

U.S. MIDDLE EASTERN POLICY: NEW APPROACHES AND OLD PROBLEMS

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Introduction

In the last decade, when operating outside its borders, the United States has mainly been opposing the geopolitical challenges President Obama inherited from his predecessor; this is primarily true of the Middle East.

From the very beginning, the president-elect outlined America's political priorities in this volatile region of the world. He shifted the accents from ending the war in Iraq to Afghanistan where he promised to increase his country's military contingent, strengthen the law-enforcement and administrative structures and involve Pakistan in the anti-Taliban struggle.

The Iranian nuclear file was treated as another serious threat to U.S. security.

The interconnected threats called for adequate measures; as a first step, President Obama appointed Richard Holbrooke his Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan; George Mitchell, Special Envoy for the Middle East, and Dennis Ross, advisor on Iran.

This and considerable funding of military and other spheres did nothing to make Washington's Middle Eastern policy more consistent; so far it remains ambiguous in the Iranian vector as well.

During 2009, for example, Washington twice changed its mind about the numerical strength of its military contingent in Afghanistan; an announcement about its increase was followed by a decision to pull out in 2011.

This shows that the incumbent president is trying to resolve this strategically important problem before the end of his presidential term. The Administration still has no idea about how to achieve “correct” relations with Islamabad, even though the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan calls for interrelated policies to be pursued on both sides of their common border.

In 2009-2010, the situation in Iraq stabilized to the extent that in the last days of George W. Bush’s presidency, his Administration announced that a gradual troop withdrawal was not far away.

The events of 2009 and the first half of 2010, however, showed that security in Iraq is fragile to say the least and, without an acceptable domestic political balance, it will continue deteriorating until the day of America’s final pull-out (some time in 2011) arrives.

American diplomacy has failed to make any perceptible progress on the Iranian nuclear issue; the crisis will escalate, which will probably force President Obama to make consequential political decisions.

Washington’s efforts to settle the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and, in particular, to hold talks with Israel about the Jewish settlements fell

through together with the illusions about America’s ability to succeed.

So far, Barack Obama’s Cairo Speech can be described as the only triumph of America’s Middle Eastern policy. Speaking at Cairo University, the president said in particular: “I have unequivocally prohibited the use of torture by the United States, and I have ordered the prison at Guantanamo Bay closed by early next year.” And further: “I’ve come here to Cairo to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world;” he assured the audience that his Administration had dropped the term “war on terror” coined by the previous administration.

This did nothing to improve America’s image around the world; sociological polls in pro-American countries (Egypt, Jordan, Pakistan, and Turkey) revealed that the approval rate had dropped below 30 percent.

It should be said in all justice that new approaches to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran remained pending not only because the problems inherited from the previous administration defied resolution, but also because the world financial and economic crisis complicated the situation at home.

From Iraq to Afghanistan

From his first days in the White House, President Obama has been very open about the two wars started by the previous administration and paid for by the American taxpayers (nearly \$1 trillion in the last two years). The counterterrorist operation in Afghanistan was triggered by 9/11, while invasion of Iraq (sanctioned by President George W. Bush) was a “war by choice.”

Barack Obama is convinced that both wars did nothing to improve the image of his country in the Muslim world; so far, the threats of al-Qa’eda and the Taliban remain unproved. The steadily increasing amount of financial and other resources poured into the Iraqi campaign undermined the counterterrorist operation in Afghanistan.

President Obama confirmed his election promises to shift the efforts from Iraq to Afghanistan.

In 2009, a new settlement strategy for Afghanistan appeared; it was expected that by late 2010 the contingent would double to reach 100 thousand troops. This made the Afghan war the new American president’s personal responsibility.

The eight years of the Enduring Freedom Operation and eviction of the Taliban did not add stability to the situation: the insurgents moved in to control a large part of the territory in the south and the east.

It took a lot of time to build up the local security forces, which explains the coalition's casualties. In 2009, it lost 519 soldiers, 316 of them being American, the highest figure since the beginning of the war (or nearly one-third of the coalition's total losses since 2001). This situation looks very much like what was going on in Iraq in 2006-2007.

