

Obama's pivot to China



INTRODUCTION: LINDSEY GERMAN, AT LONG LAST, STOPS NOT ONE, BUT TWO WARS!

On August the 29th 2013, the much-diminished British anti-war movement once again mustered its remaining foot-soldiers to make a stand against yet another military intervention in the Middle East. As they gathered in Parliament Square, it seemed that the juggernaut of the US war machine was already well and truly in motion.

It had only been a week or so before when reports of yet another atrocity, in what had become an increasingly bloody civil war in Syria, began to circulate in both the social and mass media. But what was significant about this atrocity, which had occurred in a rebel-held area of Damascus, was that it was not bloody. Pictures of those killed showed no signs of the external wounds that might be expected from the use of conventional ordinance. As a consequence, these pictures, together with mounting evidence drawn from eye-witness accounts, seemed to suggest that the victims of this atrocity had been killed by the use of chemical weapons.

What is more, all the evidence seemed to point to the Syrian regime as being the obvious culprit. After all, the Syrian regime was known to possess substantial quantities of chemical weapons. The Syrian army was in the middle of a concerted attack on rebel-held areas of Damascus and had for some time been shelling the area. And eye-witness accounts seemed to suggest that the chemical attack had been delivered by artillery shells coming from the direction of the Syrian army's positions.

Only twelve months previously, the Obama administration had been seen to have given a stern warning to the Syrian regime that, if it dared to use chemical weapons against rebel forces, then the US was prepared to take swift and punitive military action. In the weeks preceding this atrocity in Damascus there had been numerous rumours that the Syrian army had been using chemical weapons on a small scale, but up until then none of these reports could be verified on the ground. As such, these rumours had been dismissed by supporters of the Syrian government as simply attempts on the part of various rebel factions to trigger a US military action against the Syrian regime. But in this case, as if by pure coincidence, the UN monitoring group, which had been set up to check for the use of chemical weapons in Syria, just happened to be paying a visit to Damascus. The monitoring group was therefore ideally placed to visit the scene of the massacre and gather the necessary evidence before it was lost or dissipated.

Initial reports from the monitoring group soon provided Obama administration with what could be deemed sufficient circumstantial evidence to show that the Syrian Army had used chemical weapons. The Syrian regime had crossed Obama's red line, and therefore there was no other option but for the US and its allies to launch a punitive military strike.

Hence, it could be claimed that Obama had found a perfect pretext to intervene in the civil war on the side of the rebels. The Americans could hope that an air strike, with sufficient 'shock and awe', could decisively tip the balance of the civil war in favour of the rebels. Assad could then go same the way as Gaddafi had in Libya. All that was left was to go through a few political and legal formalities.

Although, as President and Commander-in-Chief of the US armed forces, he had the powers to an order immediate attack on Syria, Obama thought to cover himself in case a military attack

went wrong by seeking Congressional approval. Eager to demonstrate that Britain was still America's faithful junior partner, David Cameron followed Obama's lead and recalled Parliament from its summer recess in order to gain a clear mandate for joining America's latest 'coalition of the willing'.

Thus it was that the hundred or so faithful anti-war foot soldiers found themselves corralled into a corner of Parliament Square with the forlorn hope of influencing MPs to risk their careers and 'vote according to their conscience'. Few could have expected that a sufficient number of MPs would heed their appeals. The best they could do was to register their opposition to the war and once again declare that 'the war would not be in their name'.

But, against all expectations, not the only expectations of those in Parliament Square but also of most bourgeois commentators, Cameron failed to obtain his mandate. This was not all; Cameron swiftly accepted his defeat with good grace and promptly announced that Britain would not be able to join Obama's 'coalition of the willing' after all! Suddenly, after more than ten years of tireless campaigning against 'imperialist wars' in the Middle East, it seemed that the British anti-war movement had managed to stop Britain going to war for the first time!

Lindsey German of the Stop the War Coalition excitedly proclaimed the day after the vote:

The anti-war movement and wider anti-war opinion has scored a great victory.

The vote by MPs in the UK's Houses of Parliament last night not to join a US intervention against Syria was a personal defeat for David Cameron and Nick Clegg, but more widely represented the first time since Suez in 1956 that Britain has broken from support for US foreign policy.

This time, enough MPs had the guts to vote against another intervention.

Their arguments and information were influenced by a strong public opinion against such a war, itself a product of a mass movement which didn't stop a war ten years ago but has prevented a further one now.

To all our regret we didn't stop the war on Iraq, but that tide of anti-war opinion has made itself felt again in the past few days.

For once, MPs reflected that majority public opinion in the country and Cameron has been forced to admit that he will no longer join any such attack and that Britain will play no part in any Syrian intervention.¹

But of course, as Lindsey German was keen to point out, defeating the British Government's plans to join a punitive strike against Syria was only a 'partial victory'. As with the Iraq war ten years before, British military participation was politically useful for the US but was far from militarily essential. The US could still go it alone. So, as Lindsey German concluded - against all the cynics that had for so long derided the Stop the War Coalition's 'Grand Old Duke of York' strategy - of an endless cycle of 'A to B' marches alternating with mass rallies with ever diminishing numbers, spiced up with a few controlled 'direct actions' - it was now the time to step up the pressure:

Remember that when people say demonstrating doesn't make a difference: it did, and it does. So keep protesting, keep marching, keep blocking roads. And please join us out on the streets.²

With the votes in congress authorising military action against Syria scheduled for mid-September, there seemed little sign that Cameron's defeat in Parliament had undermined Obama's determination to go to war. Indeed, unperturbed by Cameron's defeat, all the pronouncements coming out of Washington appeared to suggest that a military strike against Syria was now inevitable; the only issue was the scale that it would take. Nevertheless, Britain's withdrawal from the 'coalition of the willing' certainly served to both galvanise the American anti-war movement and emboldened those in the US Congress who were sceptical of yet another military adventure in the Middle East. Obama could not be so certain of obtaining such an overwhelming majority for military action that he had hoped for when he had to ask for Congressional authorisation.

As it turned out, as the Congressional vote loomed, Putin - the Russian President - pulled off a startling and unexpected diplomatic coup that transformed the situation. Putin announced that he had persuaded the Syrian government to accept in principle an internationally supervised decommissioning of all its chemical weapons if the US government refrained from launching its proposed military strike against Syria.

Despite having implacably asserted only a few days earlier that it was too late for a diplomatic solution to avert military action, as John Rees of the Stop the War Coalition saw it, the US government had been 'bounced' into accepting Syria's offer, at least in principle. The juggernaut

¹ Lindsey German, Stop the War Coalition newsletter, August 30th 2013.

