

The End of the American Era in the Middle East?

Yoel Guzansky

“As a Pacific nation, the United States will play a larger and long-term role in shaping this region and its future.” President Obama, the Australian Parliament, November 2011

In recent years, the US administration has announced its intention of adopting a policy of “pivoting” toward East Asia, and this policy has been reflected in a series of military, economic, commercial, and diplomatic initiatives. In this vein, President Barack Obama and senior administration officials have confirmed that the United States seeks to play a leadership role in Asia in the coming years.

Assessments that the US strategic center of gravity is shifting to East Asia are well grounded, and their underlying rationale is spelled out in the US security strategy of January 2012. Although the range of administration initiatives and declarations about directing resources eastward at the expense of other areas is not new, it is worthwhile to examine their influence on the Middle East, a region in which the standing of the United States has been challenged over the past few years. Iran’s continuous progress toward a nuclear weapon, the erosion of US influence in Iraq, the difficulty in influencing events in Syria, the Arab monarchies’ doubts concerning the reliability of the United States, questions regarding the future of US relations with Egypt, and even the cooling of relations with Israel have indicated to some that the United States is increasingly hard pressed to advance its policy in the region. To others, these are signs of a superpower in retreat.¹

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This article's main argument is that the drive to allocate resources and attention to other areas, coupled with domestic economic constraints and proven difficulties in implementing its policy in the region, does not necessarily indicate an American abandonment of the Middle East. Rather, in light of a number of basic conditions and major interests that influence American considerations, demand constant monitoring, and suggest US willingness to intervene when necessary, the United States is expected to continue to play a sizable role in regional security.

Looking Eastward

Prior to President Obama's visit to Australia in November 2011, senior officials in the US government announced that the main focus of US policy would no longer be what it had been previously, but would instead concentrate on the challenges of the twenty-first century, specifically, Asia and the Pacific Ocean. US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta even stated that by the end of the current decade, the bulk of the US naval force would be stationed in the Pacific Ocean for the purpose of balancing China's growing power.² Secretary of State Hillary Clinton also addressed the American need to invest efforts in Southeast Asia – economic, diplomatic, strategic, and others – stating that the next decade would be the “Asian decade.”³

The United States has begun redistributing forces, boosting capabilities, cultivating old connections, and creating new partnerships, all with the goal of reassuring its friends and allies that they will not be abandoned to the growing strength of China⁴ – and all the while working to prevent their being dragged into an undesirable military conflict with Beijing, their main economic partner. There are also a number of conditions that are likely to increase the tension in US-China relations, particularly China's policy in its immediate surroundings (as expressed, for example, in the territorial conflicts in the South China Sea) and beyond.⁵

The Pacific Basin has always been a special interest area for the United States. The current American measures, both on the declarative and the practical level, including its pivot to the east, are a response to China's growing power and the resulting threat to its neighbors, and to the assertive – if not aggressive – policy it has adopted in recent years.⁶ For its part, the United States wishes to demonstrate that it will not surrender its status and economic interests in the region, which it traditionally views

as its back yard, and that it will not allow China to turn the region into its exclusive area of influence.

The concern that the Middle East may become less relevant to US national security is rooted in several issues, including the boom in local energy production in the United States and Canada and the corresponding high likelihood that Washington can wean itself of its dependence on Middle East energy;⁷ the apparent reduced threat from al-Qaeda;⁸ and first and foremost, the claim that it is better for the United States to turn its attention and devote its resources to the more significant challenge in Asia.⁹ Yet while the difficulties the United States has encountered in implementing its policy in the Middle East may have enhanced its drive to invest in other areas, this does not translate into an abandonment of the arena.

The first visit by President Obama (along with the entire upper echelon of the US administration) after his November 2012 reelection was to Southeast Asia,¹⁰ undertaken in order to substantiate the pivot to the east and demonstrate that the economic and security ties in the region are critical to the future of the United States. This visit may have been intended to signal that the administration's attention and most of its work in the next four years would be devoted to the region. It is also possible that the President sees an opportunity to leave his mark on Asia and the Pacific region and thereby establish his legacy, especially given the difficulties in doing so in other areas. However, as this visit also showed, long term considerations are often postponed in the interest of short term crises in other regions, such as the Middle East, which strengthens the claim that at least in the foreseeable future, US involvement in the Middle East will not decline.

