

Obama's Foreign Policy Objectives: The Geopolitical Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia Mosaic

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You've seen the headlines in the last weeks and days:

The Arab uprisings, the killing of Osama Bin Laden, Washington's efforts to keep troops in Afghanistan and Iraq beyond pullout schedules, Egypt's reopening of the border with Gaza, Pakistan's role in the Afghan war, President Barack Obama's speeches on the Middle East and Israel, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's intransigence, the Fatah-Hamas unity moves and plans to gain UN recognition of Palestinian statehood — and that's not the half of it.

Each event looms large in the mass media and in political discourse, but each is only part of a much larger mosaic that constitutes the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) and Central Asia component of the Obama Administration's foreign and military strategy.

This component is Washington's top priority because any significant deterioration of U.S. domination in MENA, and the frustration of its ambitions in Central Asia — especially in combination with weakening economic and political influence in the world — could hasten America's decline as the unipolar global "leader," i.e., hegemon.

The U.S. inherited this position two decades ago upon the implosion of the Soviet Union and the socialist camp and is hardly prepared to step aside. The policy Washington adopted at that time, and which remains in force today, is to prevent the emergence of any powerful rival or military force potentially able to undermine American dominion.

No other country is grabbing for the global supremacy, but a number of states with advanced and developing economies think it's time for a new international construct with multipolar leadership.

The Obama Administration's sacrosanct mission, as with earlier Washington governments, is to keep the political and geographic ground gained by the U.S. in the 66 years since the end of World War II, when it became leader of the capitalist world's Cold War contention with communism.

This ground was extended in the post-Cold War period mainly through U.S. control of global economic institutions, the political absorption of the states of Eastern Europe that had been in the Soviet orbit, unequaled military power, and for the last decade the "war on terrorism" launched by former President George W. Bush.

President Barack Obama took over from Bush in Iraq, greatly enlarged the Afghan war and extended fighting to western Pakistan, Yemen and now Libya. In addition, Obama seeks to

retain smaller but substantial U.S. military forces in Iraq and Afghanistan years beyond their anticipated pullout dates at a time when public opinion backs a total withdrawal.

Washington has had its eye on dominating MENA for its energy resources for over 70 years and attracted several key regional nations such as Saudi Arabia to its orbit many decades ago. In more recent years, U.S. hegemony has been extended throughout the entire region with the exception of Iran, the acquisition of which was postponed because of the military-political debacle caused by the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

In the decade since 9/11 Washington lengthened its imperial reach into Central Asia by projecting its formidable military power into Afghanistan, one of the poorest countries on Earth. The ostensible purpose was to capture bin Laden and defeat al Qaeda, the organization he founded in the 1980s with support from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the U.S. during the civil war against a progressive government in Kabul and its Soviet military protectors.

Washington's \$10-billion-a-month Afghan foray has become a military stalemate, but the adventure also allowed the U.S. to plant its flag for the first time in Central Asia — a major geopolitical advance, as we will explain. The Bush Administration was hardly unaware of this fact when it chose to wage war in Afghanistan instead of mounting an international police effort to apprehend bin Laden.

It is within this context of MENA/Central Asia strategy that the May 2 slaying of bin Laden by a Navy SEALs killer-team in Pakistan fits into the broader picture, as do the Iraq and Afghan wars, settling the Israel-Palestine conflict, the U.S. attitude toward the Arab uprisings and the other recent headlines regarding this region.

In domestic U.S. politics, the eradication of bin Laden has generated a brief renewal of national self-confidence, and the strengthening of Obama's "national security" credentials, leading to elevated opinion poll ratings which the White House hopes will contribute to his reelection victory next year.

Internationally, the removal of bin Laden will only touch lightly upon most of the Obama Administration's immediate foreign/military objectives. We will discuss some of these objectives under these subheadings: The Arab Uprisings, Keeping the Troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, and The Importance of Palestine.

••• THE ARAB UPRISINGS: First and foremost, the White House is dedicated to co-opting, neutralizing or ending the progressive uprisings taking place these last months against dictatorships and oppressive monarchies throughout the Arab world.

