

OBAMA'S HALFWAY HOUSE

We all had very high hopes for Barack Obama. And we still do. He is smart, curious, informed and he has a sense of humour, if only he'd display it more. But he inherited a nation in a funk and, one year into his presidency, he's not found a way to lift the mood, Americans feel mired.

At a fundamental level, that funk is about a power shift. The United States is not what it was. It got attacked and the response has proved draining in blood and treasure. Anger accumulated, frustrations and debt grew. America's 20th-century role is unravelling, albeit slowly, but its 21st-century role is not yet born.

Like it or not, we are witnessing the relative decline of the West. It's going to be a long, slow movie but we don't think the plot is going to reverse itself.

This transition prompts a couple of reactions. One is to heck with the world. Many Republicans are in this my way or the highway place. The other is: Let's adjust to the new reality through outreach and a new modesty. President Obama is somewhere in that zone. The thing is the president needs some results and we see him caught in a kind of halfway house. His gut tells him the world has changed and demands new policies but Washington politics keep him stuck in the conventional. His first year on the world stage has offered innovative speeches but largely unoriginal policy and no specific actions on the ground.

May be, he's not yet confident enough to have the courage of his convictions. Or perhaps he just needs more grown-ups in the White House. The transition from a very successful campaign to power is still a work in progress.

The issue is change. Obama has spoken of "*a new foundation.*" It's needed within and without, where the vital centres of growth have shifted to China, India, Russia and Brazil. But change is not about speeches. It is about conviction and courage. We don't see it happening for the moment, not with respect to Beijing, Tehran, Tel Aviv, or Havana, or ... Well, the list could go on.

In the 1950s, as he watched his country getting embroiled in the conflict that would become the Vietnam War, a US official observed: "*Whether the French like it or not, independence is coming to Indochina. Why therefore do we tie ourselves to the tail of their battered kite?*"

President Obama is still hitched to too many battered kites. There was the \$6 billion-plus arms sale to Taiwan, which predictably enraged Beijing.

Now re-imagined relationship with China is going to emerge as long as Beijing views Washington as meddling with its core strategic interests in this way.

How President Obama thinks he can double US exports by 2015 while provoking China is a mystery. How he expects any meaningful cooperation on Iran is equally hard to fathom.

When asking China about Iran policy, the Foreign Ministry think: "*sanctions would not fundamentally solve the problem. There are still diplomatic means that we can try regarding the nuclear issue.*" China stood strongly behind non-proliferation but called for patience in "*resolving the Iranian nuclear in a comprehensive and peaceful way.*"

That is a very considerable distance from Obama's tone in his State of the Union address on January, 2010, where he lumped Iran with North Korea (being so utterly different, they should not be paired) and warned Iranian leaders that they "*will face growing consequences. That is a promise.*"

And few days later, on February 2010, The United States made the deployments of anti-missile defences off Iran's coast and in a number of its Arab Gulf neighbours at a time of tension, which is certain to fuel tensions in a strategic region that supplies a third of the world's oil.

The United States is making the deployments at a time of tension in a long-running international row over Iran's nuclear programme, with Western powers calling for a fourth round of UN sanctions against Tehran for refusing to halt uranium enrichment.

The US deployment include specialised ships with missile-targeting capabilities off Iran's coast and expanded land-based Patriot defensive missile installations in Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain (Saudi Arabia has long had the Patriot missile defence system, while the UAE placed an order in 2008, Bahrain is also home to the US Navy Fifth fleet, Qatar hosts the US Central Command-Centcom and Kuwait has a large US military base).

This move is unlikely to please Iran, which has already warned its Arab neighbours in the Gulf not to take part in US moves against the Islamic Republic. And Tehran slammed the US plans, insisting Iran poses no danger to its Arab neighbours who had more to fear from Israel and Washington's interference in the region. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said on February 3, 2010 that: *"The West does not want to see friendly relations prevail in the region. Fortunately, there is a good understanding of the enemies conspiracies."*

The US administration has not publicly spoken about the reasons for the deployment but the reasons are multiple; its first goal is to deter Iran and to reassure Israel, which is Tehran's regional arch-foe.