² Ibid.

of the US war machine had been halted at the last minute.³

But this was not all. By refraining from launching a military attack on Syria – Iran’s principal ally – the door was opened for improved diplomatic relations between the US and Iran. Indeed, by November a deal had been reached between the US and Iran to end the seven year stand-off over the issue of Iran’s nuclear programme. Ever since 2006, the US had been ratcheting up sanctions against Iran and had repeatedly threatened to launch an overwhelming air strike against Iran’s nuclear installations unless the Iranian regime agreed to halt the production of weapons-grade uranium.

This seemingly intractable dispute, which according to the Stop the War Coalition had repeatedly brought the two nations to the brink of war, had now been resolved. Thus Lindsey German could claim that the anti-war movement had at long last, stopped not one, but two wars!

So how was it that a few hundred protesters could halt a US government so determined to go to war in 2013, when ten years before two million failed to stop the invasion of Iraq? Was it simply that the anti-war movement had at long last won the argument? Or was it, as the more sophisticated ‘Marxists’ in the Stop the War Coalition insist, ultimately due to the terminal decline of US imperialism? We shall have cause to consider such explanations later, but the simplest and most immediate answer to this question is that the Obama regime had never really been so determined to go to war over Syria in the first place.

A: FROM THE MIDDLE EAST...

Obama, hawks and the peaceniks

By the time Obama had begun his bid to become the first black President of the United States of America, it had become widely accepted that the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq had been a costly disaster. Despite spending more than an estimated \$3 trillion, and the sacrifice of the lives of thousands of American soldiers, the situation in both Iraq and Afghanistan remained dire. The sectarian strife sown by US policy of divide and rule had brought Iraq to the brink of an all-out civil war; while allied forces were barely holding in check the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

As one of the few Democrats who had been prepared to stick his head above the parapet and openly oppose Bush’s decision to invade Iraq, Obama had been able to position himself as the most credible ‘anti-war’ candidate. This positioning certainly played an important part in



winning the Democrat nomination over the pro-war Hillary Clinton, and subsequently enabled him to mobilise the Democrats’ activist base that was to prove vital for him in winning the Presidential election against the Republican candidate John McCain. However, rather predictably, the high hopes that had been raised by Obama’s election victory for many in the anti-war movement were soon to be dashed.

Even the most hawkish Republicans had not envisaged a permanent military occupation of Iraq, beyond the establishment of a few military bases. Indeed, in the run up to the war in Iraq, neo-conservative proponents of the invasion had assured their critics that the full scale military occupation of Iraq need not last more than a few months. Five years on, the issue for ‘doves’ and ‘hawks’ had now become that of how best the US could extricate itself from Iraq without making matters far worse.

When Obama assumed office, it was already becoming clear that the strategy being implemented by General Petraeus, which had been launched by Bush’s Secretary of State Robert Gates in 2007, was bearing fruit. By promoting the backlash against Al-Qaeda’s and other jihadists’ control over the ‘Sunni heartlands’ of Iraq through the arming and organisation of the ‘Awakening Councils’, backed up by a substantial surge in the number of US troops, the ‘Sunni insurgency’ against the Shia-dominated Iraqi government was being broken. As such, it now appeared that the ‘corner had been turned in Iraq’ and the way was open for a gradual and orderly withdrawal of coalition

³ Stop the War Coalition newsletter, September 13th 2013.

troops. Thus while it is true that Obama can certainly claim that within his first term of office he fulfilled his promise to end the US military occupation of Iraq, it can also be argued that if McCain had won the election the withdrawal of US troops might not have taken that much longer.

What is more, the draw down in the number of US troops in Iraq was accompanied by a surge in troop levels in Afghanistan, as the Obama administration sought to defeat the Taliban insurgency in the Helmand province and prepare the way for the eventual ending of the US occupation. This, together with the greatly expanded use of drones to assassinate leading militant jihadists operating in the Pakistan border provinces, giving rise to reports of considerable 'collateral damage' in the form of deaths of 'innocent civilians', his tardy efforts in closing down Guantanamo Bay, and his sanctioning of military intervention against Colonel Gaddafi's regime in Libya, all contributed to the disillusionment with Obama's claims to be an anti-war President.

But perhaps the most important indictment against Obama for the anti-war movement has been his policy towards Iran. It might be admitted that Obama was less inclined to threaten to launch air strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities if Iran continued to defy the 'international community's' demands that it cease the development of the capacity to produce nuclear weapons. But Obama had let it be known that if the Israeli government decided it was necessary to launch a military strike to prevent Iran obtaining nuclear capability then he would find it very difficult to resist pressure from the American Israeli lobby to back Israel up. Furthermore, Obama insisted on ratcheting up international sanctions against Iran far beyond those that had been imposed under Bush. As a result, since Obama's election in 2008, economic sanctions had brought the Iranian economy close to collapse. This ratcheting up of sanctions has brought severe material hardship, particularly for the Iranian working class that has had to bear non-payment of wages, wage cuts, mass redundancies and food and fuel shortages. With these sanctions, Obama can certainly be accused of waging war on Iran by other means.

Hence, far from breaking from his predecessor's belligerent foreign policy, particularly towards the Middle East, Obama, it may be argued, has for the most part continued it. At best Obama's foreign policy can therefore be seen as Bush-lite in style, if not in substance. However, from the view point of not only neo-conservative ideologues on the right wing of the Republican Party, but also of 'moderate' conservatives and realists of both major parties,

as well as liberal humanitarian interventionists close to his own administration, far from being too bellicose, Obama's foreign policy towards the Middle East has been far too timid.

Although all but the most hawkish neo-cons accept his basic position that following the disastrous occupation of Iraq, American foreign policy towards the Middle East should avoid committing 'troops on the ground', Obama stands accused of being far too reluctant in using other forms of military coercion, such as imposing no fly zones, air strikes or supplying weapons to pro-American forces. As a result, it is claimed, the US has appeared weak and unable to provide the necessary 'international leadership' to impose a resolution to the conflicts in the Middle East.

In the case of Libya, it had been France backed by the UK that had originally taken the lead in advocating military intervention to support the anti-Gaddafi rebellion. Obama had dragged his feet for weeks. It was then only rather reluctantly that Obama had agreed to impose a no-fly zone which was to tip the balance in favour of the rebels. Even then Obama could be accused of failing to provide the military and political backing to support a pro-western government. As a result, Libya is now so riven by competing militias that the government is powerless to control, and the Libyan state is close to disintegration.

In the case of Syria, the failure to provide adequate backing to pro-Western rebels against the Syrian regime has resulted not merely in Assad remaining in power, but in the descent of Syria into a bitter and prolonged sectarian civil war, giving rise to a profusion of anti-American jihadist militias. What is more, with the recent major advances of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the civil war in Syria has re-ignited the civil war in Iraq. With Libya, Syria and Iraq in flames and teetering on the verge of disintegration, the chickens can be seen to be coming home to roost for Obama's 'peacenik' foreign policy.