Between Iran and the Arab Spring

A US policy focused away from the Middle East would be a significant deviation from the policy that has existed over the years. It is possible that this change began during the Obama administration's first term, manifested in reduced efforts to promote the Israeli-Palestinian peace process; the ongoing difficulty in preventing Iran from obtaining nuclear military capability; an Iraq that is increasingly outside the US sphere of influence; and the search for a path toward an expedited exit from Afghanistan, despite the doubtful preparation and skills of local security forces to insure stability.¹¹ The Obama administration has also made do

with “leading from behind” in Libya and has hesitated to invest actively in ousting Bashar al-Assad from Syria, which has, according to most estimates, prolonged the civil war. A potential consequence of these developments may be the preparation by both America’s allies and its enemies for a post-American era in the Middle East, with some acting as if it has already arrived.

When President Obama took office, two main objectives were to boost United States acceptance – if not popularity – in the Middle East, and to withdraw US forces from the region, first from Iraq, and later from Afghanistan. Early in his first term, Obama promised the Muslim world a fresh start, but at the start of his second term, the Arab nations remain gripped by anti-American feelings. In fact, from the outset the Obama administration’s “reset” policy toward the Muslim world was greeted with skepticism not only because it lacked clear and defined policy goals, but also because of the difficulty it faced in order to meet the high expectations generated.

In reality, there was not much new in US policy toward the Middle East under Obama other than what appeared to be a tougher policy toward Israel, especially on the issue of settlements, and an attempt, mainly rhetorical, to placate the Muslim world. What was new, if anything, was the attempt to engage with rogue actors, such as Iran and

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Syria, and to promote multilateral action. The Sunni world refused Obama’s request to make any conciliatory gesture toward Israel in order to encourage the peace process, and not only were Arab leaders unimpressed with the President’s policy, but they may even have perceived it as an expression of weakness. The limited political, economic, and security activism of states in the Sunni Muslim camp, particularly in the face of the Iranian challenge, was more connected to the possibility that fundamental interests of these states were in danger than it was a response to American overtures.

The United States still declares that it is committed to the idea of promoting democracy in a region that is perhaps the least democratic in the world, but in fact, during President Obama’s first term, it focused primarily on the attempt to withdraw US forces from Iraq, precisely at the

time that the democratic experiment in the country was under challenge. The United States is also currently considering an accelerated timetable for withdrawal from Afghanistan. At the same time, it is endeavoring to minimize the damage to its interests and is distancing itself from attempts to establish governance and strengthen Afghani state institutions against the Taliban challenge. While the events in the Arab world have caused the United States to return, even if primarily on the declarative level, to a commitment (abandoned at the end of President Bush's second term) to the pursuit of political freedom and to human rights, such a stance appears to distance it even further from its remaining regional allies, and especially from the monarchs, particularly the Saudi royal family, who fear deep and rapid changes in their societies.¹²

In his second speech to the Arab world ("Cairo 2," May 2011), President Obama declared that promoting reforms in the Arab world is a primary goal of his administration. It is possible that because he was criticized for maintaining a double standard – using military force (under the NATO flag) against the Qaddafi regime, while calling weakly to Bahrain to maintain freedom of expression, for example – he shifted his priorities, at least publicly. In his speech Obama did not mention key states such as Saudi Arabia, which have remained the cornerstone of what remains of the pro-American Arab camp. The United States cannot allow itself to lose Saudi Arabia, which may be the reason that the entry of Saudi forces into Bahrain in March 2011 was not met with any US condemnation of note.¹³

As a result of US policy regarding the "Arab Spring," Arab leaderships that have remained intact despite the unrest are more skeptical than in the past of the backing they would receive from the United States should there be a domestic threat to their rule. This skepticism will make it difficult for them to embrace US policy in the region and propel them to think twice before taking risks for the United States, especially in connection with Iran. Therefore, Barack Obama's reelection has been coolly received in the Arab world, along with the hope of a significant change in foreign policy in his second term. In particular, Arab states would like to see

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the United States abandon its passive stance and adopt a more vigorous approach vis-à-vis the Assad regime and toward Iran.¹⁴