Washington has extended its support to nearly all these reactionary regimes for many decades, in return for which they contentedly spin in America's hegemonic orbit. President Obama has extended his belated rhetorical blessings upon the democratic trend, but in actual practice all the White House has done is lead NATO into an unjust war for regime change in Libya. [1]

The U.S. government supports democracy except when it produces a government not to its liking or when a subject country renounces Uncle Sam's jurisdiction or expresses opposition to America's policies. President Obama does not want another Venezuela or Bolivia or Brazil to take root in MENA and is working to insure that does not happen, even though all were

the products of democratic elections.

The Obama Administration seems no longer worried about the successful popular Egyptian uprising because it brought about a regime change that may only produce the form of democracy but not its full content. The U.S. government, which supported and helped finance the Mubarak dictatorship for over 30 years, is breathing easily because its continuing relations with the powerful armed forces and the ruling elite evidently insures that a democratic Egypt will remain within the imperial fold. Tunisia, which initiated the popular struggle against tyrants, also seems to have remained in Washington's camp even though the long-term dictator they sent packing to Saudi Arabia was backed by the U.S. to the end.

KEEPING TROOPS IN IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN:

The Obama Administration is anxious to retain military bases and thousands of troops in Iraq, which it is supposed to leave entirely at the end of this year, and in Afghanistan as well, when the U.S. is scheduled to depart at the end of 2014. President Obama is applying heavy pressure to Baghdad and Kabul to "request" the long-term presence of U.S. troops and "contractors" after the bulk of the occupation force withdraws.

Why keep troops in Iraq? The neoconservative Bush White House invaded Iraq, which was considered a pushover after 12 years of U.S.-British-UN killer sanctions, not only to control its oil but as a prelude to bringing about regime change in neighboring Iran, thus providing Washington with total control of the immense resources of the Persian Gulf. The Iraqi guerrilla resistance destroyed the plan, for now.

Thus, the upshot of the war — in addition to costing American taxpayers several trillion dollars over the next few decades in principal and interest — is that Shi'ite Iran's main enemy, which was the Sunni regime of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad until 2003, has been replaced by the Shi'ite government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, a politician who usually bends the knee to Washington but is quite friendly to Tehran, as are many Iraqi politicians. (The Shia are nearly 65% of the population; the Sunnis, nearly 35%.)

On May 16 Maliki declared that "Security, military and political cooperation between Iran and Iraq is essential, and we will certainly see the expansion of relations in these areas in the future." Washington's big fear is that Maliki may eventually thumb his nose at Uncle Sam, and that in time Iraq and Iran will draw much closer together — a prospect deeply opposed by the U.S., Israel and Saudi Arabia.

According to Stratfor, the private intelligence resource, on April 26: "[T]he U.S. has reportedly offered to leave as many as 20,000 troops in the country" after its "pullout" at the end of this year. In addition, a large but undetermined number of "contractors" — often paramilitary hirelings — are to remain.

Further, according to an Inter Press Service report May 9, the State Department "intends to double its staff in Iraq to nearly 16,000 and rely entirely on private contractors for security." So large a staff is almost unbelievable, but so is the immense size of the new U.S. embassy in Baghdad's Green Zone — the largest such facility in the world.

Perhaps the most important obstacle to retaining troops isn't Maliki, who may cave in to domestic or American pressure, but the fighting cleric Muqtada al-Sadr and his Mahdi Army,

which once fought U.S. troops but has been quiet in recent years. Sadr threatens to unleash the army to fight any occupation forces left behind. In making his decision Maliki must keep in mind that it was the votes of the Sadr forces that assured his election victory. The U.S. suggests Sadr is doing Iran's bidding.

Washington has told Maliki he must make his decision by August. There's lots of maneuvering going on, and which way he will decide is unknown.

Why keep troops in Afghanistan? The Obama Administration has several different reasons for seeking to retain a reduced fighting force in Afghanistan, and it is applying increasing pressure on its errand boy in Kabul, President Hamid Karzai, to sign a post-2014 Strategic Partnership Declaration that includes U.S. troops and bases.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made oblique reference to this "long-term framework for our bilateral cooperation" in a Feb. 18 speech to the Asia Society: "In no way should our enduring commitment be misunderstood as a desire by America and our allies to occupy Afghanistan against the will of its people. We do not seek any permanent military bases in their country."