From the 'Arab Spring'...⁴

It has long been observed by both liberal and neo-conservative critics that there has been a sharp contradiction in US foreign policy between the ostensible American aim of defending, if not extending, 'freedom and democracy' across the globe, and its resolute support for repressive and autocratic governments in the 'third world'. This has particularly been the case with respect to the strategically important oil-producing region of the Middle East. Ever since it supplanted Britain and France to become the dominant Western imperial

⁴ See Intakes: 'The Arab spring in the autumn of capital' in *Aufheben* #21.

power in the region following the Suez crisis of 1956, the US has sought to develop a system of bilateral alliances with the autocratic monarchies and emirates of Arabia and military dictatorships like Egypt: first to counter the influence of the Soviet Union; and subsequently to contain the 'rogue states' of, alternatively, Iraq and Iran. This contradiction was to come to the fore with outbreak of the 'Arab Spring'.

The popular uprisings, which started in Tunisia and then rapidly spread through the Arab world in early 2011, were a result of a complex of differing causes and social forces. However, perhaps not surprisingly, it was the young, urban, educated and social media savvy elements of the emergent movement that were at the forefront of reports of the mass protests in the Western media. With their articulation of the demands for an end to government corruption and for 'free and fair' democratic elections, it certainly appeared that the uprisings were the beginnings of a bourgeois democratic revolution akin to the 'velvet revolutions' that had brought down the 'totalitarian communist regimes' of Eastern Europe twenty years so before.

Under Bush (junior), the US government had not been slow in promoting apparently similar 'colour revolutions' in the Ukraine (2004), Georgia (2003) and in Lebanon (2005). Yet there were certainly those in the US policy establishment that were concerned that the Arab Spring could end up with the revolutionary overthrow of strategically important Middle Eastern governments, thereby destabilising the whole region with highly unpredictable consequences that might well prove to be disastrous for American interests. Heeding such concerns, the initial response of the Obama administration to the outbreak of the 'Arab Spring' had therefore been to maintain the status quo as far as possible.

As had become established practice with the 'coloured revolutions', the US administration certainly gave vocal support to the 'legitimate' demands of the popular movement, called for the authorities to show restraint in dealing with 'peaceful protesters' and gave the green light to Western based NGOs to fund and facilitate the organisation of the liberal democratic elements in the movement into a coherent political opposition.

But unlike the 'coloured revolutions', the eruption of the Arab Spring had been a series of spontaneous popular uprisings that had taken the Obama administration as much by surprise as anyone else. Unprepared, the US foreign policy response to the rapid developments of the 'Arab Spring' soon found itself falling behind the curve of events. By the end of January, the Tunisian government had fallen, leaving the regime of the far more populous and strategically important

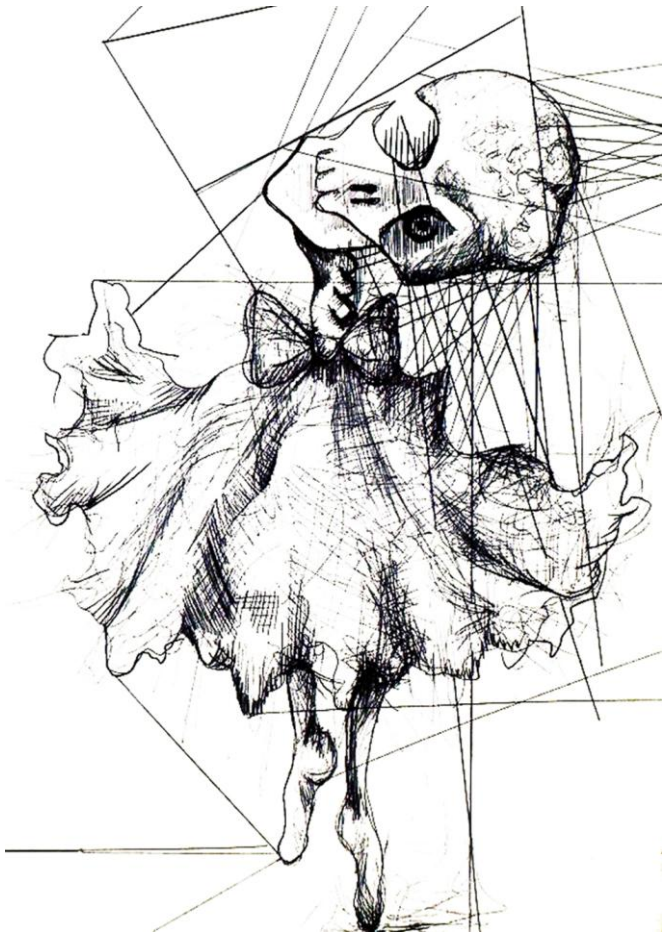
Egypt as the most likely to be next in line to be toppled. Under diplomatic pressure from the US to make timely concessions to defuse the momentum of the popular movement, the Egyptian President - Mubarak - made the surprise announcement that after more than thirty years in power he would not stand in the Presidential elections scheduled for the autumn, and promised that the issues raised by the protesters would be addressed. However, this announcement proved too little too late to defuse the popular movement. It was no longer enough for Mubarak to step down, leaving the authoritarian military regime still in place. There had to be more radical reforms if the revolutionary overthrow of the Egyptian state was to be avoided. As a result, the Obama administration pressured the Egyptian regime into accepting 'free and fair elections' that would open the way for an orderly change in government.

Although it had largely stood aloof from active participation in Egypt's Arab Spring, there were certainly fears in the US foreign policy establishment that the Muslim Brotherhood would be well placed to reap the rewards of any democratic reforms. After all, the Muslim Brotherhood was the long-established opposition to the Egyptian regime that had withstood repeated waves of repression. With its long established welfare programmes - generously funded by oil money from the Gulf States - it had strong roots amongst the Egyptian poor. What is more, it was far better organised and disciplined than the rather nebulous liberal elements within the popular movement that had been at the forefront of the Egyptian Arab Spring.

However, against such fears it could be pointed out that the Muslim Brotherhood had long sought to style itself as a 'moderate' and pro-western Islamic movement - akin to the AKP in Turkey. The Muslim Brotherhood might be socially and culturally conservative, and could be expected to seek to make Egyptian laws more compliant with some moderate interpretation of sharia law, but when it came to economic matters they fully embraced the neo-liberal faith. Like the AKP in Turkey, a government formed by the Muslim Brotherhood could be expected to leave the entrenched economic and political interests of the military and the 'deep state' for the most part intact. As far as foreign policy was concerned, a Muslim Brotherhood government, much to the alarm of Israel, would take a more sympathetic approach to Hamas, its sister organisation in Gaza and the West Bank. The Saudis might also be miffed by a shift in Egyptian foreign towards a more favourable relation with their rivals Qatar. But as far as the US was concerned there was unlikely to be a radical change in Cairo's foreign policy. The long standing alliance between Egypt

and the USA could be expected to remain more or less unchanged.

