

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Egypt and American Hubris

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American foreign policy is a wreck. The presumption that Washington controls events around the globe has been exposed to all as an embarrassing illusion.

Egypt teeters on the brink, again. Syria worsens by the day. Israeli-Palestinian negotiations are dead, with another intifada in the wind. North Korea threatens to nuke the world. Violence grows in Nigeria. The Europeans have gone from disillusioned to angry with President Barack Obama. Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador and Venezuela reject U.S. leadership in Latin America. Even Iranian reformers support Iran's nuclear program. Zimbabwe's vicious Robert Mugabe is likely to retain power in upcoming elections. Iraq is friendly with Iran and supporting Bashar al-Assad. The Afghan government remains corrupt, incompetent, and without legitimacy. Bahrain cracks down on democracy supporters with Washington's acquiescence. China and Russia resist U.S. priorities in Syria and elsewhere. Venezuela without Chavez looks like Venezuela with Chavez.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. America was the unipower, the hyperpower, the sole superpower, the essential nation. Washington was the benevolent hegemon. Only members of the axis of evil had something to fear from the United States. All the U.S. government had to do was exercise "leadership" and all would be well.

Oops.

That U.S. pride swelled with the end of the Cold War is hardly a surprise. But what unfortunately emerged was a rabid arrogance, the view that "what we say goes." It was the very hubris about which the ancient Greeks warned.

Washington policymakers looked around the world and saw unformed lumps of clay, ready to mold into America's image. And the U.S. government knew better than everyone else how the rest of the world should be organized and run. American leaders simply saw further, explained Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who understood, even if Islamic activists did not, that the mass death of Iraqi babies due to economic sanctions "was worth it." So it was when it came to achieving Washington's other foreign-policy objectives as well.

Indeed, the United States was entitled to intervene at will, coercing, bombing, invading and occupying other nations for whatever reason Washington saw fit. American officials could order about ally and adversary alike, in full expectation that its dictates would be followed. Filled with

rightness and possessed of power, the United States could expect to suffer no consequence from its actions.

Alas, this all proved to be a world of illusion, filled with smoke and mirrors. On 9/11 a score of angry young Muslims brought war to America, destroying the World Trade Center and damaging the Pentagon. A bunch of ill-equipped and ignorant Afghan fundamentalists refused to admit that they were defeated, and more than a decade later still resist the United States backed by a multitude of allies and a covey of local elites. The invasion of Iraq was met by IEDs instead of flowers, and created an ally in name only, with Baghdad ready to thwart U.S. military objectives when it saw fit.

Israeli governments, sure in their political backing from America, saw no reason to implement any of the endless peace plans, surrounded by blissful rhetoric, emanating from Washington. The United States talked democracy while supporting autocracy in Central Asia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere.

U.S. officials insisted on elections in the Palestinian territories, only to be shocked when Palestinians voted for candidates other than those endorsed by Washington.

American pleading, threats, promises and sanctions had no effect on the course of events in North Korea. Civil and military conflicts ebbed and flowed and political contests waxed and waned in Congo, Sudan, Kenya, Nigeria and Zimbabwe with Washington but an ineffective bystander. Russia's Vladimir Putin ignored U.S. priorities both before and after the fabled "reset" in relations. China protected North Korea and bullied its other neighbors, despite diplomatic pleadings and military pivots.

Then came the Arab Spring. The United States sought to buttress and then defenestrate Egypt's Hosni Mubarak. Washington tagged Syria's Bashar al-Assad as a reformer before deciding he was an oppressor. U.S. officials politely suggested that Bahrain's dictatorial Sunni monarchy be nicer to the Shia majority before shutting up, lest further criticism interfere with operations at America's premier Persian Gulf naval base in Manama. Reform in totalitarian Saudi Arabia went unmentioned. Increasingly unfriendly U.S. ally Turkey has been unsettled by a population divided in half by the government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Yet true believers insist that all of these failures resulted because the U.S. government did too little. Promiscuous intervention failed because it was too restrained. Constant political meddling, endless economic impositions and frequent military forays were not enough. Washington had not attempted to micromanage every conflict in every nation.

So as Syria daily descends further into civil war, an interventionist Greek Chorus is pressing Washington to act. Those determined to involve America in yet another war of choice in the Muslim world say only U.S. military action can save the situation. Indeed, they blame the present crisis on the United States. If only the administration had intervened earlier, it could have forced out al-Assad, imposed a secular democratic regime, fatally weakened Iran's Islamic regime, encouraged the march of democracy and caused flowers to bloom across Arabian deserts.

Left unmentioned is Washington's actual experience in similar endeavors: America's great success in resolving civil wars in Lebanon and Somalia. Turning war into a cakewalk in Iraq. Establishing Western liberal democracy in Afghanistan. Ensuring a peaceful and stable Middle East through more than three decades of military involvement.

No matter. Now Egypt has experienced a coup. And the usual suspects argue that the administration is at fault. It should have saved Mubarak. It should have supported Mohamed Morsi's opponent in the presidential election. It should have forced President Morsi to share power. It should have told the Egyptian military to do something. Or not to do something.

Left unmentioned is the lack of any evidence that the U.S. had any influence over events in Egypt. Washington subsidized, backed, endorsed and embraced Mubarak for three decades. If that was not enough to save him, then what more could have been done? The problem was incompetent, corrupt, unsavory dictatorship. In the end, the Egyptian people had enough and, absent U.S. military intervention on behalf of the vicious autocrat—thankfully unthinkable—Washington could not have saved him. Just like the equally vile Shah of Iran who fell under similar circumstances in 1979.

As for succeeding events, where is the evidence that Morsi, Egypt's generals and the Egyptian people sat around awaiting the opinion of U.S. policymakers? Washington's support for the odious Mubarak left it with little credibility. Maybe the generals can be bought with the promise of more military aid, but even they know that the U.S. cannot protect them if their soldiers refuse their orders. Morsi's fate was decided in Cairo, not Washington.

Americans understandably pine for a simpler world in which Washington is the center of the world and the U.S. orchestrates international events. Alas, that world never really existed. It certainly does not exist today.

Instead of embracing the illusion of Washington's omniscience, Washington officials should acknowledge the limitations on their power and influence. They should reflect on events spinning out of control in Egypt. It's time for the more "humble" foreign policy that candidate George W. Bush promised in what seems to be a lifetime ago.

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