In translation: Clinton indicated the U.S. was first going to seek approval from the Afghan government, and that its need for troops and bases would not last forever.

Washington is not without resources in this matter. It's going to take up to \$10 billion a year — which Kabul simply cannot afford — to pay for the nearly 400,000 Afghan troops and police that the Pentagon plans to have ready by the end of 2014. The money can only come from Uncle Sam, and the possible price may be accepting America's "enduring commitment."

According to a Reuters dispatch May 24, a "senior U.S. official who spoke on condition of anonymity," told the British news agency: "Our goal is to end the war in Afghanistan, bring our troops home, leave behind enough capability to conduct CT [counter-terrorism] operations and to sustain necessary support to the local forces and Afghan state.... It remains a major, long-term U.S. commitment." Here are some reasons why:

(1) The U.S. has been holding "secret talks" with the conservative Islamic Taliban for months with the objective of reaching an agreement that will bring the Taliban into the Kabul government and perhaps in some provinces as well, under the authority of President Karzai. The purpose is to end the 10-year stalemated war against the Taliban and several fighting groups opposed to the American invasion, and to convey the impression that it has achieved victory. But the White House doesn't trust the Taliban, or Karzai for that matter, and wants its own "boots on the ground" after the main force departs.

According to an April 18 article in the Financial Times, the Obama Administration was so intent upon negotiating an agreement with the Taliban that it "quietly dropped its precondition that the Taliban sever links with al Qaeda and accept the Afghan constitution before holding face-to-face talks." These conditions now have to be met "at the end of talks." The U.S. acknowledges there are only about 50 al Qaeda members in Afghanistan these days.

(2) Neighboring Pakistan, which is essential to keep the Taliban under control in Afghanistan and as a transmission line for war supplies, is deeply distrusted by Washington, but

Pakistan's assistance in the region is required to bring about a peace agreement. Since Islamabad likewise distrusts the U.S. but appreciates its cash subsidies and needs a superpower friend as protection against its perhaps exaggerated fear of Indian enmity, the relationship remains viable — but the Obama government wants American troops to guide the process on the ground and for possible incursions into western Pakistan.

There have been reports that the U.S. was aggrieved to discover bin Laden was hiding in Pakistan for years. But cooperation will continue and the full details may not be revealed for years by either side, though each probably knows everything about the other's role in this affair. As they cooperate, both countries have been spying upon and keeping secrets from each other, and their findings may best remain among themselves.

(3) Most importantly the U.S. has no desire to completely withdraw from its only foothold in Central Asia, militarily positioned close to what are perceived to be its two main enemies with nuclear weapons (China, Russia), and two volatile nuclear powers backed by the U.S. but not completely under its control by any means (Pakistan, India). Also, this fortuitous geography is flanking the extraordinary oil and natural gas wealth of the Caspian Basin and energy-endowed former Soviet Muslim republics such as Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Lastly, Iran — a possible future imperial prize — is situated between Iraq to the west and Afghanistan to the east. The U.S. wants to keep troops nearby for any contingency.

Washington's foothold in Central Asia is a potential geopolitical treasure, particularly as Obama, like Bush before him, seeks to prevent Beijing and Moscow from extending their influence in what is actually their own back yard, not America's.

Both former Cold War adversaries are acutely aware of Washington's intentions and are trying to block U.S. maneuvers through the regional Shanghai Cooperation Organization and other means, such as Beijing's recent warm and supportive gestures toward an appreciative Islamabad. While China and Russia have supported the U.S. war in Afghanistan, they both — and no doubt Pakistan and India as well — strongly oppose the prospect of a long term U.S./NATO military presence in the region.

The White House has been twisting the Kabul government's arm to sign a "status of forces" agreement allowing a relatively large American contingent of troops, special forces, CIA operatives, paramilitary contractors, military trainers, etc. — perhaps between 10,000-20,000 occupying up to six military bases — to remain in Afghanistan after the end of the 2014 pullout date. President Obama might then claim that the Afghans requested the forces for their own security. So far the Karzai government is holding out, but eventual agreement is probable.