Unlike Iraq, Afghanistan has no ethnic or confessional dividing lines; the Taliban-led insurgents armed with a blend of Pashtoon nationalism and militant Islamism oppose the foreign military presence and the pro-American government. The country has no strong state structures; it is living amid a permanent civil war (which has been going on for nearly thirty years now) waged by different groups of armed people; the living standards of the majority (particularly in the countryside) is low, while the middle class and the intelligentsia are small.

The mountainous terrain, bad roads, and unsafe transportation make fighting in Afghanistan very hard indeed.

This notwithstanding, President Obama is resolved to go to the end, adding 17 thousand troops to the American contingent in Afghanistan and dispatching 4 thousand military instructors (within the framework of the first Strategic Review of March 2009). This was done on the eve of the new operations against the Taliban and accelerated training of the local security forces to make the Afghan government more efficient in the center and the provinces and in the hope of integrating some of the warlords into the country's political structure.

Obama described the Taliban's increased clout and stepped up terrorist activities in Pakistan as the two main blocks on the road toward the settlement; America expanded the geography of its military operations, which requires a new strategy applied to both countries.

New strategic thinking became indispensable in May 2009 when newly appointed commander General S. McChrystal reported that seen from the inside the situation in Afghanistan looked much worse than when seen from Washington. It became clear that the war on the Taliban would require considerable resources.

The presidential election in Afghanistan caused a lot of headache in Washington: the election of August 2009, when Hamid Karzai won in the first round, proved to be too dishonest to be accepted as legitimate; Abdullah Abdullah, the opposition candidate, had to withdraw from the race.

On 2 December, 2009, when speaking at West Point Military Academy, President Obama made public the long expected strategic decision. This ended the fierce debates between those who together with General McChrystal insisted on the use of force against the insurgents and those who wanted to concentrate on al-Qa'eda.

It should be said that further enlargement of America's presence in Afghanistan, which envisaged adding another 30 thousand troops and several hundred civilian experts, went beyond the Strategic Review of March 2009.

Larger military contingents were expected to turn the tide in the war on the Taliban; the modified American strategy designed to fight the insurgents concentrated on defending the key settlements, carrying out accelerated training of efficient security forces, and promoting more capable Afghan state institutions. Political settlement was pushed to the backburner; the country's political infrastructure had to be geared toward public security and political stability.

President Obama announced that in 2011 America would gradually begin pulling out its troops, which means that time is short and the schedule tight.

The following two features can be described as the highlights of the U.S.'s 2009 strategy in Afghanistan:

- (1) "Crawling Americanization:" despite the fairly large U.S.'s allies' military contingent in Afghanistan the American share is steadily rising—Washington is obviously resolved to remain the coalition's leader.

- (2) “Afghanization” of the war: there is an obvious trend toward setting up efficient Afghan security and defense structures to confront the Taliban on their own. America’s huge national debt and its domestic problems caused by the financial and economic crisis have forced President Obama, who is moving toward another presidential campaign, to avoid excessive military spending in Afghanistan and American casualties.

A settlement is much less probable in Afghanistan than in Iraq; the Americans are facing a dilemma: either to stay put in the Hindu Kush Mountains or to allow the Taliban and al-Qa’eda to triumph on an international scale.

Pakistan: Moving Ahead Amid Domestic Uncertainties

Pakistan’s counterterrorist operation in the border areas, an obviously important factor of Obama’s Middle Eastern strategy, is one of Washington’s great diplomatic victories. President Obama said the following about the remote areas of the Pakistani border that are beyond the reach of Islamabad’s control and used as a safe haven by al-Qa’eda and other armed Islamic groups: “For the American people, this border region has become the most dangerous place in the world.”

This makes Pakistan “Achilles’ heel” of America’s Afghan strategy, but the fact that Islamabad is resolved to remain Washington’s strategic ally with financial and military aid attached to the status means that the two countries are pursuing the same goals and share the same interests.

Throughout the last few decades, the Pakistani army and intelligence (ISI) have demonstrated tolerance toward militant and armed Islamists and even unofficially cooperated with them; these military structures helped the Taliban to become successfully established in Afghanistan after the Soviet pull-out and the downfall of the Najibullah government.