And the second is to reassure the Arab states, so they don't feel they have to go nuclear themselves. But there is certainly an element of calming the Israelis as well.

Actually, President Obama is talking a lot but finally he is stuck in a halfway house. Obama wants a new relationship with China but he's stuck with the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act. He seeks a new relationship with Tehran but is relapsing into the old, sterile sanctions-threatening pattern at a moment of great political fluidity in Iran when American sabre-rattling is counterproductive. It is outreach that has unnerved the Iranian regime; threats serve the hard-liners. I am with Chinese patience for now.

In the Middle East, where he wants to redefine America's relationship with the Arab and Muslim world, and advance peace between Israel and Palestine, Obama finds himself listening to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's recent vows to keep some settlements in the West bank *"for eternity"*.

Israeli Prime Minister is grievously mistaken if he thinks that the world will give in blindly to his high-pitched propaganda campaign trumpeting Israeli support and assistance for developments in the Palestinian territories, especially in West Bank. For the past six months Western media have virtually gone overboard in reporting *"optimistic developments"* in Palestinians daily lives perpetuated primarily by Israel easing some restrictions in the occupied territories.

But the prevailing reality in the occupied Palestinian territories bears no resemblance to Netanyahu's claims.

The juggernaut of Israeli occupation still continues to crush the daily lives of the Palestinians even as their aspirations get trampled upon. In sharp contrast to the reports in Western media of developments, the daily lives of average Palestinians still offer a pathetic scenario as Tel Aviv's piercing grip controlling their lives shows no perceptible indication of loosening.

White's article, False Hopes for Palestine proves all-pervading colonisation of West Bank and East Jerusalem beyond all doubt. The Palestinian economy still remains on life-supporting devices, and international donations.

Cities like Jenin throw up scenes of rows of shuttered-down shops and business establishments, and checkpoints almost at every street corner. Sprouting of economic green shoots demand direct access to the rest of the world and a lifting of the restrictions on exports. As such hopes still remain a pipedream for the Palestinians; their free movement in Area C in West Bank is a fantasy. Over 60 to 70 per cent of West Bank still remains inaccessible to the Palestinians.

A conservative estimate shows that at least 200 Palestinian homes were demolished last year to accommodate Jewish settlements.

Robert Fisk, The Independent correspondent in Jerusalem was unequivocal in announcing that "*In the West Bank's stony hills, Palestine is slowly dying.*"

The tightening Israeli grip over West Bank and East Jerusalem virtually tantamount to "*ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians via bureaucracy.*"

Netanyahu's propaganda claiming Israeli support thus appears not just obscene but extremely perverse. With 69 checkpoints and 500 supplementary restrictions continuing to impede free movement of Palestinians in their own ancestral land, Netanyahu's claims of Israeli support and assistance for development in the Palestinian territories are perhaps the biggest mockery of freedom and undoubtedly the strongest vindication of Jean Jacques Rousseau's contention that "*man is born*" free but everywhere he is in chains.

President Obama, this is the true reality in the Palestinian territories and you have been unable to change the dynamic of ever widening estrangement between Israelis and Palestinians. We have seen no big new ideas, just a cool acquiescence to the Netanyahu's "*nyets*" that help make "*two-state solution*" one of the weariest phrases on the planet.

Of course, as nothing much has been done with the Israelis, while attending the seventh US-Islamic World Forum on February 2010, the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton pleaded for patience with the Obama administration's effort to do something about the concerns of the people of the Middle East.

Hillary Clinton acknowledged that they believe the US "*commitment is insufficient or insincere*" and feel Washington has not "*fully embraced the spirit of mutual respect and partnership*" President Barack Obama tried to project during the first three months of his administration. The US Secretary of State tried to reassure leaders attending the forum that the US administration fully intends to take the "*concrete steps*" needed to make essential changes in this part of the world.

But, she warned that this transformation "*cannot happen overnight or even in a year.*"

Arabs and Muslims are wary of the words used because they have been waiting for changes in the US policy not for one or two years but for more than 60 years. Ever since Israel was created of war and ethnic cleansing, the atmosphere in this area has been charged with anger and death.