Thus, it could be argued that the prospects of the Muslim Brotherhood taking power in Egypt did not seriously threaten US interests in the region. Indeed, such a government offered the best bet of maintaining social peace and stability and hence the maintenance of *Pax Americana* in the Middle East. This argument seemed to be largely borne out following the subsequent elections of 2012 that brought Morsi to power at the head of a government dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood.



...to winter in the Levant

In the case of the Egyptian regime, the Obama administration had considerable diplomatic leverage. As a long-standing ally, there were close political and commercial ties between America and Egypt. What is more, after Israel, Egypt is the biggest recipient of American aid in the Middle East. The Obama administration had therefore been able to use this diplomatic leverage to persuade the Egyptian regime to firstly jettison Mubarak, and then when this failed to defuse the protests, to accept 'free and fair elections' and constitutional reforms that would require the military to take more of a back seat in the running of the country.

The case of Syria was different. With its close relationship with Iran, Syria was far from being an ally of the US, and was regarded as something of a rogue state. As such, the US had far less direct diplomatic leverage over the Syrian regime. Instead the Obama administration had been obliged to depend on exerting diplomatic pressure indirectly through intermediaries – the most important of which was Russia. Syria had been a long-standing ally of Russia, which like America's alliance with Egypt went back to the Cold War era. The Syrian regime provided Russia with an important political ally within the strategically important oil-producing region of the Middle East. But perhaps more important were the long-standing military ties. The Syrian regime had permitted Russia to have a naval base at Tartus – thereby providing the Russian navy its only direct access to the Mediterranean Sea. In return Russia had long supplied Syria with weapons and defence systems.

Of course, Russia had various other geopolitical and economic interests that required Putin to maintain good relations with the US. Indeed, Putin had long been eager to present Russia as a responsible and reliable member of the 'international community'. But Putin was reluctant to give up Russia's long-standing alliance with Syria easily.

Backed by both Russia and Iran, Assad had been free to adopt the traditional response of the Ba'athist regime to any political opposition – state repression. Although there had been reports of demonstrations and protests in Syria in the first two months of 2011, they had not reached anywhere the scale that was happening elsewhere in the Arab world. Fear of the security forces, it seemed, had served to inhibit the development of Arab Spring in Syria. However, following the fall of Mubarak in Egypt, such fears began to be overcome and the Arab Spring began to bloom across Syria's major towns and cities. Assad's response was to send the army in to crush the protests. But the protesters proved to be remarkably persistent. By early summer, the mass protests of the spring were giving way to armed resistance. Elsewhere in the Middle East the Arab Spring had begun to dissipate, but in Syria – as in Libya – it was now well on the way to becoming an all-out civil war.

Now it might be supposed that as Syria was a vital ally of America's number one enemy – i.e. Iran – the Obama administration's interest would be to back the rebellion against the regime. The neo-conservatives and liberal interventionists in the US certainly saw the developing civil war as an opportunity to overthrow the Syrian regime and install a pro-western government. This would serve to isolate Iran and peg back the gains it had made as result of America's disastrous war in

Iraq. Furthermore, the regional powers in the Middle East, such as Israel, Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states, which feared the growth of Iranian power in the region, and had rallied behind the US policy of confrontation with the Iranian regime over the issue of its development of nuclear weapons capability, were also eager to see the end of Iran's principal ally.

But, despite such pressures, the Obama administration proved remarkably reticent about providing any form of direct military involvement in support of the rebels. It is true that Russia, with China's backing, repeatedly made it clear that it would use its veto on the UN Security Council to block any UN mandate for direct military intervention in Syria. But, as the recent mobilisation of a 'coalition of the willing' against ISIS has shown, the Obama administration is far from being averse to taking military action if it is deemed necessary. In the case of the then incipient Syrian civil war, the Obama administration chose to seek to impose a tacit agreement with the state powers of the region that there should be no direct military intervention in support for either side in the civil war. By making it clear from the beginning that the US was not intending to send in troops or launch air strikes against the Syrian regime, Obama made it clear he expected Russia and Iran to refrain from direct military intervention in support of Assad's government. The Syrians would have to fight it out themselves. Although they could provide political and financial support from the side-lines, the US and the governments of the region should stay out of the ring.

However, the US did go as far as providing substantial supplies of humanitarian aid to relieve the plight of the growing numbers of Syrian civilians fleeing the civil war (and it would seem likely that a significant part of this aid ended up feeding rebel fighters based in and around the refugee camps in Turkey). The US also sought to facilitate the formation and organisation of the political opposition in the form of the Syrian National Council, and was to provide substantial training and material support to the Free Syrian Army (FSA). However, in supplying military equipment to the FSA, Obama drew one of his 'red lines', which he was to hold steadfast to up to the eruption of ISIS on scene in 2014, restricting such supplies to non-lethal equipment.

The Obama administration was prepared up to a point to accept Russia's right to provide military and financial aid to the internationally recognised government of Syria so long as this did not involve substantial numbers of troops on the ground. At the same time, Obama expected the Gulf States to use their vast oil wealth to arm the Syrian opposition so it had a chance against the well-armed Syrian army.

With this policy of 'relative disengagement', the Obama administration can be seen to have been hedging its bets. If, as seemed increasingly likely during the summer months of 2011, Assad succeeded in ruthlessly crushing the opposition through sheer military might, then *status quo ante* would be restored and the US would have gained little but would have lost little. If, however, the Syrian opposition began to win the civil war, the US could enter the end game to ensure an orderly transition to a more 'democratic' and pro-western Syrian government. Once it became clear that Assad's days were numbered, Russia could be expected to use its diplomatic leverage to persuade the Syrian regime that the game was up. After all, it was not in Russia's, interests - or Iran's for that matter - to allow protracted death throes for the old regime. It was far better to aid the US and thereby retain some degree of influence over the American brokered post-civil war settlement in Syria than be excluded. The US would then, it could be hoped, be in a position to ensure an orderly transition to a new - more pro-American - Syrian regime.

But Obama's strategy of hedging his bets had seriously under-estimated the resilience of both the Syrian regime and the opposition. As the Syrian opposition survived Assad's repression and began to take up arms Obama was increasingly drawn into upping the ante on the overthrow of the Syrian regime.

