



The New DIGITAL REVOLUTION

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HAS OBAMA (INADVERTENTLY) BROKEN THE MOLD IN US FOREIGN POLICY?

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By Graham E. Fuller

Is it possible that President Obama — without articulating it, perhaps without even fully intending it — may have strayed into the radical re forging of American foreign policy?

For the first time since the fall of the Soviet Union — or even the end of World War II — a linked body of enshrined foreign policy axioms may be quietly unraveling: American exceptionalism, American unilateralism, America as world policeman, moral commentator and hector, global hegemon and architect of a "world order." Yesterday bombs were about to fall on Syria, now they are suspended. After months — years, decades — of talk about possible air strikes on Iran, suddenly we receive accounts of civil exchanges between the American and the Iranian presidents. These may only be false starts, but the larger implications beckon and burgeon. They start with the Middle East but radiate out to touch relations with Russia, China, Israel and the U.N., for starters.

Neoconservatives, hawks and liberal interventionists are aghast; progressives are heartened but holding their breath. Witness the mirror imaging in the U.S. media around these developments. The traditional nostrums don't vary: The U.S. must draw red lines; lines once drawn must be acted upon; U.S. credibility is at stake; military readiness must be pumped to permanent alert in the Middle East to meet permanent security threats; American monopoly of decision-making must be jealously husbanded on all that moves in the world. Hawks stand with liberal interventionists, fearful that Obama is giving away the American store in acts of colossal naiveté, weakness and inexperience. Progressives perceive in these same acts the first glimmers of wisdom and rationality creeping into U.S. policy formulation — hints of strategic perestroika that just might rescue the U.S. from spiraling decades of foreign policy disasters that have undermined the country in countless ways: wartime presidents, global recoil from our policies, massive defense budgets, self-fulfilling proclamation of enemies, interventions, national paranoia, the building of a national security state, and pervasive intrusion into citizens' private lives in the quest to keep America safe from tireless enemies.

Consider the linkages. Obama, on the brink of a new war in Syria, suddenly backs away. Taboo number one is shattered: It is possible to deal with Russia without fear that it is America's number one enemy (as U.S. presidential candidate Mitt Romney once put it). The realization dawns that Russia could be a responsible player in its own right whose interests in solutions to Middle East problems may overlap with ours as long as we cease trying to steal a march on Russia at every turn and scarf up its regional allies. Now it appears that cooperation with Russia might invigorate American clout in reaching a solution in Syria; Putin is

no longer the muscled fop. Indeed, Russia just might save us from yet another damaging war in an incendiary region.

So maybe unilateralism — a key source of U.S. troubles — is falling on hard times as well. Hawks grieve, progressives delight. We may just have to work with other great powers of the world rather than with the rotating list of wistful imperial wannabes in Europe willing to sign on to U.S. adventures. We may start recognizing the legitimate concerns and interests of other states — snapping the comfortable certainty that American interests are a “universal good” welcome to most of the world (except for those who flirt with the axis of evil).

Thus perhaps we can end our radio silence with Iran — a prickly state that has dared to view the Middle East outside the terms of the American gameplan. Is Cuba far behind? Perhaps a made-in-Israel interpretation of Middle East events may no longer be the required way of viewing the region. Perhaps a genuine global consensus on Palestine could be in the offing in which the U.S. yields up its monopoly over decades of its fruitless and toothless “peace process.” Concern for American strategic “credibility” with China may give way to sober calculation of joint interests. And the U.N. may actually turn out to have its uses.

Maybe we can't find a solution to the no-win Syrian morass. Nor does the world depend on obsessive U.S. intervention wherever we sense things are not good. (We're pretty selective though — when was the last time you read in the mainstream U.S. press about the 5.4 million dead in the Congo in little more than a decade?) Why can't the global “burden” be shared with others who have at least as large a stake as we do (in Syria, Gulf oil flows, Afghan security, Asian sea borders)? Then perhaps we don't need as massive a military as we have, or the burgeoning security institutions that back it up. And maybe we can then come off the hard drug of being the “indispensable nation.” Could it be that Obama's supposed weakness and vacillation is actually an “aha” moment, the first glimmer of wisdom in the dark tunnel of disastrous policy decades since we seized the poisoned chalice of the “world's sole superpower?”

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