This has grown. Israel continues to besiege Palestinians, colonise Palestinian land and kills Palestinian's resistance all over the world. Recent US transgressions have heightened six decades of antagonism. The US has transformed Iraq into a devastated and dangerous country and installed a pro-Iranian Shia regime in Baghdad. The Guantanamo Bay prison which holds Muslims indefinitely without trial has not been closed, as promised by President Obama. US-led Nato troops are prosecuting wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

And, while President Obama promised dialogue with Iran, during his visit Hillary Clinton berated Iran instead of proposing a date and venue for a meeting. Although Palestine is the font of popular Arab and Muslim anger against the US, US administration is doing nothing to curb Israel's military excesses and appetite for Palestinian land. The US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton regard Israel's colonies in occupied Palestine as illegal but she say some will stay under any final deal, pre-empting negotiations and she take no action to halt their funding by US organisations and individuals or to discourage US citizens from residing in these colonies.

There are practical steps the administration could take in this regard. Ban the transfer of US funds to Israeli colonies and prosecute for trespass on Palestinian land US citizens who lives in these colonies.

The administration can also use the various organs of the US government to block the sale and delivery of US manufactured weapons, ammunition and other military hardware to Israel. While the US has made a long-term commitment to Israel's existence and security, Washington should not in any way support Israel's occupation of the West bank and East Jerusalem, which Palestinians demands for their State, or its encirclement and blockade of Gaza. The US should also rein in Israel's tendency to attack neighbouring Lebanon and Syria and its threats against Iran.

On that point, when he came into office, the US president Barack Obama pledged, to the relief of many around the world, to rebuild strained relations with countries at odds with US interests, or at least to try.

After a disappointing start with Iran, North Korea and Venezuela, the US administration has recently turned its attention to Syria.

On the beginning of February, President Obama nominated an ambassador to Damascus after a five-year diplomatic absence and sent a senior diplomat to meet with its President Bashar Al Assad.

President Obama's strategy is predicated on the notion that a forceful engagement of Syria can strain its ties with Iran.

In all likelihood, it was that very US campaign to rally Arab countries against Iran, and its not-so-subtle attempts at wooing Syria, that prompted the Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to visit the Syrian capital last week to hold a summit of the *jabhat al Mumana*, the rejectionist front, which the leader of Hizbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, also attended.

In comments to the international media made in the presence of President Ahmadinejad, President Al Assad appeared to dash Obama's hopes for engagement. President Al Assad said that support for resistance movements *"is a moral and national duty in every nation, and also a religious legal duty. We hope the day will come when we can celebrate our religious victories and (the opposing forces') great loss. This day will come."*

These remarks may show that Syria sees US overtures as a sign of weakness and an admission of failure in its tentative to isolate Iran.

It is also possible that President Al-Assad to reassure his Iranian counterpart that his domestic troubles and United States pressure have not changed Syria's rationale for this strategic partnership.

Based on the long-standing ties between the two countries, many have argued that Damascus will never abandon an alliance that gives it incommensurate regional influence and strategic depth. Because of this, President Obama's outreach was destined to fail. President Ahmadinejad himself seems to agree as he said: *"Everyone must know that these relations are brotherly, deep, broad*

and everlasting. No factor can undermine these brotherly relations. These relations are becoming deeper, broader, and closer everyday
It is unreasonable to expect Syria to make a 180-degree policy shift in the short term, especially when it has legitimate demands against the US and Israel, including the return of the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.

And during her last trip to Qatar, the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton offer nothing on the Palestinian / Arab-Israeli front, but argue that Qatar and other Arab countries should restore Israeli interest and commercial offices closed down due to Israel's brutal attack on Gaza last year. She also wants the Arabs to open trade ties with Israel at a time it refuses to freeze colonisation activity for even a few months or to enter into serious negotiations with the Palestinians.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu says that Israel will "*never*" withdraw from East Jerusalem or the Syrian Golan Heights. What are you going to do about his obstinacy? President Obama might refuse contacts with him. Instead, Obama is sending senior administration officials to Israel.