The development of the Syrian civil war



The summer military offensive of 2011, which had seen Assad sending in tanks against protesters, had succeeded in quelling much of the large city centre protests in both Damascus and most of the other major cities in Syria. However, it had failed to break the opposition. It had merely forced the protesters into the suburbs and increasing numbers to take up arms. What is more, the reluctance to fire on their 'own people' had led increasing numbers of soldiers in the Syrian Army to desert. By the autumn the Syrian Army was facing formidable armed resistance from the newly formed citizens' militia, whose ranks were now being swelled by the desertion of entire military units, bringing with them weapons and vital military expertise. As a result, the Syrian regime began to lose control of entire neighbourhoods and districts in both Damascus and other major towns and cities – particularly those in the province of Homs which had a long tradition of opposing Assad.

In June, a number of high ranking Syrian Army officers had defected to Turkey and had announced they were forming the 'Free Army Officers'. Over the summer they had become the nucleus around which the US sought to build and train the Free Syrian Army (FSA). By October the FSA had begun its first raids across the border from its bases in Turkey. The FSA was soon able to claim victory in a number of well publicised engagements with the Syrian army. This, combined with the Syrian army's failure to hold its ground against the increasingly well-armed resistance in the cities, meant that as 2011 drew to a close it began to look likely – at least for many in the Washington foreign policy establishment – that Assad's demise would only be a matter of months if not weeks.

As a result the Obama administration began to step up its diplomatic efforts in order to corral the multifarious and fractious parties, groups and individuals that claimed to represent the Syrian opposition, which made up the US approved Syrian National Council (SNC), into at least the semblance of a government-in-exile – now with its own army, the FSA. But after a promising few months, both the military and political momentum of the opposition had begun to stall.

The rather rosy scenario put forward by those in Washington in favour of betting on the success of the Syrian opposition presumed that the Syrian regime was close to breaking point. Once it became clear that the apparently formidable Syrian army could be beaten, the appearance of invincibility of the Syrian regime, and the inevitability of Assad's continued rule, would begin to crumble. Fear would give way to hope amongst the Syrian people. The Arab Spring in Syria would be reignited, leading to renewed

uprisings across Damascus and in other towns and cities. The FSA would be swelled by growing numbers of defectors from the Syrian army, leading to further military defeats for the regime. As the FSA and the popular resistance took control of swathes of Syria, including most of the suburbs of the capital, Assad would be obliged to retreat into the administrative centre of Damascus. Besieged, Assad would then either have to surrender or else take flight to his traditional political strongholds in the province of Latakia. The only question would then become how long he could hold out.

However, such a scenario greatly underestimated the strength of the Ba'athist military state and the entrenched position of both Assad and his immediate ruling circle within this state. Although the Arab Spring had brought hundreds of thousands out on the street to demand the overthrow of the Syrian dictator, Assad could still count on at least the passive support of a large 'silent majority'. The Ba'athist state provided large numbers of Syria's population with their livelihoods in terms of jobs and contracts with the large military apparatus, the state bureaucracy and with the state owned companies, which still made up a large part of the Syrian economy. Even amongst those Syrians who may have been sympathetic to demands put forward by the Arab Spring for reform and who detested the brutality of the regime, there are likely to have been many who saw the secular Assad regime as a lesser evil to what might follow if it were to be overthrown. After all, there was the example of neighbouring Iraq where an American invoked overthrow of the repressive Ba'athist regime of Saddam Hussein had resulted in several years of bitter civil war sectarian and ethnic civil war – pitting Shia against Sunni and Arabs against Kurds.

What is more, the alternative government in exile promoted by the Americans did not inspire much confidence. As with the Iraqi National Council that had been assembled by the Americans as an alternative government to Saddam Hussein's government at the time of US invasion of Iraq, the SNC was made up largely of opportunistic would-be politicians, businessmen and other mountebanks whose professions of loyalty to the 'American way' were only out done by their much exaggerated claims to be leaders of the 'Syrian people'. The members of the SNC seem to have spent much their time swanning around the luxury hotels of Geneva and Ankara squabbling over the details of the future constitution and the division of titles and posts once they were in Damascus rather than what they were going to do to actually get there in the first place.



The SNC had little more than nominal control over the FSA, and little if any influence over the armed resistance within Syria itself. Outside Washington and Geneva, the SNC failed to gain any credibility as a viable negotiating partner with Assad's regime, which would be capable of playing a major part in bringing about an end to Syria's civil war.

With at least the passive support of those Syrians that preferred the 'devil they knew to the devils they didn't', the Assad regime was able to contain the armed uprisings to the opposition's strongholds. As a result, rebel forces failed to take overall control of either Damascus, or any other town or city of any significance in Syria. Instead the newly 'liberated' rebel held urban neighbourhoods soon found themselves under siege by the Syrian Army.

With the armed uprisings contained, and the diplomatic offensive to isolate Syria and promote the SNC as the internationally recognised alternative government blocked by Russia, the overthrow of Assad's regime came to depend on a military victory in the civil war. By itself a military victory for the opposition did not look promising.

On the eve of the civil war, Syria could boast of having one of the most formidable, well equipped and well trained armies in the Middle East. The Syrian Army was made up of an 80,000 strong elite Republican Guard, 200,000 mainly conscript troops in the regular Army, and a further 200,000 reservists. Arrayed against this was, as we have seen, was the FSA. In October 2011 it was claimed that the FSA was 20,000 strong. However, estimates of those that were being drilled, trained and under the direct command of the FSA in Turkey were considerably less than this figure. Of course, in addition to this were the numerous effectively autonomous citizens' militias that were either fighting to defend the opposition's urban strongholds or else making raids against the Syrian Army from across

the Turkish border. Many of these militias claimed to be 'battalions' of the FSA. Altogether the armed opposition to the Syrian regime at this time seems unlikely to have been more than a few tens of thousands. The armed resistance was therefore heavily out-numbered and certainly out-gunned.

Now of course, the Syrian Army was a largely conscripted army. Many of the young conscripts were likely to have had friends and family involved in the Arab Spring, and many were likely to have been sympathetic to the movement's aims. It is perhaps not that surprising therefore that, as we have already mentioned, the Syrian Army suffered a high rate of desertion and defections from its ranks. However, by late autumn of 2011 the number of reports of either senior army officers defecting to the FSA, or entire military units going over to the armed resistance, had begun to decline. It seems that the Syrian Army had soon learnt to take care in deploying only its more loyal units to the front line. Although this seems to have hampered the rapidity of its troop deployments, it meant that Syrian Army could maintain its overall numerical supremacy over the armed resistance.