The closest Obama has come to publicly acknowledging the partial withdrawal effort was on 60 Minutes May 8 with the obscure comment that "we don't need to have a perpetual footprint of the size we have now."

The main problem in keeping a smaller "perpetual footprint" is that the Taliban insists on a total withdrawal and abandonment of all U.S. bases as well as troops. Otherwise they won't agree to the truce that is necessary to justify Obama's "honorable" withdrawal. The U.S. seems intent upon pounding the Taliban militarily until it agrees. Eventually, Washington may prevail by offering the Taliban more money and more political and administrative power in the new arrangement. Perhaps the troops might be renamed "contractors" and the U.S. could transfer the bases to Kabul, which would lease them back to the Americans.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PALESTINE:

Before mentioning the Obama/Netanyahu brouhaha in late May, we'll touch upon why the Israel-Palestine situation is central to America's MENA/Central Asia policy, and note why the U.S. seeks a two-state solution to the Palestinian question and why the present Israeli government won't go along.

The U.S. and most of its European allies view Israel as an important "Western" political, military and intelligence outpost in a resource-strategic, volatile and now "unstable" region of the world populated almost entirely by Arab Muslims. It will not allow Israel to go under.

Washington's superpower influence has convinced most Arab governments to mute their criticisms of Israel's mistreatment of the Palestinians, (Syria and Libya have been exceptions), but the Arab masses have always supported the cause of the Palestinian people and denounce both Israel and its American enabler. Now that these masses are beginning to speak for themselves the Palestine question is more important than ever.

The oppression of the Palestinian people is the main cause of anti-American attitudes throughout the Islamic world of about 1.4 billion people, mostly in 47 countries with majority Muslim populations. This number will grow to 2 billion by 2030.

At this time the U.S. is fighting in five Muslim countries, and seeking to seduce several resource-rich Central Asian Muslim countries while retaining its Arab satellites in MENA. Meanwhile, Washington is presiding over a debt-ridden ailing economy, its world leadership is declining, and several developing countries, led by China, are rising and seeking a more equitable world order than that put into place at the end of World War II when half the globe was subjugated to the big colonialist and imperialist powers.

Obviously, something has to give — and "resolving" the Palestinian crisis with two states seems to be the quickest and least expensive way for Washington to win the good graces of a fifth of the world population at a time when U.S. "leadership" is losing clout.

A fairly broad section of Israeli opinion also sees two states as a way out of the Palestinian dilemma — but the country is presently in the hands of a right/far right government led by Netanyahu's Likud Party, the anti-democratic and racist Yisrael Beiteinu extremists led by Avigdor Lieberman, and the ultra-orthodox religious party Shas. Most of these right wing extremists will do everything possible to stall an agreement with the Palestinians in hopes that in time something — anything — will happen that will allow the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza to be annexed to Israel proper.

The ultra-orthodox community (10% but growing fast), backed by many other religious citizens, adhere to the superstition that the deity "gave" Israel to the Jews, and that the Arabs are interlopers who should emigrate elsewhere. Many in Yisrael Beiteinu also want the Arabs to leave, but for ultra-nationalist reasons. Likud seems less fanatical but depends on the far right to retain power.

Since the U.S. government has made it clear for decades that it will defend, support and subsidize the State of Israel under all conditions, what's behind the headlines in recent days about a sharp disagreement between Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Obama?

Frankly, during his visit to the U.S. — where he met with Obama, addressed Congress and

delivered a speech to the pro-Israel lobby AIPAC — Netanyahu made a mountain out of a molehill to divert attention from his government’s refusal to take the basic steps required to resume negotiations with the Palestinians leading toward creation of two states.

The “molehill” was Obama’s call for the resumption of talks between both sides based on the boundaries that existed before the June war 1967 with “mutually agreed land swaps.”(Israel still occupies and is building settlements upon the land it seized in contravention of international law.)

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Actually, this has been the basic U.S. position for nearly two decades in discussions with Israel and talks between both sides. The Clinton and Bush 2 Administrations were in general agreement. The Palestinian Authority in the West Bank agrees with it, and now Hamas in Gaza as well, as did previous Israeli governments. They understood — as Obama made sure to articulate to the Israeli leader — that the “mutually agreed swaps” of land would be part of a final boundary agreement.