The wave of revolutions in the Arab world accelerated the decline of American influence in the region because it toppled rulers who were US allies, but also because it jolted relations with the regimes that remained intact. Furthermore, the rise of new regimes does not ensure smooth relations with the United States. Even though, for example, President Obama backed the masses that took to the streets to demonstrate in Egypt against President Husni Mubarak (after failing to support similar events in Iran two years previously), US relations with the new president, Mohamed Morsi, are not particularly good. While the democratic elections in Egypt were welcomed by the United States, they brought to power a movement and a president whose commitment to democratic values is uncertain at best. President Obama has stated explicitly that while the United States, whose main lever for influence on Egypt remains economic (with 1.7 billion dollars per year in military and civilian aid), does not consider Egypt an enemy, neither does it see it as an ally.¹⁵

There is no question that both America's friends and enemies in the Middle East will interpret the new eastward-bent strategic focus as a further retreat from American centers of influence in the Middle East, and specifically, as a weakening of the US military option against Iran and an expression of America's lack of support for the pro-Western regimes that have remained in place. The United States is aware of such attitudes, and therefore is initiating both declarative and practical steps in order to assuage the concerns of its allies. To this end, it has increased its military presence in the Gulf, signed enormous deals with Arab Gulf states, and dispatched high ranking officials to the region, while giving prominence to these measures.

The Centrality of the Middle East

The desire of the United States to relinquish some of its global commitments reflects an isolationist tendency with deep roots in American history. In recent years, those in the United States who argue that the country must concentrate its efforts on domestic issues, even at the expense of America's global interests; share the defense burden with US allies; and take part only in wars of last resort, have grown stronger.¹⁶ Nevertheless, and even if there is a diminution in its status in the Middle East, the United States is not deserting the region. Moreover, not only

has the United States not ceased dealing with Middle East affairs; those who are in charge of shaping US foreign policy, which sometimes seems reactive, confused, and full of contradictions,¹⁷ devote most of their time to the Middle East – even if it often seems that the time invested in handling the ills of the region is inversely proportional to the amount of influence the United States currently wields there.¹⁸

There is a wide gap between greater emphasis on the Pacific region and disengagement from the Middle East. This is not a zero sum game, and the United States can be involved in these two major arenas at the same time. Furthermore, the United States still has a number of major interests in the Middle East that continue to play a significant role in US policymaking and stand to influence the future course of American action in the region.

The Energy Market

The global energy map is changing, especially because of the boom in oil and gas production in the United States through use of advanced technologies. This change is likely to bring about a reduction in dependence on Middle East oil, and therefore, less dependence than in the past on oil producing states (especially since the United States is already no longer dependent on imports of natural gas and coal). US oil production has risen in the past four years by 25 percent. Moreover, the International Energy Agency (IEA) expects that the United States will surpass even Russia and Saudi Arabia and become the largest oil producer in the world.¹⁹

At the same time, the notion that the United States will be completely independent of Middle East oil is far from reality. While the United States today produces 60 percent of its oil consumption and is expected to supply all of its energy needs by the end of the next decade, even then it will continue to be dependent on the global economy, which is liable to be harmed and to harm the United States as well if oil sources in the Middle East do not continue to supply the demand of states such as South Korea, Japan, India, and China. For example, the Persian Gulf alone has 54.4 percent of the total proven global oil

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reserves and 40.5 percent of all proven global gas reserves.²⁰ Therefore, even if the United States were not dependent on energy from the Gulf for domestic consumption, it would remain dependent on the stability of the global energy market and would need to continue to maintain free access to Persian Gulf oil. The importance of the United States on this issue was illustrated when in early 2012, in contrast to its stance on the Iranian nuclear issue, it asserted that freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz is a red line.²¹ The United States also has special relations with the Gulf states and a history of activity in the region, and these are influenced by factors other than the need for energy and for access to the Gulf economy, and require an American presence in the region.

Nuclear Proliferation

When President Obama entered office, one of the major goals he set for himself was to promote the idea of global disarmament.²² In practice, however, he has encountered significant setbacks in achieving this goal: Iran is seeking to become a nuclear power, and Pakistan is an unstable nuclear power that could transfer nuclear technology to other states in the region, or even lose control over its nuclear arsenal. In addition, if Iran obtains nuclear weapons, this is liable to lead to further proliferation in the region, with other states likely to aim for military nuclear capability. The United States was and remains the largest external power in the region and is the only power capable of safeguarding Pakistani nuclear weapons, serving as a counterweight to Iran's power, and attempting to prevent further nuclear proliferation. It is for this reason that the US connection with the greater Middle East in the context of nuclear nonproliferation remains essential.

