

Obama Turns Failure into Success in the Middle East

By Leon Hadar

At a time when every official is packaging lousy policies as appealing “narratives,” it might be appropriate to recall an old master of this game, former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who knew how to use a good line to turn a strategic loss into a diplomatic success story.

Hence, after years of trying to isolate China’s communists while maintaining the fiction that Taiwan represented China, Kissinger recognized the huge costs involved in pursuing that policy and initiated a dialogue with Beijing. The policy of befriending Mao, a bloody tyrant and of divorcing Taiwan, a long-time friend came to be known as the “Opening to China” --recalling Marco Polo’s exotic expeditions.

In that sense, President Barack Obama’s response to the upheaval in the Middle East seems to be very Kissingerian, as he tries to integrate a series of U.S. strategic defeats into an attractive narrative of “change.”

The downfall of the pro-American autocrats in Tunisia and Egypt and the growing threat to regimes that are either allied with Washington (Bahrain) or doing business with it (Yemen), cannot be described as anything other than a devastating blow to U.S. strategic interests.

Coupled with the costly military intervention in Iraq, the inconclusive war in Afghanistan, the deadlocked Israeli-Palestinian peace process, Iran’s nuclear military program, and the diverging U.S. and Turkish interests – it becomes obvious that the age of U.S. hegemony in the Middle East is over.

And there is not much that the U.S. can do to reverse this process, Not unlike Winston Churchill who insisted that Britain could retain its empire after 1945, some Americans (and Israelis) fantasize that the U.S. can continue calling the shots in the Middle East by holding the hands of Hosni Mubarak, by establishing a No-Fly Zone in Libya, or by taking a tougher line against Iran. But with a military overstretched in Iraq and Afghanistan and with a budget deficit rising to the stratosphere, there is no support in Washington for opening a new military front in the region.

Indeed, while a recent Washington Post polls suggested that 64 percent of Americans believe that the war in Afghanistan is not worth fighting, a Gallup poll indicated that 50 percent of the public supports the notion that the U.S. “should mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along the best they can on their own.”

And without the U.S. willing to deploy its troops in new military interventions, waltzing with Hosni or threatening to shoot down Kaddafi’s planes or imposing more sanctions on Ahmenajid will only create expectations for renewed U.S. leadership that

are not going to be fulfilled. In fact, the U.S. support for imposing a no-fly zone in Libya is based on the assumption that France and Britain are going to take up the leading military role in the operation with the Americans providing some limited tactical support in enforcing the zone and is “not going to deploy ground troops into Libya,” as Obama stressed over the weekend.

Obama not only recognizes that the U.S. is constrained in its ability to determine outcomes in the Middle East. He also understands that the continuing U.S. preoccupation with that region doesn't allow Washington to invest the required time and resources in maintaining its position in East Asia where core U.S. are at stake.

So Obama's Washington is engaged in a cost-cutting exercise in the Middle East under which it is adjusting to the political changes – or riding the ‘wave of change’ -- by accepting the inevitable (Egypt), trying to mold it (Bahrain) or treating it with some benign neglect (Libya) -- and by pressing the Europeans to assume more responsibilities in the region.

This Realpolitik approach is being marketed as an American-induced campaign for political and economic reform with Obama and Facebook being hailed as the agents of change, despite the fact that the expectation in Washington is that even under the best-case-scenario, the new regimes will be hostile to the U.S. -- and to Israel.

And, indeed, riding the “wave of change” in the Middle East may require a change in U.S. policy towards Israel not unlike the readjustment in American policy towards China under Kissinger that led to the breaking-up of diplomatic relationship with Taiwan, a U.S. ally that for years had enjoyed the backing of a powerful “China Lobby” in Washington.

The zero-sum nature of the conflict between the two governments claiming to represent China meant that when Washington recognized China it had to ditch Taiwan. But when it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the two-state solution allows the Americans to ride the Mideast wave while continuing to support peace and security for the Israelis and the Palestinians. And U.S. commitment to a democratic Jewish State should prove to be more enduring than the alliance with Taiwan.

Hence, riding the sturdy surfboard of the two-state solution on the crest of the current wave in the Middle East will prevent Israel from going under the water and help carry it towards a diplomatic shore where Israeli-American ties remain secure. END

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