

**OBAMA'S DILEMMA -
DOING GOOD IN A COMPLEX
WORLD**

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Obama's Dilemma: Doing Good in a Complex World



President Obama has seen his vision of a new global dialogue been threatened by at least three separate, yet intimately connected events:

North Korean missile tests, and subsequent escalation of regional tension;
The Iranian elections, with the added concerns surrounding Iran's fast-developing nuclear capability, and
Israeli Premier Benjamin Netanyahu's 'Peace Speech', which was widely denounced as significantly reducing the possibility of meaningful Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations.

This paper looks at the pattern of political and strategic forces that are revealed in these situations, and suggests that they indicate that Obama will very soon be under pressure to adapt his visionary rhetoric in order to accommodate the needs of the real-politick of the modern world.

‘Events, dear chap, events’.

‘British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan’s reply, when asked what was the hardest thing about politics’

Historical Precedents

President Barack Obama’s inauguration in January this year signalled not only a new set of US policies and guidelines, but rather a new vision of what political leadership, and American political leadership in particular, could deliver to the world.

Not since President Kennedy forty-eight years previously had the arrival of a new President in the White House been accompanied by such a popular wave of support, not only in America but across the globe.

However, just as Kennedy’s Presidency was soon engulfed by the Cuban Missile Crisis, Bay of Pigs, and the fast developing turmoil in Vietnam, so President Obama has found that in the space of two weeks he has gone from being the personal embodiment of a new political era to a man who is surrounded by situations that he is not only not in control of, but has seemingly limited ability to influence.

Whilst it is clear that many of the situations that Obama is facing are changing on a daily, if not hourly basis, there is already a pattern of political and strategic forces emerging that suggests that Obama will very quickly have to learn to find a workable balance between the idealistic vision of his inauguration speech, and the real-politick that is demanded from working within a extremely complex and inter-connected matrix of regional and global players, who not only do not share Obama’s visions and values, but who have a completely different understanding of the aims and objectives of political brinkmanship.

The last two weeks have seen Obama caught up in a maelstrom of events that have left him vulnerable to two of the worst charges in American politics, that of being naïve and being weak. The last American President who was elected on a platform of idealism and global dialogue was Jimmy Carter (1977-81), and his vision and political reputation were also destroyed by Iranian radicals, as America was made to look weak and powerless by student revolutionaries who took over the US embassy in Teheran and held 52 embassy personnel hostage for 444 days. Many of those student leaders now hold senior positions of power and responsibility in the present Iranian regime, whilst Jimmy Carter was the first US President since 1932 to lose in a re-election bid (in 1981, to Ronald Reagan).

American right-wing politicians have always been ready to attack any President that they perceive of as weak, especially if their weakness is reflected in the ability of America to project itself as a world leader (*the* world leader). Obama is clearly open to a potential charge of inexperience and foolish thinking, and he may find himself in a position where he will be forced to be seen as taking decisive action, even when the situation itself may suggest that it would be more prudent to stand back and allow events to proceed to a more stable status where next-stage negotiations could then be explored.



A Different Ball Game: North Korea and Iran

Having only recently removed North Korea from its list of terrorist nations (October 2008), a move that was specifically linked with the acceptance by North Korea of international monitoring and verification of its nuclear programmes, its recent missile test together with its willingness to escalate regional tension and instability clearly shows that not only does North Korea not wish to play by US rules, but that it is prepared to raise the stakes so high – announcing that any act of aggression by US or other forces would be responded to as an act of war - that North Korea may now be seen by US authorities as the realisation of their greatest nightmare: a rogue nuclear state that is not prepared to play by what has been accepted as the international rules of nuclear power for the last sixty years. As well as putting regional alliances under pressure – China, Japan and South Korea all have significant concerns that are not necessarily reflected in US policy – the US in particular will need to balance the needs of the 6-party talks partners with its own domestic political, public and media pressure.