This means that a method would be found for Israelis to obtain much of the Palestinian land where it has illegally settled 500,000 of its citizens in the West Bank and East Jerusalem in exchange for swapping some of its own land and other concessions. Naturally, land would be exchanged to make it possible for the two parts of Palestine to be connected, even if just a narrow corridor.

The “mountain” was Netanyahu’s intentional misunderstanding that as a result of talks Israel was being told to return to the 1967 borders, which he charged were now “indefensible.” All that was missing from his distortion was the allegation that Obama was now adding one more “existential” menace to the plethora of dangers facing Israel, but it was implied. Both AIPAC and Congress focused on protecting Israel and genuflecting to Netanyahu. Obama’s cautious and weak call for talks was brushed aside, as Netanyahu had planned.

The House and Senate — Democrats and Republicans, in a rare display of bipartisanship — gave the Israeli leader a tremendous welcome replete with a score of standing ovations. Congress has been even more pro-Israel than the White House over the last decades. Part of the reason is the remarkable effectiveness of the pro-Israel lobbies on election campaigns. Some politicians owe their careers to AIPAC, and some have lost their careers when they publicly questioned Israel’s sanctity.

Another part stems from the political power of tens of millions of Christian evangelicals and fundamentalists who not only accept the supernatural theory that a divine being “gave” Israel to the Jews but believe the Christian superstition that the Jews must be in full possession of Israel (Palestine) before Jesus Christ will return to Earth for the “Rapture.”

Aside from Obama’s 1967 borders remark, all his comments just before and during Netanyahu’s self-serving visit were paeans to Israel and pledges of America’s support. He also displayed a dismaying inability to recognize a difference between oppressed and oppressor.

Obama (1) refused to call on Israel to stop building settlements in Palestinian territory; (2)

omitted mention of Israel's illegal demand to annex all Jerusalem; (3) did not refer to the Palestinian refugee situation; (4) insisted that the PA withdraw its application for statehood set to be debated at the UN in September, with a good chance of General Assembly approval (though an inevitable U.S. Security Council veto will obviate the vote); (5) opposed the unity moves between Fatah/PA in West Bank and Hamas in Gaza.

In addition Obama argued that the Palestinians must not only recognize the existence of Israel but should acknowledge "Israel as a Jewish state and the homeland of the Jewish people." In normal diplomatic exchanges mutual recognition is sufficient, without all the bending over backward expected of the Palestinians.

As far as state and homeland are concerned, there are more than a million Palestinians who have been living in what is now Israel since 1948 and for many generations earlier, in addition to refugees whose demand for a "right to return" has not been addressed. This is a matter for the negotiations, not dismissal beforehand by defining Israel in such fashion.

Many demands on both sides will be negotiated — but any commitments take place after, not before, negotiations. One more point on recognition. Much is made out of the fact that Hamas (and Fatah as well, but this usually is not mentioned) does not "recognize" Israel. But according to international law, recognition is between two states, not between a political party and a state.

Even when the right/far right coalition led by Netanyahu is defeated in a couple of years by the center right Kadima Party, it will be somewhat easier but still very rough going for the Palestinians. The political left is very small. There is no powerful center or center left party (though the weakened center-right Labor Party, which would join the new ruling coalition, sometimes thinks of itself as center left), and Kadima would have to make concessions to its coalition partners, then to the powerful right/far right in parliament, and then to the settlers and the die-hards.

Kadima, an offshoot of Likud, is led by former Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni who calls for negotiations with the PA, including land swaps, leading to a Palestinian state. But both Obama and Livni have made it clear in the past that the state they envisage for the Palestinians would be extremely weak, dependent on conservative Arab countries and the U.S., and probably not even allowed to have its own defense forces.

Right now, even that hurdle seems to be a long distance down a road that resembles an obstacle course, but the Palestinian people have shown themselves to be extremely persistent in the face of great odds, and whatever their final objective in the struggles to come they just might get there.

For our three-part article on "The U.S.-NATO War Against Libya," see the April 9, 2011, Activist Newsletter at <http://activistnewsletter.blogspot.com/>

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