The opposition forces were able to more or less hold on to urban areas under their control and were able to make daring raids to capture arms depots and air fields and to cut Syrian Army's supply routes. However, in the open arid plains that cover much of Syria, once the Syrian Army had time to fully deploy its forces its advantage in terms of tanks and armoured vehicles, heavy artillery and air power usually proved decisive. As a consequence, outside their urban strongholds, and the mountainous areas along the Turkish and Lebanese borders, rebel forces were unable hold on to any significant amount of territory for more than a few weeks.

So by the spring of 2012 it was becoming clear that the civil war had reached a stalemate. As the rebel-held areas were gradually reduced to rubble, the numbers of civilians fleeing the conflict began to soar. In the summer of 2011, the numbers seeking refuge in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon had amounted to little more than 1000 a week; by spring 2012 this had increased more than tenfold. Fears began to mount that the refugee camps would not be able to cope with this mass exodus, thereby creating a major humanitarian crisis. Liberal humanitarian interventionists in the Democratic Party began to add their voices to those of the Republican Party neo-conservatives, to demand that 'something must be done' to bring a swift end to Syria's civil war by some form of US-led armed intervention. Although it was broadly accepted that there could be no 'troops on ground', Obama came under increasing pressure to follow his example in Libya and impose a no fly

zone. This, it was argued, would be sufficient to tip the balance of the civil war decisively in favour of the armed opposition.

However, unlike Libya, Syria had formidable air defences. To impose a no fly zone over Syria, it would have been necessary not only to destroy the Syrian air force but also to degrade Syria's Russian supplied anti-aircraft systems. If American losses were to be minimised it would have required an overwhelming operation of air strikes on a scale comparable that of the 'shock and awe' inflicted on Iraq in March 2002. However, such an operation would have required, at least temporarily, a major global redeployment of America's armed forces, which, for reasons we shall consider briefly later, Obama's administration was loath at this time to contemplate.

It was amidst such clamour for military intervention that Obama had come to draw his 'red lines' concerning Assad's use of chemical weapons in the summer of 2012. Of course, as has been seen in relation to both Iraqi and Iran, the perils of allowing 'rogue states' to possess 'weapons of mass destruction' has been a long established trump card for those in the US and Europe advocating 'regime change' in the Middle East. The Syrian regime did not possess nuclear weapons, and had no prospect of obtaining them. However it was known to have a substantial stock pile of chemical weapons – the 'poor state's weapon of mass destruction'. The Syrian regime had so far shown little inclination in using chemical weapons in the civil war. Indeed Assad could certainly claim to both the international bourgeois community and his own population that he had adopted a measured and graduated response to the escalation of the civil war. He had only resorted to using heavy artillery, attack helicopters and eventually fixed wing strike aircraft in response to an increasing well-armed 'terrorist resistance'. However, for months the proponents of regime change in Washington had expressed concerns that once Assad became cornered, he might, as a desperate last resort, sanction the use of chemical weapons against rebel forces.

At the same time there were the concerns on the part of the Israeli government, and which were ably expressed by the influential pro-Israeli lobby in Washington, that the Syrian regime might supply their Hezbollah allies with chemical war-heads for their Iranian supplied missiles aimed at Israel. Following the failure of the Israeli army to drive Hezbollah and its missile batteries out of Southern Lebanon in 2008, Israel, with substantial American aid and support, had built what has been called the 'Iron Dome' – a state of the art anti-missile defence system. The Iron Dome could be expected to shoot down most of

the rather primitive Hezbollah missiles, even if they were all launched at once in a surprise attack. But the Iron Dome was not guaranteed to be 100% effective. It would only take one missile armed with a chemical war-head to find its way through these anti-missile defences to devastate an entire Israeli city. If the Americans did not take this danger seriously then there was always the implied threat that the Israeli government might have to break ranks and take matters into its own hands through some form of direct military action in Syria.

By making it clear that any use of chemical weapons on the part of the Syrian regime would change the 'calculus' on the use of direct military intervention of the part of the US, Obama was able to send a signal that he was taking his critics' concerns seriously. It can therefore be seen as a sop to both the proponents of regime change and the Israeli government, as well as a warning to the Syrian regime. Yet at the same time it reaffirmed Obama's existing policy of avoiding being drawn into yet another prolonged conflict in the Middle East. So long as Assad kept within the parameters set by the US to contain Syria's civil war – by not using chemical weapons and not violating its neighbours' territories or air space – then the US would continue to stay out of any direct military involvement in the conflict.

Thus, by qualifying it by drawing his red lines, Obama in effect reaffirmed his existing policy of ruling out direct military intervention. Nevertheless, Obama could not be seen to do nothing. There could not be a retreat to a policy of hedging his bets and waiting to see who won the civil war. Instead the Obama administration set about redoubling its efforts in providing indirect support for the overthrow of the Syrian regime in the months that followed.

The Americans increased their efforts in training and equipping the FSA. In return for this increase in aid, they insisted on greater haste in establishing a properly constituted command structure, which after more than a year was generally recognised as being woefully inadequate. The SNC was broadened so as to include 'moderate Islamicists' sponsored by Turkey and the Gulf states. And renewed diplomatic efforts were made to isolate the Syrian regime and to promote the SNC as the internationally recognised representative of the 'Syrian people'.

By the autumn, reports from the fighting in Syria could be seen to support the view that the tide had begun to turn in the civil war. The increasingly well-armed and equipped resistance was reporting significant victories over the Syrian Army. In October the units of the FSA that had been trained in Turkey began to take control of substantial areas in the mountainous terrain

along the Lebanese border, placing them close to striking distance from Damascus. In December, the Americans' renewed diplomatic offensive culminated with the convening of a conference made up of representatives of 200 governments around the world to give international recognition to the SNC. As the year before, it seemed for many in Washington that if Assad was not on his way out before Christmas then it would not take that much longer.

But also as the year before, as days began to grow longer, such hopes soon began to fade. On closer inspection it is clear that the attempts on the part of the Obama administration to create a military, political and diplomatic momentum that would persuade both the Syrian state and its allies that regime change was inevitable had been largely based on wishful thinking.

The transformation of the Syrian civil war

Far from reigniting the Arab Spring, the militarisation of the resistance to the Syrian regime was to sound its final death knell. By the end of 2011, even in the most resilient opposition strongholds such as those in the city of Homs, the regular mass anti-regime demonstrations, which had stubbornly persisted throughout the summer and early autumn, had more or less petered out. As the besieged opposition neighbourhoods were steadily reduced to ruins, increasing numbers of the civilian population began to flee to relatives elsewhere in Syria or, failing that, to the burgeoning refugee camps in Turkey, Jordan and the Lebanon. Those that were left behind were perhaps too occupied with mere survival to bother much about 'politics' or armed resistance, leaving the small minority that had taken up arms, bolstered by army defectors, to fight in the militias amidst the rubble.

