

Obama's foreign policy disasters

By Greg Sheridan, The Australian, 2 April 2015

The Middle East is in chaos and conflict, and Barack Obama is about to surrender on Iran's nuclear program.

It is almost impossible to overstate the failure of the Obama administration in all areas of foreign policy. Nowhere is this failure likely to have more calamitous outcomes than in the Middle East.

The talks on Iran's nuclear program have been extended. We know Obama is mightily committed to a deal. We don't yet know the terms of the deal. But in general the restrictions on Iran's nuclear program, according to the leaks about the negotiations, have become weaker and weaker.

Failures in Iran and Yemen

First, Iran was not to have uranium enriching centrifuges. Then it was not to have very many of them. Then it was apparently to have 6000 or so of them.

First, Iran was to ship its nuclear fuel out to Russia for processing. Then it wasn't.

First, Iran was going to get rid of its nuclear stockpile, then it wasn't.

Yemen has recently collapsed into a failed state after Houthi Shia militia took over the capital. The Shia militia is backed by Iran. Saudi Arabia has been bombing its positions to reinstate Sunni rule. It is also leading the formation of a united Arab force, which means a Sunni force.

All of this is to stop Iranian expansion. Iran now controls a great deal of Lebanon through its client, Hezbollah. It has enormous influence in the Shia majority Iraq and has led the effective fighting there against Islamic State, while US-led forces, including Australia, are reduced to supplying air power to bolster Iranian military efforts. Iran is also the most important backer of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Iran has been the big winner

Taken altogether, while war and instability have spread across the Middle East, Iran has been the big winner.

The US is broadly complicit in Iran's rise, although it is belatedly backing Saudi efforts in Yemen.

The Washington Post recently ran a devastating editorial on the nuclear negotiations with Iran. First, it said, these negotiations were supposed to be about wiping out Iran's ability to produce nuclear weapons one day. As the talks have gone on, and Obama's desperation for any kind of deal has become obvious, the talks have become likely to ratify and endorse an ongoing, vast, Iranian nuclear program, with obvious weapons potential. This would give Iran's nuclear program international legitimacy for the first time.

Second, Obama has done nothing to stop Iran's growing power over the Arab world.

Domestically weak and isolated

And finally, Obama's position within the US is so weak, and so isolated, that he daren't risk submitting whatever deal he makes with Iran to either house of congress because he knows it would be rejected. In this he is a great contrast to previous presidents who have sought congressional approval for their biggest moves in the Middle East.

As the Obama presidency draws to a close it is increasingly difficult to nominate a single element of its foreign policy that you could call a success. The administration at times talks a good game. But it delivers almost nothing.

In Obama's first administration this was disguised by three important factors. First, there was the simple, vast inertia of American policy. It takes a long time to change it, for better or for worse.

Second, Obama's intense political caution, perhaps his defining characteristic as a politician, meant that despite his soaring rhetoric his real intentions and moves were muffled, confusing and mostly incremental.

And third, in the first administration he appointed serious figures, notably Robert Gates and Hillary Clinton, as his secretaries of defence and state. Looking back, the notable thing about their respective tenures is how often they were second-guessed by the White House and their best instincts and policy positions undermined.

But they lent the first Obama administration a gravity that is wholly absent from the second administration.

The most feckless and ineffective president

Obama may turn out to be the most feckless and ineffective president in foreign policy the US has had since World War 11. Two apparently unrelated incidents illustrate the nature of the second Obama administration.

First, in Syria, the US President drew a red line. If Assad used chemical weapons he would face swift and severe US punishment. This may or may not have been a wise threat to make. I always thought striking Assad a very dubious proposition. But when Assad crossed the red line Obama immediately scuttled for a retreat, making the most clumsy and inelegant diplomatic collapse imaginable, deciding that after all he would need congressional approval and he couldn't get that so better not try.

The point of all that is that it fatally undermined Obama's credibility. And the credibility of the American president is central to global security order.

The second example is the Obama administration's opposition to its friends and allies joining China's new infrastructure bank. Again, this may or may not have been good policy. But the wilful neglect of Asian diplomacy has been a defining characteristic of the second Obama administration. To tell everyone, as the Americans did, that convincing friends not to join the

bank was US policy and then not to have the clout, the wherewithal, the relationships to make anything out of that policy is again a dreadful blow to US credibility.

It is impossible to think of anything Obama has achieved in foreign policy.

The reset with Russia? You've got to be kidding. Friendship with Ukraine? The outreach to Iran? This has empowered the mullahs beyond their wildest dreams. The Cairo speech to the Muslim world? The Middle East is now a smoking ruin. John Kerry's endless involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian dispute? This has yielded precisely nothing.

By the way, as the Middle East reduces to a fierce contest between Sunni and Shia forces, can anyone, beyond the Obama White House, still believe that Israel is the central problem in the region and the cause of all the other problems?

Obama can be a dangerous friend to allies

Obama can be a dangerous friend to allies who try to help him. But mostly he quarrels with or ignores allies, and as Benjamin Netanyahu showed in Israel, quarrelling with Obama is a contributor to electoral success in many nations. But for countries that are sworn enemies of the US, Obama is endlessly obliging, as Iran is discovering.

Obama seems to think foreign policy consists mainly of receiving applause from undergraduate audiences for platitudinous speeches. He is the first truly postmodern president, for which no text truly exists beyond the author.

For the rest of us, who live in the pre-postmodern world, it's a mess.