Admiral Mike Mullen just completed a visit and Vice President Joe Biden also on February 2010. Admiral Mullen, did at least, make it clear that the administration opposes a unilateral Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear facilities. Let's hope that Obama and Biden will reaffirm that stance on the next few months.

Iran is, of course, the real reason, the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton travelled to Qatar to attend the Forum. She spoke of Iran's "*pursuit of nuclear weapons.*" She said, the administration is ready for "*meaningful engagement, but we don't want to be engaging while they are building their bomb,*" offering no proof of this grave accusation. She also accused Iran's Revolutionary Guards of taking power in the country, without providing evidence to back up her claim. She is prepared to go to great lengths to boost sanctions on Iran while doing nothing about Israel.

The US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton want Arab co-operation although Qatar, which hosted the Forum, and the UAE have strong commercial ties with Iran.

She tried to persuade the Saudis to lend a hand in persuading China, which opposes strengthening the sanctions regime, to go along. The administration needs China's vote in the Security Council to bless a new round of sanctions.

She also wanted the Saudi Arabia to reassure China on oil supplies if Iran were to cut off the flow of crude. This is a cheeky request. The US administration has just taken two decisions which have antagonised China: to sell a \$6 billion in arms to Taiwan and to arrange a meeting between the president Obama and the Dalai Lama, a symbol of Tibetan resistance to Chinese rule.

As the saying goes, the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is determined to rake in Taiwan's cash and bask in the aura of a man regarded as holy by many round the world without paying the price.

The Arabs also have prices on existential issues which you cannot ignore forever and at the peril's relations with Arabs world. Mrs Clinton, you should follow the courageous example of Congressman Brian Baird, a Democrat from Washington State, who called on the administration to deliver urgently needed food, medicines, and building material to Gaza by ship, breaking Israel's blockade of the strip and its 1.5 million hapless citizens.

He told about Gaza school children, "*We ought to bring roll-on, roll-off ships...right to the beach and bring the relief supplies in, in a modified version of the Berlin airlift.*" The supplies, he stated, could be handed over to UN aid

bodies. He also said the administration should send its envoy, George Mitchell, to Gaza to assess the destruction wreaked by Israel's 2009 offensive.

Brian Baird dared to speak out since he has declared his intention to retire from congress. Incumbency is, above all, the problem for the administration which needs the support for the right-wing pro-Israel lobby to stay in office and get Democratic candidates elected to Congress next fall. The 2012 presidential and congressional polls are looming. If the US administration wants traction on Palestine/Israel and good relations with the Arab and Muslims peoples, this administration have to free from the grip of this malign lobby.

President Barack Obama's dream of being a historically transformational figure like Franklin D. Roosevelt or Ronald Reagan may be slipping from his grasp.

To be sure, he's already made one lasting mark that changed the country's course, his election as the first African-American president broke a centuries-old racial barrier. He also could break through with bold new initiatives that change the course of history, as Richard Nixon did late in his first term when he opened US relations with communist China.

However, President Obama's quest to usher in a new liberal era, one with major new policies and a growing Democratic voter majority punctuating a shift away from the conservative era that Reagan ushered in, is in trouble and may be disintegrating. Healthcare is his best hope now and is a Senate plan that would leave millions still uninsured, dashing his promise of universal health care, and even that may already be out of reach.

Even if that healthcare bill is necessary and that it is the time to make a decision about the future of health care in America.

His final proposal put forward draws on the best ideas from all sides, including several put forward by Republicans summit. It will put Americans in charge of their own health care, ensuring that neither government nor insurance company bureaucrats can ration, deny, or put out of financial reach the care our families need and deserve.

As President Obama said: *"I strongly believe that Congress now owes the American people a final vote on health care reform. Reform has already passed the House with bipartisan support and the Senate with a super-majority of sixty votes. Now it deserves the same kind of up-or-down vote that has been routinely used and has passed such landmark measures as welfare reform and both Bush tax cuts."*

On that point, the final march for reform has begun, and the participation of all American is crucial for the President. Essentially, his proposal would change three things about the current health care system:

First, it would protect all Americans from the worst practices of insurance companies. Never again will the mother with breast cancer have her coverage revoked, see her premiums arbitrarily raised, or be forced to live in fear that a pre-existing condition will bar her from future coverage.