As 2012 wore on, and as hopes of an early end to the Assad regime receded, even those journalistic reports sympathetic to the armed resistance began to paint a picture of the militias as becoming little more than a loosely connected alliance of armed gangs. Although most militias may have continued to proclaim themselves as 'brigades of the FSA' this seems to have increasingly become more of a means to attract military supplies and funding, rather than out of any remaining ideological commitment to a cohesive popular uprising bringing about a 'secular democratic revolution'.

At the same time, the Turkish government's decision to provide a safe haven for anti-Assad forces along Turkey's borders with Syria in October 2011 had opened the way for the subsequent influx of foreign fighters to join the civil war on the side of the rebels. As a result, the Syrian civil became the new front line of the 'global jihad'. Battle-hardened jihadists, with

experience of fighting asymmetrical wars against conventional forces in Chechnya, Iraq, Sudan, Yemen and elsewhere, now began to flood into Syria to join the fray. These formed militia that began coalesce into various ideologically defined fronts that provided a degree of coordination and direction far beyond that which being offered by the FSA.

It had been his influx of battle-hardened and ideologically committed foreign fighters that had succeeded in halting the advances of the Syrian Army in the spring, and by the autumn of 2012 had begun turn the tide of the civil war against the Syrian regime. But in doing so they began to redefine the civil war as a sectarian war. Indeed, even American commentators now began to describe the civil war as a war between a ruling minority drawn mainly from the Alawite sect of Shia Islam, and the 'oppressed' majority made up of Sunni Muslims.

But it was not merely their experience, ideological commitment and superior organisation that allowed the Islamist forces to take the lead in the fight against the Syrian regime, but the fact that they were far better armed. By stopping short of supplying lethal military aid to rebel forces, and leaving the supply of weapons to the Gulf States, the Obama administration abdicated much of the control over which militias were supplied. Of course, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the other Gulf States were expected to supply arms to the officially recognised, and hence US approved, FSA forces. With the expansion of the SNC this official recognition could be extended to those militias aligned to the 'moderate' Islamic parties sponsored by the governments of Turkey and the Gulf States. But this was not all; it has been a badly kept secret that the Saudis have long covertly supported anti-US Salafist groups in Iraq – or at least turned a blind eye to the 'private' funding of such groups by members of the royal family – including the Islamic State of Iraq, which was later to become the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) as a means to wage a proxy war against Iran. Qatar and the other Gulf States, in competing with the Saudis for influence in the region, have followed suit. As a result, the civil war in Syria was fast becoming not only a sectarian war but a proxy war between the Gulf States and Iran.

Outside the conflict zones surrounding the rebel-held neighbourhoods, Assad had been able to maintain at least the semblance of some sort of normality throughout much of Syria. Indeed, in May 2012 the regime had even been able to hold Parliamentary elections. But with the renewed offensive by the anti-regime forces there could be little doubt that if the regime was overthrown Syria as a whole would be ripped apart by sectarian and foreign forces. Assad was therefore

able to rouse the morale of the Syrian Army, and galvanise what had previously been largely passive support amongst the Syrian population as a whole, against the both imminent menace of 'Islamic terrorists' and foreign intervention.

This increased support at home was also matched by increased support from abroad. As it became increasingly evident that the Gulf States were using Syria as theatre to wage a proxy war against Iran, and with the Obama administration making it repeatedly clear that it was reluctant to commit the US to any form of military intervention, the Iranian government began to provide Syria with more overt and active support. With the military advice and support of Iran – personified by the appearance of the notorious Iranian General Qasem Soleimani in Syria apparently at the heart of operations – Syria was able to launch a concerted counter-offensive early in 2013. Already the FSA attempts to establish control over the borders of Syria and Lebanon in the autumn of 2012 had brought it into conflict with Hezbollah. As the winter offensive gathered pace, Hezbollah began to play an increasingly frontline role within Syria itself.

By the summer of 2013, the forces opposed to the Syrian regime had been forced back and were falling into disarray. Any pretence that the FSA was in any way a coherent force that could bring about a 'democratic revolution' was no longer tenable. The various militias were divided and increasingly in open conflict with each other: secular versus Islamist, moderate Islamist versus Salafists, and Salafists versus Salafists – with ideological divisions reflecting the competition between their various sponsors amongst Gulf States.

Thus on the eve of the chemical attacks in

Damascus at the end of August 2013 the Obama administration faced a difficult dilemma. Having been lured into committing his administration to the cause of overthrowing Assad by Republican neo-conservatives and by liberal humanitarian interventionists in his own party, Obama had seriously underestimated the resilience of the Syrian regime. After two years of civil war, and two concerted attempts to overthrow the regime, hundreds of thousands had been killed and approaching two million had been made refugees. But the Syrian regime had remained largely intact. It still maintained overall control of the country and its 20 million remaining people.

It was now quite clear that the only way Assad could be overthrown was through direct US military action. But even though air strikes, the imposition of a no fly zone over Syria or the large scale arming of militias by the US might be sufficient to overthrow the Syrian regime, there was the problem of 'what then?' With the both the FSA and SNC discredited there was no means of ensuring that the new Syrian regime would be pro-Western. Indeed, without reliable forces on the ground, Syria was more likely to go the way of

Libya and descend into a failed state torn apart by sectarian and ethnic conflict that could have serious destabilising effects throughout the Middle East.

If the Obama administration was to remain true to Obama's declared commitment to the overthrow of Assad's 'brutal and oppressive regime' - with which he had rallied America's allies in the Middle East - then it would have bite the bullet and commit itself to an open-ended occupation of Syria. But this would require Obama to abandon his policy of avoiding becoming entangled into open ended commitments in the Middle East and it would cross his red line of 'no troops on the ground'.

So, either the US would sooner or later



have to be prepared to invade Syria or it would have to back pedal and come to terms with Assad. In the face of this dilemma, the Obama administration had taken the middle way and procrastinated. But with the chemical attacks in Damascus the seemed to have forced the issue. Assad had crossed the Obama's 'red line', and if America's red lines were to mean anything, then Obama had to act. If the US was looking for a pretext for direct military intervention this was it.

But it wasn't.

B: ...TO CHINA

When the authors of the 'Project for New American Century'⁵ were scanning the horizon for potential future challengers to US global hegemony, they certainly took note of China. After all, China possessed a land mass comparable to that of the USA, it was composed of more than a fifth of the world's population, had possession of advanced nuclear weapons and, perhaps commensurate with all that, had one of the five permanent seats on the UN Security Council. But, in the late 1990s, despite surging economic growth, China remained a backward and predominantly agrarian country. It lacked the economic base to present itself a serious rival to the USA.