Whilst Iran does not yet have nuclear weapons capability, it is widely accepted that by the end of this year Iran will have developed its technology and facilities to such a stage that it will no longer be possible to prevent it from achieving full-weapon status. It is within this environment that the US will have to deliver a response to the Iranian Presidential elections, and the fact that the declared winner, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, is widely believed to have fixed the results. At this early stage, the US is being extremely careful not to make any statement that could be seen as attempting to influence the outcome of this stand-off between Ahmadinejad and the main opposition candidate Mir Hossein Musavi. However, unless there is a significant move within Iran itself, involving the intervention of the Guardian Council, and specifically supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei, who until now has been a solid supporter of Ahmadinejad, the US will either have to recognise the legitimacy of an Ahmadinejad victory, which will lessen its own legitimacy as the supporter of freedom and democracy, or will have to back Musavi, which could easily lead to public disorder and a sharp military-based reprisal from the Iranian government, leading to large scale confrontations and possible street massacres.

Although Obama has clearly indicated that he understands the need to avoid short-term political squabbles disproportionately affecting long-term strategic objectives, any move by him that could be seen as supporting an anti-US, nuclear weapons-bearing regime in Teheran would lead to real problems both in the US and with regional strategic partners.

Israel: A Necessary Partner?

Into this already extremely complex mix must now be added the recent 'Peace Speech' made by Israeli Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu. One of the headline features of the new Obama regime has been its desire to be actively involved in the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, together with its extremely public warnings to the Israeli government that its actions in the Gaza Strip and West Bank are unacceptable, and the US belief that Israeli policies, particularly but not solely concerning continued settlement activity within the West Bank, are themselves the major obstacles to a meaningful peace negotiation process.

Netanyahu's speech was designed specifically to regain the initiative, and to position himself as the regional leader who was offering real opportunities to continue the peace dialogue. However, it became clear even during the speech itself that Netanyahu was using terms and phrases that would be completely unacceptable to his Palestinian negotiating partners, and the wide-spread response immediately following the speech was that it in itself made the possibility of meaningful dialogue even more distant, and had even worked to increase the support for the radical Hamas party, having clearly shown that the moderate and pro-Peace Process stance of the Fatah faction was simply being used by Israel in order to put off having to make real concessions.

However, rather than being in a position to give a clear message that Israel's intransigence is simply unacceptable, Obama now finds himself in a new dilemma, one that did not exist ten days ago. Israel has consistently warned successive American administrations that Iran is not a trustworthy negotiating partner, and that a nuclear-capable Iran is a risk that the western world simply cannot allow to happen. Obama's rhetoric has been that in fact, with good will, US and Iran would be able to develop a working relationship that would allow them to find mutually acceptable solutions that would lead to greater stability and a growing trust between two major regional powers.

Israel is now in a position where it can simply state that it is the country that has a much greater understanding of the threat that Iran and other regional forces provide (eg Hezbollah, Hamas and other similar Iranian-backed organisations), and that the US would be forcing Israel to enter into an existential danger if it was pressured into giving up national security in order to achieve peace.

The second issue that the US will be acutely aware of is that if there is not a solution to the Iranian nuclear development problem by the end of the year, the possibility of a military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities will be that much higher, which in turn means that US will be dependent on Israeli intelligence and know-how, and quite possibly Israeli air-force resources that would make the actual strike. It is for this reason that US strategists are now aware that Israel is a regional ally that it cannot afford to upset as much as it might have done two weeks ago.



'A Week is a Long Time in Politics'

Obama's critics in the US have already become powerful enough to have significantly reduced his ability to pass badly-needed domestic economic legislation that he has given his personal backing to, and the above situations will only give them more ammunition to make the point that the world does not operate as smoothly as he has described, nor does it respond to his rhetorical displays. However, great leaders are defined by great challenges, and it is possible that Obama will emerge from this period as a truly great leader, one who is able to transcend local pre-occupations in order to construct a genuine new framework for global dialogue and regional conflict resolution. On the other hand, President Obama would not be the first person to see his dream turning to nightmares as he becomes a victim to circumstances beyond his control, but if the public perception of him becomes one of being weak and out of his depth, it will be extremely difficult for him to turn that around.





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