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The First Post

Obama faces mutiny, led by Clinton and Biden



The new President has squandered his one chance to bring real change to foreign policy making the US's strategy just as hawkish as it was under Bush

BY ALEXANDER COCKBURN

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Write them off as impromptu indiscretions, or as off-the-cuff remarks not to be taken as formal expressions of policy, but diplomatic time-bombs tossed casually in the past month by his Vice President and his Secretary of State are exposing President Barack Obama to something dangerously close to ridicule on the international stage.

At best Obama is presiding over an undisciplined cabinet; at worst, he is facing mutiny, publicly conducted by two people who only a year ago were claiming that their qualifications to be in the Oval Office were far superior to those of the junior senator from Illinois.

Take Joe Biden. Three weeks ago the VP gave Israel the green light to bomb Iran, only to be swiftly corrected by his boss. At the time it seemed yet another somewhat comical mile marker in a lifetime of gaffes, usually perpetrated in the cause of self-promotion.

But Biden's subsequent activities allow a darker construction. In the immediate aftermath of Obama's Moscow visit, the air still fragrant with cosy speeches about a new era of trust and cooperation, Biden headed for Ukraine and Georgia, publicly ridiculing Russia as an economic basket case with no future.

In Tbilisi he told the Georgian parliament that the US would continue helping Georgia "to modernise" its military and that Washington "fully supports" Georgia's aspiration to join Nato and will help Tbilisi to meet the alliance's standards. This elicited a furious reaction from Moscow, pledging sanctions against any power rearming Georgia.

There's no sense of efficient new strategy - it's seamless continuity with folly

Georgia could play a vital role in the event that Israel decides to attack Iran's nuclear complex. The flight path from Israel to Iran is diplomatically and geographically challenging - and Georgia is perfectly situated as the take-off point for any such raid.

Israel has been heavily involved in supplying and training Georgia's armed forces. President Saakashvili has boasted that his Defence Minister, Davit Kezerashvili, and also Temur Yakobashvili, the minister responsible for negotiations over South Ossetia, both lived in Israel before moving to Georgia, adding: "Both war and peace are in the hands of Israeli Jews."

On the heels of Biden's shameless pandering in Tbilisi, Secretary of State Clinton took herself off to Thailand for an international confab with Asian leaders and let drop on a TV chat show that "a nuclear Iran could be contained by a US 'defence umbrella'" - actually a nuclear defence umbrella for Israel and for Egypt and Saudi Arabia too.

The Israel lobby has been promoting the idea of a US "nuclear umbrella" for some years now, with one of its leading exponents being Dennis Ross, now in charge of Middle Eastern policy on Obama's National Security Council. In her campaign last year, Clinton flourished the notion as an example of the sort of policy initiative that set her apart from that novice in foreign affairs, Barack Obama.

From any rational point of view, the "nuclear umbrella" is an awful idea, redolent with all the gimcrack theology of the high Cold War era, about "first strike", "second strike", "stable deterrence", "controlled escalation" and "mutual assured destruction", used to sell US escalations in nuclear arms production, from Kennedy and the late Robert McNamara ("the Missile Gap") to Reagan ("Star Wars").

Indeed, as one Pentagon veteran remarked to me earlier this week: "The Administration's whole nuclear stance is turning into a cheesy rerun of the Cold War and Mutually Assured Destruction, all based on a horrible exaggeration of one or two Iranian nuclear bombs that the Persians may be too incompetent to build and most certainly are too incompetent to deliver."

The impression is of an incoherent US foreign policy being deliberately kicked in a dangerous direction by two foreign policy hawks with a history of slavish deference to Israel.

The fault is Obama's. The window for a new president to force a decisive change in foreign policy comes in the first three months, before opposition has time to solidify. Obama squandered that opportunity, stocking his foreign policy team with tarnished players such as

Ross. There were promising gestures such as the appointment of Senator George Mitchell as peace envoy to Israel, and even admonitions to Israel to quit setting up illegal settlements. But as the calculated indiscretions of Biden and Clinton suggest, not to mention the arrogance of Netanyahu and his political associates, the window of opportunity has closed.

Obama has done some good things such as promising to veto further production of the hugely expensive and useless F-22. But there's no sense of a methodical new strategy. Overall, it's seamless continuity with folly.

Would it have been that hard to signal a change in course? Not really. Obama could have excited the world by renouncing the Bush administration's assertion, in the 'National Defense Strategy of the United States' in 2005, of the right and intention of the United States to pre-emptively attack any country "at the time, place, and in the manner of our choosing".

As William Polk, the State Department's Middle East advisor in the Kennedy era, wrote last year: "As long as this remains a valid statement of American policy, the Iranian government would be foolish not to seek a nuclear weapon."

Obama, surrounded by Clinton-era veterans of Nato expansionism and, as his recent Accra speech indicated, with an impeccably conventional view of how the world works, is rapidly being overwhelmed by the press of events. He's bailed out the banks. He's transferred war from Iraq to Afghanistan. The big lobbies think they have him on the run.

Whatever they may claim right now, both Biden and Clinton would love to run against Obama in 2012, calculating that by then hopes of Obamian "change" will have been destroyed and Obama mired in Afghanistan with his international credibility destroyed by Israeli intransigence and very possibly a unilateral attack on Iran. That's the impetus for the Biden-Clinton disloyalty.

Remember a useful guiding principle: there is no such thing as foreign policy, neither in democratic governments nor in dictatorships. All policy is domestic policy.