In the 1990s, Pakistan, an important Cold-War ally of the United States, found itself abandoned (in the strategic respect); sanctions were applied against the country, which had a uranium enrichment program.

At that time, Islamabad was pursuing its regional interests by establishing closer relations with the Taliban in power in Afghanistan and the Islamic militants who used Pakistan’s territory. Today, confrontation and rivalry with India constitutes the key aspect of Pakistan’s political culture.

In the wake of 9/11, the United States, in preparation for the counterterrorist operation, had to lift the sanctions and extend its military assistance; this restored their allied relations.

At Washington’s request, Pervez Musharraf, the military dictator who ruled the country from 1999 to 2008, helped the American military to fight the groups of insurgents.

The Pakistani army and ISI never broke their ties with the Taliban and other Islamist groups in the hope of relying on them to trim India’s influence in Afghanistan and Kashmir.

Military and financial aid to Pakistan continued after the last elections in the United States; the new president even wanted to make wider use of drones to locate and destroy insurgents and al-Qa’eda and Taliban leaders in the safe haven of the border areas. To balance out military and economic cooperation and encourage Zardari’s civilian Cabinet, Washington increased the volumes of non-military aid and extended its partnership relations with Pakistan.

Several drone attacks destroyed some of the key Taliban and al-Qa’eda figures, but the side-effects proved unacceptable: anti-Americanism among the Pakistanis intensified. The top figures in

the Army looked askance at Washington's support to the civilian government, which they interpreted as an effort to tip the balance in favor of the civilians.

The decision of the top Pakistani military to move against the militants in the border areas can be described as an impressive achievement for Washington in implementing its antiterrorist strategy. The military operations of the Pakistani troops in Swat Valley and Southern Waziristan complicated the situation inside the country. The Islamists launched military operations against the state; in Rawalpindi they held the army headquarters under siege for nearly 24 hours.

In 2009, there were 87 suicide terrorist attacks which killed 1,300 people (a total of 12,600 fell victim to terrorist acts).

It should be said that Islamabad was fairly selective in its military operations: it aimed at Baitullah Mehsud and his troops, which formed part of the Taliban and fought together with al-Qa'eda (they are believed to be responsible for most of the terrorist attacks in Pakistan). No matter how hard Washington tried to channel the army and ISI against the Afghan Taliban and the units unrelated to Mehsud, it failed.

President Obama's decision to begin pulling troops out of Afghanistan in 2011 will affect relations between Islamabad and the Afghan Taliban, which in the past had fortified Pakistan's position in its confrontation with India. The rivalry between India and Pakistan for influence in Afghanistan will increase together with America's shrinking military presence there.

Today, Pakistan is being drawn into the U.S.'s political orbit, but Washington does not have unlimited pressure on its government; further deterioration of the situation inside the country will shift the emphasis from al-Qa'eda to the country's nuclear safety. This means that so far the U.S. Administration has not balanced out its interests in Afghanistan and political stability in Pakistan.

Iraq: Will the Americans Remove Their Troops?

Today, the situation in Iraq can be described as relatively normal (at least compared with the crisis regions of the Middle East); Washington is no longer riveted to this country for at least two reasons:

- first, the successful operations in 2007 and 2008, division of the country's capital into confessional districts, and support extended by the Sunnis Awaken public movement considerably decreased the level of violence in the country;
- second, the positive developments allowed President Obama to concentrate on new measures designed to stabilize the situation; the new administration was able to draw on the political capital the George W. Bush Administration earned in its last months in power.

The Nouri al-Maliki government insisted that the U.N. mandate on continued international military presence in the country should not be extended after 2008, however President Bush achieved a far-reaching consensus; late in 2008 the Status of Forces Agreement in Iraq was endorsed. A pull-out schedule, likewise, was adopted, under which all international military units were expected to leave the cities and settlements by 30 June, 2009 and the rest of the territory by the end of 2011.

Under the plan adopted on 27 February, 2009, some American military units (about 50 thousand) will remain in the country until the end of 2011 to train the Iraqi security forces.

This does not mean that all the other problems have been resolved; real stability is still far away: security requires deep-cutting political changes, while the country must find its new national identity outside America's orbit.

