

Obama's road to disaster

By Greg Sheridan, The Australian, 8 August 2015

The presidency of Barack Obama has reached a stage of decomposition akin to that of a spent uranium shell lingering dangerously on an abandoned battlefield.

Obama's presidency is now a deformed caricature of its former self — vaguely recognisable, intensely unattractive, dangerous to be near.

I reach this melancholy and unattractive conclusion following Obama's truly bizarre argument that the only alternative to his capitulation to Iran is war.

A statement almost clinically deranged

This is a statement almost clinically deranged.

It combines everything that is bad in the Obama presidency: rhetorical overreach, emotional blackmail, supreme arrogance and an almost demented failure to confront reality.

Obama's deal with Iran is the worst possible deal. It will in the long run likely make the Middle East far more unstable. More important, it makes the prospect of the spread of nuclear weapons throughout the Middle East much likelier.

As we commemorate the 70th anniversary of the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, we can pause to remark how well the world has done to prevent a second hostile use of the unimaginable devastation of nuclear weapons.

This is a triumph of our species, in some respects a rare triumph. But Obama's Iran deal, and the success of Islamic State and similar groups throughout the Middle East and North Africa, and now the disastrous new actions of Turkey, radically increase the chances that we won't be able to maintain this 70-year success.

Obama's Iran deal achieves the opposite of what it claims

There is no need to recount again all the ways in which Obama's Iran deal achieves exactly the opposite of what it claims.

At the most basic level, one of the main ways the world has prevented the spread of nuclear weapons has been to prevent the spread of the most sensitive elements of nuclear technology.

Thus, most nations that have peaceful nuclear energy programs do not enrich their own uranium. They buy enriched uranium to use as nuclear fuel.

The Obama agreement with Iran grants complete legitimacy to Iran's possession of every part of the nuclear cycle, including advanced uranium enrichment.

There is not a serious strategic analyst in the world who does not believe that Iran's nuclear program is bent towards ultimate nuclear weapons capability.

The enforcement and inspections regime is so weak — 24 days' formal notice and advance negotiation of access for any inspection of a non-declared nuclear site — that the ability of Iran to cheat on this deal over time is spectacular.

Obama was so desperate to get this deal that he even threw in non-nuclear concessions tools such as the progressive lifting of conventional weapons and missile technology embargoes on Iran.

A vastly stronger Iran will in time have nuclear weapons

The result of the deal is that a vastly stronger Iran will in time certainly have nuclear weapons, sophisticated air defences to protect them and long-range missiles to deliver them.

So, was the only alternative to this turning of all four cheeks submission really war?

Of course not.

Continued and intensified sanctions, coupled with comprehensive arms and technology - embargoes, offered the best chance of seriously delaying and perhaps preventing a nuclear-armed Iran.

But this would have yielded no moment of fatuous and fantastic triumph, such as Obama is awarding himself now.

The Platonic ideal of the postmodern political leader

It is in this that Obama reveals himself as the Platonic ideal of the postmodern political leader. It is the transient moment of media triumph that counts, not the substantial reality.

Postmodern political leaders tend to keep well away from substantial reality because it's so messy and intractable.

It is worth contrasting the US President's behaviour with that of another leader, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Netanyahu has been criticised as a fearmonger over Iran, and for implicitly threatening a military strike on Iran without ever following through.

The fearmongering charge is ridiculous. Iran keeps threatening to wipe his nation off the map. But the implicit threat of military action had a serious strategic purpose, which, before Obama's surrender, it had in large measure achieved.

I never thought it very likely Israel would strike Iran. There were three considerations that led to this conclusion.

One, if Israel had a good shot at Iran's nuclear program, it would have taken it long ago. The technical challenge of such an attack is enormous.

Two, when Israel is really going to do something like this it doesn't talk about it in advance, as the earlier attacks on Syrian and Iraqi nuclear reactors demonstrate.

And three, the political and military costs of such a strike for Israel would be enormous.

But by convincing the Americans, and especially the Europeans, that he might conduct such a strike, Netanyahu forced them to take the Iranian nuclear threat seriously.

Netanyahu made the Iranian situation urgent

Democratic politicians are always inclined to put off the important to deal with the urgent. Netanyahu made the Iranian situation urgent.

So Obama has all but guaranteed a nuclear-armed Iran down the track, which must surely lead Iran's bitter enemy Saudi Arabia and long-term rivals Egypt and Turkey eventually to acquire nuclear weapons as well.

So how do Turkey and Islamic State also figure in increasing the risk of nuclear proliferation?

Turkey has recently begun bombing Islamic State targets in Syria and opened its air bases to allow US planes to do the same.

Good news, yes?

Actually, no.

Turkey has used the cover of striking Islamic State to hit its real enemy, the Kurds of Syria.

One reason the war against Islamic State is going so slowly, and so relatively poorly, is because most of the regional powers have other priorities, more important to them than defeating Islamic State.

The Sunni powers are scared of Islamic State but they are more scared of Shia Iran and other Shia military forces.

The Turkish government hates the Kurds as a political force. Some Kurdish extremists have certainly been guilty of terrorism, but mostly not for some time and nothing of the scale of Islamic State.

Only two ground forces have been effective against Islamic State in Syria and Iraq: the Kurds and the Shia militias led by Iran. The Syrian air force has been effective, but its army less so.

Turkey is crippling the fight against Islamic State

So by attacking the Kurds, Turkey is crippling the fight against Islamic State. The Turks have in any event been pretty two-faced in their efforts on Islamic State.

Until recently, the Turks have been permissive in letting foreign fighters flow into Syria and Iraq. In exchange, Islamic State atrocities against Turkey have been rare.

This all seems to have changed just lately.

But in attacking the Kurds the Turks are doing even graver long-term damage.

The autonomous Kurdish region of Iraq is the only part of Iraq and Syria that has been governed in a consistently decent manner.

The Kurds deserve a homeland and all the evidence is that they would run it relatively well. By savagely attacking them, the Turkish government is attacking one of the few sources of moderation in the Arab world.

As for Islamic State, it has demonstrated that a terrorist group can take and hold large swaths of territory and population.

It has radically upped the ante on the pornography of violence and the celebration of extreme atrocity.

A dirty radiological bomb to a Western target

If it continues to control a de facto state it will eventually find a way to deliver at least a dirty radiological bomb to a Western target.

Obama's surrender on Iran, Turkey's attack on the Kurds, the continuing success of Islamic State in holding its new state — three horrible portents for the future in the Middle East.