Second, his proposal would give individuals and small businesses the same choice of private health insurance that members of Congress get for themselves. And his proposal says that if an American still can't afford the insurance in this new marketplace, the government will offer tax credits based on the income, tax credits that add up to the largest middle class tax cut for health care in history.

And, finally, his proposal would bring down the cost of health care for everyone,

families, businesses, and the federal government, and that will bring down the deficit by as much as \$1 trillion over the next two decades. These savings mean businesses small and large will finally be freed up to create jobs and increase wages. With costs currently skyrocketing, reform is vital to remaining economically strong in the years and decades to come.

So, on that healthcare reform, President Obama is doing a wonderful and difficult job, and when he talked about change on the campaign, this is what he was talking about: coming together to solve a huge problem that has been troubling America for 100 years and standing up to the special interests to deliver a brighter, smarter future for generations to come.

Concerning the legislation to fight global warming is stalled in the Senate.

About forging peace in the Middle East, unfortunately, he hasn't been able yet to get the region's adversaries in the same room, let alone close to agreement.

Ending venomous partisanship? Washington is more polarised than ever. Leading his party to an enduring majority? Right now, it is heading in the other direction. He's tried, but to this point, he's failed. He got things done, but they're not the historic things that are transformational, because he's blocked by partisan.

President Obama himself set the bar higher than merely getting things done.

Because he didn't want an "inbox" presidency that simply reacted to problems, nor did he want to ride to re-election on popular but small measures. During the campaign, for example, he spoke admiringly of Reagan for having such a transformational impact, even if he disagreed with Reagan's course.

"Ronald Reagan changed the trajectory of America in a way that, you know, Richard Nixon did not and in a way that Bill Clinton did not. He put us on a fundamentally different path because the country was ready for it." Obama said in January 2008.

How did Obama lose the chance, so far at least, to enact the history-changing parts of his agenda after he won the biggest popular majority of any Democrat since Johnson in 1964 and came to office with big Democratic majorities in Congress?

He faced three main problems.

The recession forced him to spend time and political capital on a stimulus plan that may have reduced job losses, but didn't stop them.

A yearlong fight over healthcare, with buyoffs for select lawmakers, looked like politics as usual, scared Americans already sceptical about a government racing deeper into debt and produced no results.

Obama misread the political landscape at home and abroad and overestimated his ability to bend people his way. Reagan, by comparison, swept into office with a broad national appetite for cutting taxes, a grass-roots tax rebellion had started earlier in California, and for a big build-up in defence spending; Democrat Jimmy Carter already had started one.

With that mandate and a less polarised Congress, Reagan focused on his core objectives and was able quickly to push through the tax and defence policies that helped shape his presidency and transform the country's politics.

Johnson also moved quickly after the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963 and his landslide 1964 victory to enact what he called the "Great Society", a sweeping expansion of civil rights legislation, coupled with the creation of Medicare and Medicaid, the greatest expansion of government social welfare since Franklin D. Roosevelt.

President Obama, in the end didn't have that luxury, because the economy was such a mess, it derailed the other domestic items on his agenda and he had to use a lot of domestic political capital on the stimulus.

Now he is kind of used up his window.

Finally, the only area where Obama's actions have been more eloquent than words is in the elimination last year of Al Qaeda fighters, "*far more than in 2008,*" the president said.

This is a new but so far undeclared Obama doctrine: large-scale targeted killings. It is cheaper and more effective than ground invasions but raises issues that can't be passed over in silence even with collateral damages.

But Mr. President that method will not solve the Afghanistan's issues; it will just post pound the only viable solution: the political dialogue with all parties involved in this conflict and a final solution call the peace.

New foundations and new partners are needed. But they can't be built in halfway houses. It is still time for changes today, because tomorrow it may be too late for change

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