The Peace Process

To stress the commitment of the new administration to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, President Obama appointed his Middle East envoy, George Mitchell, only forty-eight hours after being sworn into office in January 2009. Obama called this issue a "national security priority" for the United States.²³ However, American efforts to promote the peace process over the past four years have not borne fruit, in part due to American conduct on this issue. It is reasonable to assume that there will be renewed American interest in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process during Obama's second term, when he is free of electoral considerations

and potential American pressure levers on Israel are more significant. The argument that progress toward a political settlement between Israel and the Palestinians will make it easier to implement US policy in the Arab world in general, and toward Iran in particular, still bears much weight in the United States.

Israel

America's relations with Israel are traditionally defined in terms of moral obligation, common cultural and political values, and joint strategic interests. Nevertheless, a trend with potential negative impact on relations is connected to an image of a weakened Israel. Israel is no longer perceived by many in the United States as an asset, and in recent years various critics have even gone so far as to depict it as a burden. However, Israel remains an important partner for the United States in dealing with terror threats and evolving military threats, and the militaries of the two countries share intelligence and combat doctrines. Israel remains a loyal and stable ally that through joint development efforts also contributes to US defense industries.

The Terror Threat

In the United States, the terror threat is considered to be lower than it was eleven years ago. Nevertheless, a US withdrawal from the Middle East would not put an end to anti-American jihadist terror. On the contrary, it appears that radical Islamic forces seek to enter the vacuum created by fall of old Arab regimes. Al-Qaeda in Yemen is already defined by the United States as the most dangerous of the organization's affiliates.²⁴ In addition, the attack on the US consulate in Benghazi, Libya, which killed US Ambassador Christopher Stevens, illustrates the extent to which the post-revolutionary transition period has only increased the threat posed by al-Qaeda, including in the Maghreb, and has strengthened al-Qaeda's affiliates in Iraq and Syria.

Weapons Sales

The United States is continuing its attempt to strengthen its allies in the region. The most blatant expression of this policy is that it provides these states with access to advanced American weapon systems that are intended to help them face the Iranian threat. The sale of US-produced weapons and weapon systems is a way to increase American influence

and is a significant consideration for the United States, especially in light of the state of the US economy. The scope of US weapons sales in recent years, intended mainly for the Gulf states, is unprecedented. Thus, for example, from 2008-11, deals with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates totaled 70 billion dollars.²⁵ The United States is also planning to provide some of the Gulf states with a large number of advanced fighter jets such as F-15-SA, sophisticated aerial defense systems such as THAAD, and even precision guided munitions. However, the Gulf states' willingness to confront Iran actively also depends on their confidence in the US government's commitment to support them – a commitment that will affect American considerations prior to an attack on Iran.

Conclusion

“After two wars that have cost us thousands of lives and over a trillion dollars, it's time to do some nation-building right here at home.” President Obama, the Democratic National Convention, September 2012

The greater Middle East is the least stable region in the world, and it will likely remain so for many years. Transferring the American diplomatic and military center of gravity to East Asia will not add to its stability. Furthermore, while the economic and security challenges posed by the Pacific region are mostly long term, the challenges posed by the Middle East appear more immediate.

Indeed, the Middle East is the major front in dealing with anticipated dangers to the United States, and emerging trends in the region will increase its importance as a critical arena for US national security. What is not clear is how effective the US strategy of the past four years, or the strategy currently forming, is in confronting these challenges. Whether some of the trends described above stem from President Obama's political doctrine or are connected to the economic situation in the United States, or whether they are a response to the American frustration toward his policy, the US administration is conveying the message that the Middle East is no longer at the top of its priority list. The fact that the anticipated change in such priorities will take place over a decade, however, has a somewhat blunting effect, and does not mean that the Middle East will not remain on the list. Although other regions may be given greater consideration, and American interests and concerns in the

region remain despite its waning influence, to assume this is tantamount to complete abandonment is an overreaction. Nevertheless, even a shift from the top of the priority list is a dramatic change that is liable to have long term consequences for Israel, as the US constitutes a central pillar of its national security.

Notes

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