

Obama's Big Foreign Policy Headaches

By Patrick Seale
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Viewed from Europe, American foreign policy would seem to be in a frightful muddle. President Barack Obama's new team, which takes office later this month, will be confronted with a host of difficult issues. The team will include John Kerry at State and Chuck Hagel at Defence, if their appointments are confirmed by the Senate.

Hagel, a distinguished independent thinker, is already facing a fierce smear campaign by pro-Israeli sympathisers on the grounds that he is not pro-Israeli enough. The outcome of the battle will show the extent to which the U.S. can free itself from Israeli shackles, restoring its battered reputation and freedom of action in the Middle East

The many severe challenges facing America include what to do in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Israel, Palestine, Syria, Yemen (as well as whether to continue the 'targeted killings' by drone strikes which have aroused furious anti-American sentiment in several countries), not to mention relations with China and Russia. Dealing with these problems will require hard and radical thinking – and no doubt, in some cases, a painful change of course.

Take Afghanistan? Is the U.S. pulling out after Dec. 31, 2014, or not? Afghan President Hamid Karzai is due at the White House in the coming days. He will want to know what future protection he can expect from the U.S. He will certainly have in mind the fate of President Najibullah, butchered by the Taleban when they captured Kabul in 1996 after the Russians departed.

Today, no one can deny that the security situation is deteriorating. Every other day brings news of young Afghan soldiers turning their guns on their Western trainers, of Taleban infiltrators killing Afghan soldiers in their beds. Most Afghans – especially those who live in the countryside - are a conservative people, devoted to their religion and their tribal traditions. They want an end to the wars which have devastated their country. They want the foreign infidels out.

The Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979 - somewhat reluctantly - in response to cries for help from local Communists who had seized power and killed President Daud, only to find themselves confronted by an anti-Communist uprising. The Russian occupation lasted ten grim years, 1979 to

1989, causing much loss of life on both sides. It was ended sensibly by President Gorbachev, when the Soviet Union itself faced collapse.

Capturing Kabul in 1996, the Taleban butchered President Najibullah who had presided over the last years of the Russian occupation. Then in 2001 -- to avenge Al-Qaida's devastating attack on New York's Twin Towers on 11 September 2001 -- the United States invaded Afghanistan and drove out the Taleban, who had mistakenly given Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaida house room.

America's Afghan war has now lasted nearly 12 years. It has claimed tens of thousands of lives, including many innocent victims of indiscriminate bombing, and disrupted life in much of the country. It has cost billions of dollars, contributing to America's crippling deficits. It is now blindingly obvious that most Afghans do not want the Americans there. Yet President Obama is said to be pondering whether to leave 6,000 or 10,000 or 20,000 troops behind. Their fate would not be enviable.

It would surely be better for the U.S. to withdraw altogether in 2014, while putting its full weight over the next two years to promoting an inter-Afghan settlement. This would involve bringing together all the local forces and factions in a large *Loya Jirga* or tribal council. Regional powers with a stake in Afghanistan's future must be brought in too, notably Pakistan and India, Iran and the Central Asian countries bordering Afghanistan, as well as China and Russia. Qatar (which has opened a Taleban office in Doha) and Saudi Arabia may also have a mediating role to play. It would be wise for the United States to stay well in the background, if not out of the Afghan debate altogether.

In his first term of office, Obama missed the chance of negotiating a 'grand bargain' with Iran which would have stabilised the vital Gulf region. Instead, blackmailed by demented threats to attack Iran from Israel's Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu -- which risked dragging the U.S. in on Israel's side -- Obama imposed on Iran the most crippling sanctions ever imposed on any country. This was surely a grave mistake. It has inflicted pain on ordinary Iranians and aroused great anger against America. It has yet to be proved that Iran is seeking nuclear weapons. Instead, Israeli warmongering and international sanctions risk triggering a devastating war, which no one in the region wants except for some Israeli fanatics. The heart of the problem is that Israel intends to prevent any of its neighbours acquiring a deterrent capability so as to give itself the freedom to strike them at will. This is not a formula for harmony in the turbulent Middle East. The US must understand that a regional balance of power rather than Israeli military supremacy is the best way to keep the peace.

America's gravest problem is that Israel, its closest ally, is turning into a far-right racist statelet, imposing undemocratic laws at home and oppressive policies towards its captive Palestinians. The Israeli election of January 22 is likely to bring to government dangerous religious nationalists -- such as Naftali Bennett's Jewish Home Party -- which advocate the immediate annexation of 60 per cent of the West Bank, dooming the two-state solution to final extinction. These policies are in blatant contradiction with U.S. values and interests.

The great question of Obama's second term is whether he can regain control of America's wayward ally and rein in its dangerously self-destructive policies. It will not be easy but it must be done for the sake of both the U.S. and Israel -- and for the peace of the entire region.

Syria poses yet another painful dilemma for the United States. Obama committed himself early on to President Bashar al-Asad's overthrow -- largely under Israeli pressure to weaken and isolate Iran. But the U.S. has belatedly woken up to the fact that Bashar's fiercest enemies are Islamic extremists close to al-Qaida -- the very terrorists the U.S. has been fighting across the world! An extremist victory could turn Syria into another Afghanistan.

The only way out of the dilemma is for the U.S to join Russia -- as well as Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and some excitable European countries -- in imposing a ceasefire on both sides as a necessary precondition for a negotiation. This will hopefully lead eventually to some sort of national reconciliation and a peaceful transition of power. There is no other sensible way out of the Syrian tragedy.

The world will be watching to see whether Obama's team can clear its head of outdated notion and seek to resolve conflicts rather than inflame them.

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