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## Obama Wields Hagel Cudgel on Two Fronts

Tim Ferguson January 29, 2013

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Confirmation hearings begin this week in the U.S. Senate for Defense Secretary-designate Chuck Hagel. Asia (home of the incipient “Pivot”) and other important regions of the globe will be listening for specific references to their military situations, and it is to be hoped that familiar Middle East rubs do not occupy a disproportionate share of the discussion time. North Africa clearly has become a trouble spot of its own, though with obvious connections to the Mideast, and this too will occupy the talking heads. But the Hagel nomination is more “meta” in its implications than any particular conflict.

This choice symbolizes an attitudinal challenge to war as a normal function of statecraft. With the exception of Jimmy Carter, no American president in modern times has had a more routine aversion to organized hostilities than Barack Obama. This can be true despite all the counterinsurgency steps, including the drone attacks and use of special forces, over the last four years. Obama’s expressions, most recently his brief disavowal of war in his second Inaugural, make this clear. Again, putting aside the Carter interval (a period of dovishness that was interrupted by the politically paralyzing Russian invasion of Afghanistan), today’s is the ripest liberal prospect for trumping the military-industrial complex since the imagined second term of John F. Kennedy. (This would have been the period, according to many of JFK’s acolytes, when his personal progressive instincts overcame the Cold War framework of his times.)

So to help accomplish this transformation, Obama has chosen a combat veteran and former Nebraska senator, a nominal Republican but one with few institutional loyalties and barely more friends in politics, to head the Pentagon. It promises to be unpleasant business, this dismantling of many cherished assumptions about the U.S. force structure and its international reach, and Obama wants a battle-scarred and uncuddly sort to conduct it. Lobbying will be just as fierce after a confirmation as now. There are risks, given Hagel’s “temperament” issues, but the president will take them.

At the hearings, the most likely tussles will come over administration policies on Libya (“leading from behind”), Syria and Mali (“disengaged”) and Iran (“naive”). Past strategy skirmishes over Iraq and Afghanistan will be revisited, along with whether Hagel inappropriately tagged those supporting the current policies of the Israeli government a “Jewish lobby.” But again, the grander questions of state power (or as some would call it, of empire) deserve attention, for they will shape the template for all future decisions. This contrary push will help shape the Obama legacy.

Plus, the nomination serves to advance a second Obama front in his second term, related somewhat to this assault on the post-World War II military posture: He is seeking to render the American Right impotent as a force for resisting his overall agenda. Obama has spotted a fissure in those ranks, between the so-called neoconservative or hawkish ranks and the constitutionalist/Old Right/libertarian resistance to projecting American force. This split, nearly a century old, has been cracking back open for at least a decade (the post-Sept 11 consensus masked it for a bit, as did the earlier anti-Sovietism) but now promises to come to the fore again with Hagel. Go to the Cato Institute site and you see nearly uniform support for his nomination. Read the Wall Street Journal editorial page or listen to the Fox News Channel and it is the opposite.

In ordinary times, the Old Right would be decidedly handicapped in a GOP intramural. The War Party holds strong. However, when you add concern about the massive indebtedness of Washington to the equation, a restrained military ambition gains support. Even if this is the dreaded Obama's preferred way to "cut the deficit," it may be preferable in the eyes of some fiscal conservatives to no spending cuts at all. (Note that the Journal edit page itself has come around to supporting the infamous sequester, which hits the Pentagon for half the mandated cuts, in the ongoing Washington budget standoff—although this is presumably meant as a bargaining ploy.) And as Chuck Hagel will need 60 votes for confirmation in a body split 55-45, peeling off enough Republicans may become vital.

The Obama second term is going to force a lot of issues, by the sounds of the partisans. America's military mission is an early and interesting one, and lightning rod Hagel is the chosen cudgel.