Today, the relations between the Kurds and Arabs remain tense. There are still the unresolved problems of Kurdish independence, use of the oil fields in the Kurdish areas, and delimitation of administrative powers. From time to time, the confrontation is leading to large-scale terrorist acts against the government; the 19 August, 8 September, and 15 October explosions killed over 350.

These events, though unrelated to al-Qa'eda, Sunni extremists, or neo-BAASist groups, might develop into a full-scale civilian conflict; they undermine the faith in the government's ability to preserve security in the country.

It should be said that if the Shi'a-Kurdish government fails to integrate the former Sunni insurgents in the country's political and social context, the number of potential terrorists will start to grow again.

The problems described above—the regime's slow political transformation and the sporadic violence in the country where there are several regional players—might become even more urgent as the date of America's final pull-out approaches.

President Obama's response to any possible deterioration in Iraq is hard to predict; today the White House's attention is riveted on Afghanistan and Pakistan and America's increased military presence there. It seems that even if Nouri al-Maliki tries to retain the American troops in his country under various pretexts after 2011, he is unlikely to succeed. In view of the upcoming presidential elections in the United States, President Obama, who can run for a second term, will hardly hail such requests.

The United States, however, will not let Iraq out of its sight (irrespective of the planned pull-out); the White House is resolved to keep the country (at least for the near future) as the center of its influence in the Middle East.

Iran: Are there Limits to Confrontation?

The United States has already revised its Iranian policy. President Obama is prepared to talk to Tehran. This means that he has distanced himself from some of the demands of the Six (the U.S., Russia, China, the U.K., France, and Germany) related to uranium enrichment.

It was expected that American diplomats would be involved even though the previous Administration had been dead set against this possibility. The change in America's stand on the Iranian nuclear file notwithstanding, another nuclear crisis flared up in 2010 largely fed by President Obama's ambiguous policies pursued at the rhetoric and practical levels.

At the rhetorical level, there were at least three letters to the Iranian leaders and several public addresses in which President Obama invited the Iranian leaders to "reset" relations and recognized Iran's right to peaceful nuclear research. The letters said, in particular, that the United States was not pursuing a regime change in the country. Ahmadinejad was called upon to act as a responsible leader to find his country a worthy place on the international arena.

Moreover, President Obama was the first American president to admit that his country had been involved in deposing the democratic regime of Mohammed Mosaddeq in Iran in 1953.

At the practical level, however, in 2009 the United States was even more eager than before to enlist international support for new sanctions against Iran. At the same time, Iran was invited to the conference

on Afghanistan in March 2009. In October 2009, Foreign Minister of Iran Manouchehr Mottaki received permission to visit the sector of Iranian interests at the Embassy of Pakistan in Washington.

It should be said that the United States, in turn, refused to open a sector of their interests in Tehran even though the issue had been discussed for some months with the Bush Administration.

As could be expected, Iran rejected the "olive branch" and announced that its nuclear file could be discussed if and when the economic sanctions were lifted. The Iranian political elite was skeptical: Tehran regards the United States as a potential threat to political stability.

The Geneva-2 talks between the Six and Iran on 1 October, 2009 were an uphill effort; it had become known that another reactor was being built in the city of Qom; this fanned doubts about the peaceful nature of the nuclear program.

Iran responded to the IAEA inquiry about the sources of nuclear fuel for its research program by agreeing in principle to send 70 percent of its reactor-grade low-enriched uranium to Russia and France for enrichment.

Another attempt was made to prevent enrichment of uranium from reactor to weapon grade; however, a crisis could not be avoided. After pushing France out of the uranium enrichment process, Iran demanded that fuel exchange should take place in its territory. Soon after that Ahmadinejad announced that his country intended to build 10 more uranium enrichment facilities; he voiced his suggestion that Iran should abandon its cooperation with the IAEA and withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

This forced the U.S. Administration to resume its pressure on Tehran in 2010. It started looking for international support for U.N. economic sanctions and prohibited American companies from selling gasoline to Iran.

Washington had obviously exhausted its diplomatic possibilities.

