

Obama's blunder gives us a nuclear Iran

By Greg Sheridan, The Australian, 16 July 2015

Barack Obama's nuclear deal with Iran is a wretched capitulation by a weak President whose word means nothing.

So many American red lines are given up in this deal it makes your head spin. They suffered the same fate as Obama's red lines with Syria. You use chemical weapons and we'll react, Obama told the Syrians. But he was only joking. Since then America's adversaries in the Middle East, and all over the world, have become significantly bolder.

The Iranians completely outmanoeuvred Obama

But this was not hard because as time went on it became increasingly obvious Obama was desperate for a deal.

The Obama presidency is like the worst aspects of the Rudd and Gillard governments on super steroids. Everything is calculated only for its announcement effect. The photo op, the moment of apparent triumph and adulation from the usual suspects, is all that counts.

Julia Gillard gave us the East Timor solution to boatpeople when no such solution existed. Kevin Rudd declared that we would urgently build the 12 most capable conventional submarines in the world, then did absolutely nothing about it. They were Obama moments writ small. This nuclear deal is the Obama moment writ large.

No serious analyst thinks it will work

There surely cannot be a serious analyst anywhere in the world who thinks it will work. I am tempted to compare it with the 1994 agreement Bill Clinton concluded with the North Koreans. But such a comparison would be unfair to Clinton. It was a tougher deal than the Iranians have got, and at least Clinton and his folks believed it might work.

In this deal, the cynicism of Obama is sublime. He can announce victory, perhaps pocket a second Nobel Peace Prize, and leave the world to deal with a nuclear armed Iran down the track.

Australia has no alternative than to cautiously welcome the deal, much as we try privately to get the President to behave like a president. Tony Abbott was right to give the deal a cautious welcome but then say: "I probably should stress the caution at least as much as the welcome."

Foreign Minister Julie Bishop seemed equally sceptical in remarks she made to a Jewish news organisation, but a transcript of these remarks, or anything similar, was not issued generally, while her other interviews on the issue, the transcripts of which were also remarkably slow in being issued, seemed more upbeat. Surely our formidable and high-achieving Foreign Minister is not succumbing to the temptation that plagued some of her predecessors of changing her tone from one audience to another?

To knowing audiences it's all baloney

Our estimable Foreign Minister can quite reasonably claim that in answering one media outlet's questions she is not required to issue these remarks to all and sundry. Fair enough. But the sense of a difference in tone, that we must go along with the Americans because that's what we must do, but to knowing audiences we acknowledge that it's all baloney, persists, perhaps unfairly.

The benefits in this deal for Iran are immense. It gets tens, ultimately hundreds, of billions of dollars in sanctions relief.

Despite the nonsensical notion of a sanctions "snapback" if Iran is found to violate the deal, the business of constructing international consensus for effective sanctions is so laborious, painstaking and time-consuming that once sanctions are gone there is very little chance of their ever being imposed again, especially as Iran will deny any violation.

Iran also gets the inestimable benefit of having the whole international community grant complete legitimacy to its vast nuclear establishment. It does not have to destroy or abandon one single nuclear facility. Given its exemplary record of cheating on all nuclear constraints in the past — including constructing secret facilities that were discovered only because of defector testimony — the cover this gives for who knows what activities in the future is immense.

The inspections regime is infinitely weaker

But what about inspections, won't they prevent Iran from cheating? The inspections regime in this deal is infinitely weaker than that which the Americans previously said was their absolute minimum. There are no surprise inspections and military facilities are altogether off the table. If a regime as sophisticated as Iran's cannot dodge an inspection regime as loose and ramshackle as that, then North Korea is headed for liberal democracy.

Don't we need Iran's help to confront Islamic State? Isn't Iran becoming more moderate?

As to moderation, the allegedly moderate President of Iran, Hasan Rowhani, was marching through the streets of Tehran last Friday at the head of the annual "Death to America! Death to Israel!" parade, in which those two plainly moderate and reassuring slogans were shouted by the crowds.

It is true the Iranians are providing the only really effective fighters (apart from the Kurds) against Islamic State in Iraq. This is because the Iranians are running a vicious Shia versus Sunni war throughout the Middle East and have motivated militias on the basis of sectarian hostility. These militias are themselves typically cruel towards conquered populations, though not on the scale of Islamic State.

But one of the key reasons the Iraqi state is failing so abysmally in its dealings with its Sunni population areas is because Iran has interfered so heavily with the Iraqi government and played the sectarian card so strongly.

Hezbollah is still a proscribed terrorist organisation under Australian law. It has an extravagant record of terrorism, dating back to the murder of hundreds of US servicemen in Lebanon in the 1980s. The main sponsor and director of Hezbollah is Iran. Hamas, the Palestinian group that rules Gaza, is the most extreme of the Palestinian organisations and has a charter filled with extravagant anti-Semitism. Its chief international backer is Iran.

In Syria, Iran always backed Hafez al-Assad. Under North Korean tutelage, Assad made a strong effort to build a clandestine nuclear reactor.

This appalling sellout

Iran has been up to its eyeballs in nuclear proliferation and missile proliferation efforts throughout the Middle East. In Yemen, Iran backed the Shia rebels who destroyed the government, which was co-operating with the US in fighting Islamic State, al-Qa'ida and related groups.

The enemy of my enemy is not necessarily my friend.

Western politicians typically cannot understand Middle Eastern regimes with theological - ambitions. This appalling sellout will give us infinite trouble down the road.