances. In Afghanistan Reagan secured the support of the entire conservative Muslim world and operated through the key Afghan feudal-tribal leaders against a Soviet-backed, urban-based reformist regime in Kabul. Obama is in the reverse position in Afghanistan. His military occupation is opposed by the vast majority of Afghans and most of the Muslim population in Asia.

Reagan's roll-back in Central America, especially his Contra-mercenary invasion of Nicaragua, had the backing of Honduras and all the pro-US military dictatorships in Argentina, Chile, Bolivia and Brazil, as well as rightwing civilian government in the region. In contrast, Obama's roll-back coup in Honduras and beyond face democratic electoral regimes throughout the region, an alliance of left nationalist regimes led by Venezuela and regional economic and diplomatic organizations staunchly opposed to any return to US domination and intervention. Obama's roll-back strategy finds itself in total political isolation in the entire region.

Obama's roll-back policies cannot wield the economic 'Big Stick' to force regimes in the Middle East and Asia to support his policies. Now there are alternative Asian markets, Chinese foreign investments, the deepening US depression and the disinvestment of overseas US banks and multi-nationals. Unlike Reagan, Obama cannot combine economic carrots with the military stick. Obama has to rely on the less effective and costly military option at a time when the rest of the world has no interest or will in projecting military power in regions of little economic significance or where they can attain market access via economic agreements.

Obama's launch of the global roll-back strategy has boomeranged, even in its initial stage. In Afghanistan, the big troop build-up and the massive offensive into 'Taliban' strongholds has not led to any major military victories or even confrontations. The resistance has retired, blended in with the local population and will likely resort to prolonged decentralized, small-scale war of attrition designed to tie down several thousand troops in a sea of hostile Afghans, bleeding the US economy, increasing casualties, resolving nothing and eventually trying the patience of the US public now deeply immersed in job losses and rapidly declining living standards.

The coup, carried out by the US-backed Honduran military, has already re-affirmed US political and diplomatic isolation in the Hemisphere. The Obama regime is the only major country to retain an Ambassador in Honduras, the only country which refuses to regard the military take-over as a 'coup', and the only country to continue economic and military aid. Rather than establish an example of the US' power to intimidate neighboring countries, the coup has strengthened the belief among all South and Central American countries that Washington is attempting to return to the 'bad old days' of pro-US military regimes, economic pillage and monopolized markets.

What Obama's foreign policy advisers have failed to understand is that they can't put their 'Humpty Dumpty' together again; they cannot return to the days of Reagan's roll-back, Clinton's unilateral bombing of Iraq, Yugoslavia and Somalia and his pillage of Latin America.

No major region, alliance or country will follow the US in its armed colonial occupation in peripheral (Afghanistan/Pakistan) or even central (Iran) countries, even as they join the US in economic sanctions, propaganda wars and electoral destabilization efforts against Iran.

No Latin American country will tolerate another US military putsch against a democratically elected president, even national populist regimes which diverge from US economic and diplomatic policies. The great fear and loathing of the US-backed coup stems from the entire Latin American political class' memory of the nightmare years of US backed military dictatorships.

Obama's military offensive, his roll-back strategy to recover imperial power is accelerating the decline of the American Republic. His administration's isolation is increasingly evidenced by his dependence on Israel-Firsters who occupy his Administration and the Congress as well as influential pro-Israel pundits in the mass media who identify roll-back with Israel's own seizure of Palestinian land and military threats to Iran.

Roll-back has boomeranged: Instead of regaining the imperial presence, Obama has submerged the republic and, with it, the American people into greater misery and instability.