

Progress in the Middle Eastern Quagmire

As the prodigious six-power effort to make enough pre-emptive concessions to Iran for that country to accept the status of a threshold nuclear state (with an unverifiable promise not to complete the process for 10 years) sailed through yet another deadline before dissolving in celebrations of a new “final deadline” of June 30, all signs were that the traditional Great Powers *may* have finally fumbled themselves into complete irrelevancy for the first time since Henry VIII and Francis I met on the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520.

The American attempt to create a democratic and coherent Iraq after the rout of Saddam Hussein has been an abject failure; in some respects a worse strategic debacle than that country's only previous unsuccessful military enterprise, the Vietnam War. In neither war was the United States itself militarily defeated, but in both the strategic outcome was a defeat. In general, America's problems are not with its military commanders but with its statesmen.

The George W. Bush administration that invaded Iraq and randomly championed democracy, even where the newly enfranchised, as in Gaza and Lebanon, democratically chose fundamentalist dictatorship, was succeeded by the Obama administration and its policy of appeasing the semi-jihadist theocracy in Iran. Barack Obama has stood by with proverbially folded arms while Iran exerted control over Syria, Lebanon, Gaza and most recently Yemen, while steadily reducing his demands for a comfort level that Iran would not deploy nuclear weapons. In pursuit of this last goal, the U.S. has dragooned its traditional British, French and German allies to join the mischief-making Russians and Chinese in going through the repeated charade of negotiations with Iran.

The American retreat in the world, disguised as a “pivot to Asia” (which is not occurring) and accompanied by endless sanctimonious advice to countries where the U.S. no longer has influence, has required the world’s several strategically fluid regions to replace American leadership with local coalitions. Increasing cooperation between Japan, India, Indonesia, Vietnam, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, Australia and New Zealand is gently balancing the rising power of China. Russia is not threatening Western Europe, and the serendipitous Saudi oil price reduction has put a restraining rod on the back of Vladimir Putin’s Russia in pursuit of its ambitions to retrieve some of its former territory in Ukraine and the Baltic countries.

It is the Middle East, the most complicated of all regions, where the development of some sort of stable international system was always going to be most difficult to achieve. The Romans never completely pacified the region, and neither did the Byzantines or Turks. The post-First World War carve-up between Britain and France extended foreign domination another generation, but the dissolution of the European colonial empires and the creation of a Jewish state in what the Arabs claimed to be their land (though they had never really ruled it and the Jews had always been a presence there) severely complicated the equation. Traditionally, the Turks and Persians were the powerful neighbours and the Egyptians were the leading Arab power; around these poles there were centuries of violent jostling. In the colonial era, Western discoveries of oil gave the region new strategic importance and empowered Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq and the Persian Gulf states with great wealth – as well as vulnerability to more powerful neighbours, as the Iraqi seizure of Kuwait in 1990 and the attempted Iranian takeover of Bahrain in 2011 demonstrated.

As the Obama administration drew its red line at Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad gassing his own people, deployed

naval forces for a punitive expedition, abdicated command of the armed forces to Congress and then prostrated itself at the feet of Putin, who was Assad's chief armourer anyway, it struck up the astonishing notion of steadily reducing the restraints contemplated for deterring Iran from developing and deploying nuclear weapons. Administration spokesmen believe that what they are doing with Iran is a brilliant diplomatic tour de force on a scale that matches the Richard Nixon-Henry Kissinger opening to China in 1971-72.

That was an arrangement that was carefully prepared and led to normalization of relations between the countries, detachment of China and the Soviet Union from the North Vietnamese effort to defeat the U.S. militarily, the SALT 1 arms control agreement and the Vietnam Peace Agreement. It was a masterpiece of conception and execution. The appeasement of Tehran started with the abandonment of the democratic forces that were oppressed in the Iranian elections of 2009, a complete reversal of the previous administration's pro-democracy agitation; went all through the endless nuclear talks while Iran asserted aggressive influence over one local country after another; and even produced a military alliance between the U.S. air force and Iranian ground forces against the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham in Iraq. The whole misconceived initiative is well on the way to becoming another disaster, though we can only hope that the extravagant claims made for the latest "agreement" prove more accurate than previous optimistic noises on the same subject and from the same spokesmen.

Fortunately, blind luck has provided something of a safety net for the blunders of American policy-making. The Bush intoxication with democracy in inhospitable places led to the elevation of the terrorist Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the 900-pound gorilla in the Arab world for 80 years, but it mismanaged its mandate, overstepping both the bounds of the new constitution and the toleration of the Egyptian army –

which intervened, as it had under Nasser, Sadat and others in 1952, and threw the Brotherhood out. Then the Saudis, frustrated by the American failure to deter Iran from developing nuclear arms, cut the oil price in half, taking the Russian currency down with it. The bungled American effort to defeat Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in last month's election enabled him to strengthen his party at the expense of his radical pro-settler allies, weakening the hard-liners and giving him an enhanced mandate to make a settlement with the Palestinians and attack the Iranian nuclear facilities.

This has providentially occurred as Egypt and Saudi Arabia have assembled an Arab joint force with the Gulf states, and the cooperation of Jordan, Morocco, Sudan, Turkey and Pakistan – an unprecedented span of Muslim powers – to defeat Iran in Yemen. Meanwhile, to the extent that the latest extension in the Iran nuclear talks may lead anywhere, it is because of the Israeli ability to attack the Iranian nuclear program, the Saudi-Egyptian creation of an Arab joint force to counter-attack in Yemen, and the Saudi determination to reduce oil prices and impoverish Iran. Israel has also armed itself with the carrot of agreement to a Palestinian state, as long as the Arab powers, alarmed as they are by Iran, enable the Palestinians finally to accept statehood with the right of return of Palestinians displaced at the creation of Israel in 1948 to the new Palestinian entity – and not, as has been demanded up to now, to Israel, where their numbers would drown the Jewish state. Western policy has failed, but in the Middle East, treacherous quagmire though it has always been, the bellicosity of Iran may facilitate pan-Arab cooperation and Israeli-Palestinian progress at last.

These issues echo in Canada. Prime Minister Stephen Harper and former foreign minister John Baird's pro-Israel and anti-ISIS policies are being vindicated; the announced naval building program, provided it finally happens, is timely; and the

federal Liberals are impaled on a double bad call: they leaped too soon to support the draconian C-51 public security bill, only to find the knee-jerk public support of it eroding, and they have an incomprehensibly mealy-mouthed plan to aid Iraqi refugees as a substitute for Canada taking its proper place in the anti-terrorist coalition. (Like other serious countries, we are sufficiently adept multitaskers to do both.) New Democratic Party Leader Thomas Mulcair and the delightful head of the Greens, Elizabeth May, win on public security. The government wins on foreign policy, though it lost its capable foreign minister. The Liberals missed the buses in both directions and are left with an Easter to be spent in prayerful hope for revelations politically damaging to the Conservatives in the Mike Duffy trial.

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