

November 3, 2010



This is the print preview: [Back to normal view »](#)

Stanley Kober

Posted: November 3, 2010 03:35 PM

Netanyahu and Obama

With negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian authority stalled, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has asked President Barack Obama to reiterate assurances President George W. Bush gave to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in 2004. At that time, President Bush put U.S. prestige and power behind several Israeli negotiating positions, for example, that a final agreement would not involve the return of Palestinian refugees to Israel and that Israel would not be obliged to return to the armistice lines of 1949.

President Obama should not accede to this request, since any such assurances would be based on false assumptions.

First, this kind of presidential statement misconstrues the power of the presidency. Although we have become accustomed to presidential control of foreign policy, the Founders had a more constrained view of executive authority. Alexander Hamilton noted in Federalist No. 75 that "the history of human conduct" shows us that it is unwise for "a nation to commit interests of so delicate and momentous a kind" as "its intercourse with the rest of the world to the sole disposal" of the President of the United States.[2]

Hamilton was writing about the treaty power, but the reasoning of his argument applies, since the assurances President Bush gave are extensive. For example, having set out his vision of the road map, President Bush promised that "the United States will do its utmost to prevent any attempt by anyone to impose any other plan."

As Netanyahu evidently realizes, a presidential letter cannot bind a succeeding president, which is another way of saying it cannot bind the United States. That is why Netanyahu wants President Obama to renew the assurances. But what is the value of the commitment if it must be renewed with every new U.S. administration?

A commitment by the United States, if it is to be meaningful, must involve more than letters between leaders. We should not encourage illusions otherwise.

Secondly, our strategic posture has changed in the past decades, and our relative decline raises questions about the value of any assurances we give.

During the 1990s, the United States dominated world events. Even in 2004, its position seemed unchallengeable: Afghanistan was still quiet, and the insurgency in Iraq was only emerging.

Now the situation has changed completely. We are leaving Iraq to a government that, on present indications, will include the party of Moqtada al-Sadr, one of our foremost enemies. In Afghanistan, war rages, increasingly engulfing neighboring Pakistan. And our economy is gripped by a crisis unlike any we have experienced for decades.

Yet the foreign policy community in Washington seems unaffected. The Obama Administration talks about the importance of our alliances even as our allies cut their defense spending to deal with their own economic difficulties.

The response is we must do more with less, which helps explain why we are in such a difficult predicament. Over time, it is impossible to do more with less. Reality catches up with you. If you have less, you must do less. It is as true for foreign policy as it is for the family budget.

Given this simple but unavoidable fact, the enervating inertia that has taken over Washington cannot continue. Arguably, American involvement in facilitating peace negotiations between Israel and its neighbors had an impact in the 1970s, when Henry Kissinger shuttled between Israel and Syria and President Jimmy Carter convened the successful Camp David meeting.

Since then, however, the record has been disappointing. Madrid, Oslo, Camp David, Taba, and President Bush's road map have not resolved the fundamental differences between Israelis and Palestinians.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the parties to the conflict now devote more time and effort to influencing Washington than in negotiating with each other. Instead of attempting to overcome their differences, the focus has shifted to trying to convince American officials to put pressure on one of the parties to make concessions. One hears the common refrain that if the president would only do [fill in your favorite prescription], the conflict would be solved.

But the president does not possess a magic wand. The United States cannot do for the parties what they are unwilling to do for themselves. We should not mislead people into thinking that we can.

If President Obama renewed the Bush assurances, could the United States make good on them? Those who would provide those assurances have an obligation to show how the United States would fulfill them.

Responsible superpowers do not make promises they cannot keep.