On the whole, the picture looks as follows: while talking about his goodwill in relation to Iran, President Obama is seeking international support for new, harsher sanctions against Iran to be imposed in 2010.

Russia and China, the energy interests of which in Iran can be described as considerable, at first refused to move in unison with the United States. Washington did its best to convince them to sign a more moderate document. Enraged, Tehran accused Moscow of betrayal and said that it was going along with Washington.

The effect of the sanctions is still unclear, however they have undermined domestic opposition and consolidated the nation in the face of an external threat. In the final analysis, Iran might launch a nuclear weapon program of its own.

The Middle East: Looking for a Way Out

Israel belongs to the inner circle of Washington's strategic allies. As an outpost of Western civilization in the Middle East, it carries even more weight. The United States has been keeping the Arab-Israeli conflict in the focus of attention at all times. The new administration favors Israel and Palestine as two independent states; it demands that Israel should stop building Jewish settlements on the West Bank.

The Arab-Palestinian confessional confrontation and the problems created by the shortage of land and water resources are undermining the peacekeeping potential and political will needed to resolve the crisis.

Today, the Palestinians are very much weakened by the split between the FATAH nationalists and the Islamists of HAMAS. The President of the Palestinian National Authority Mahmoud Abbas, who maintains relations with Israel and Washington, is little respected by his own people.

Israel's war in Gaza has no prospects; the Israeli leaders do not know what to do with HAMAS or how to move away from military confrontation to conflict settlement.

The new coalition of the right wing in the Israeli government headed by Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu (in 1993 he "stopped" the Oslo Accords—the Israeli-Palestinian peace agreements which provided for the creation of a Palestinian National Authority) has closed ranks with a large part of the country's political elite under the slogan "Israel's Security Above All Else," which means that Iran rather than Palestine presents the greatest danger.

President Obama is convinced that the two problems should be approached together, otherwise the contradictions will remain unresolved; he also believes that a one-sided Middle Eastern policy is unacceptable.

We should bear in mind, however, that in the Middle East too, President Obama's policy is both rhetorical and practical.

The American president's Cairo speech, in which he invited the Arab-Muslim world to participate in a dialog, belongs to the rhetorical component.

Real life proved to be much more complicated. Step-by-step progress toward settlement was suggested; Israel was invited to freeze its settlement program while the Arab countries were advised to normalize their relations with Israel to create the atmosphere of trust and confidence needed for launching peace talks. This was not that easy; George Mitchell's repeated attempts to convince Netanyahu to halt the settlement program failed.

Israel agreed, however, to freeze the program for ten months (with the exception of Eastern Jerusalem, public buildings, and projects already begun); this can be described as a positive, even if temporary, result.

The European Union has long regarded the Israeli settlements as illegal. Catherine Ashton, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, put this stand in a nutshell: "East Jerusalem is occupied territory." The EU Declaration of 8 December, 2008 demands a complete ban on the building of settlements.

The absence of positive shifts in settling the Palestinian-Israeli conflict forced the U.S. Administration to change its political approach to the problem; unwilling to leave the "negotiation platform," "soft" brokerage was the only option Washington had left.

The American analytical community believes that this approach will do no harm; however, as tension in the occupied territories rises and settlement prospects become vaguer, Washington's involvement in the settlement process may be reduced to purely symbolic. This means that President Obama should invest more political capital in the Middle Eastern process; American brokerage should become more transparent and multifaceted (that is, acquire more vectors).

America should revise its ideas about HAMAS in line with "I face the world as it is," to quote from the American president's Nobel Peace Prize Speech. This bold step will inevitably be criticized at home and will worsen relations with Israel.

In Lieu of a Conclusion

Relations with Israel are not President Obama's only headache in the Middle East; before 2012, he is going to have to address many other no less important tasks. Indeed, the situation in Afghanistan,

Pakistan, and Iraq largely depends on the balance of forces and distribution of resources in the Middle East.

The United States is sparing no effort to avoid the use of force to settle the Iranian nuclear problem; additional U.N. sanctions against Iran will probably force Tehran to become more involved in the developments in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Continued American pressure on Iran might trigger a conflict of American interests with China and Russia.