At this time, few would have believed that China would be able to sustain more or less double-digit economic growth rates for more than a decade. It seemed safe to assume that, although this sleeping Asian giant might well arise at some point during the twenty-first century, it would not be anytime soon. In identifying more imminent threats to American supremacy that may arise in the coming generation or so, it was not China that was of concern but an economically integrated and politically cohesive European Union or a resurgent Russia.

As a result, as it had been throughout the cold war, US strategic foreign policy remained centred on the Euro-Asian land mass, with particular focus on Eastern Europe and Central Asia. It was in accordance with this perspective that the neo-conservatives had formulated their strategy of the radical restructuring of what they called 'the wider Middle East', which would serve to pre-empt the re-emergence of the Russian Empire, and that would be brought about by successive wars of 'liberation' against Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran.

A decade or more later, matters had changed dramatically. Frequent predictions that the

prolonged Chinese 'economic boom' would soon burst had been repeatedly proved wrong. In terms of both GDP and share in world trade, China had now become a major economic power, on a par with the UK, France or Italy. Indeed, if the Chinese economy continued its current rate of growth in a decade or so it would be close to catching up with the US. If there was any candidate for a new hegemon that might emerge in the next generation or so, then it was China.

It was out of the recognition of this new reality that Democratic Party leaning foreign policy wonks began to formulate the notion of the 'Pivot to Asia'. The most important strategic issue facing US foreign policy, it was argued, was managing the rise of both China and the rest of Asia. This required a major refocusing of foreign policy, away from the age-old one centred on the Euro-Asian landmass, and towards the Pacific Ocean.

For the advocates of the Pivot, the problem of the neo-conservative attempt to restructure the wider Middle East through brute force was not merely the vast waste in terms of lives, resources and money for what was essentially a failure, but that it had locked US foreign policy into an outdated strategy. With much of America's military assets committed to the Middle East, and with much political and diplomatic 'capital' expended in ensuring that US sanctions against Iran were agreed and implemented, US foreign policy had become bogged down in the Middle East, and as result was seriously neglecting the rise of both China and Asia more generally.

Of course the rise of China was by now an almost universally accepted fact. Only a few die-hard cold war warriors in conservative think-tanks would deny that if US dominance was to be challenged it was far more likely to come from China than from a 'return of the evil empire'. More pragmatic Republicans could certainly agree that the potential challenge from China had to be addressed, but they could object that advocates of the Pivot to Asia were overstating their case. What practical difference would a 'Pivot to China' make?

First, it could be pointed out that the Bush (jnr) administrations had pursued and developed the policy of 'constructive engagement' with China that had begun under the Clinton Presidency. China may have been welcomed into the WTO under quite generous terms by Clinton, but the Bush administrations ensured that China had complied with its commitments as a WTO member, and had continued to encourage the Chinese integration into the global economy. Within this framework of 'constructive engagement', America's diplomatic ties had naturally grown with the growth of the Chinese economy on purely pragmatic grounds.

What is more, this policy had proved remarkably successful for US capital. With China

⁵ 'Project for a New American Century' was the leading neo-conservative think tank in the 1990s bring together leading right wing intellectuals and politicians. See 'Oil wars and world orders old and new' in *Aufheben* #12.

producing goods that the US had long given up or had never produced in the first place, most of corporate America had won out from the rise of China. The rapid growth of the Chinese economy and its integration into the global economy had opened up lucrative business opportunities for US transnational corporations, not only directly in the form of joint productive ventures with the Chinese state in China but also indirectly in the growth of trade and production in the rest of Asia generated by China's demand for inputs necessary to supply its ever growing production. In the US itself, big profits could be made by the likes of WalMart in the distribution of cheap manufactured goods imported from China. More generally China's production of cheap manufactured consumer goods had played a major role in defeating the decades old problem of price inflation. The Chinese government's policy of holding foreign exchange reserves in the form of US treasury bills had also helped hold US interest rates down, allowing the American monetary authorities to pursue a more expansionary economic policy. If nothing else, corporate America had good cause to be pro-China.

Of course there were business and financial interests that complained they were being locked out of speculative and investment opportunities by China's tight capital controls. There were other business interests that might suffer from the Chinese policy of maintaining 'under-valued' currency. These complaints would be bolstered by various neo-liberal ideologists demonstrating that the Chinese would be better off if they hastened along the road of neo-liberal reforms. And of course there would be a multitude of complaints concerning China's lack of human rights, her lack of democracy, her dismal record on the environment and the looming problem of carbon emissions, her rudeness towards the Dalai Lama and his Tibetan subjects, and China's unwarranted hogging of the world's panda population.

In advancing their various complaints against China, each complainant could plausibly claim that their concerns had been downplayed by US diplomats in order to secure Chinese support for UN sanctions against Iran. But given that few within the American ruling class wanted to risk ruffling the feathers of the goose that was laying the golden eggs, it could be argued any 'hard-line' that may have been taken with the Chinese on these issues in the absence of US policy towards the Middle East would have been little more than cosmetic. Far more effective in persuading the Chinese to support UN sanctions was the threat that Bush might be mad enough to launch a military strike against Iran, rather than any conciliatory gestures.

Second, ever since the panda diplomacy between Chairman Mao and President Nixon of the early 1970s, China had ceased to be considered much of a military threat to US interests in the Pacific. Following the opening up of the Chinese economy to foreign investment in the 1990s, US-China relations had moved from what might be described as 'peaceful co-existence' to that of 'peaceful economic competition', as the Chinese government concentrated on economic development. The People's Liberation Army remained a predominantly defensive force that possessed little capability to operate beyond the immediate vicinity of Chinese territorial waters. In 2008 there was still little sign that China had any intent of converting its economic power into expansionist military muscle that could in any way threaten American interests in the Pacific, let alone the rest of the world.



Third, it might be conceded that by concentrating so much diplomatic efforts on both the middle east and on China, the Bush administration had neglected the rest of Asia. As a result, it might also be conceded that US 'soft power' and 'influence' had suffered in the region. This was particularly the important given the wave of unpopularity the USA had suffered in Asia – particularly those countries with large Muslim populations – as result of the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan. But there seemed little

practical indication of the consequences of this decline in vaguely and abstractly defined 'soft power' and 'influence'.

Finally, the pragmatic Republican might retort that the 'Pivot to Asia' presupposed the imposition of sufficient stability in the Middle East in the first place, in order to allow for a redeployment of America's diplomatic and military resources elsewhere. Without this precondition, any pivot would not go very far anyway – as Hillary Clinton, who as Secretary of State was put in charge of Obama's Pivot to Asia, was to subsequently discover.

By the time he assumed office, the surprising success of the 'surge' in Iraq had convinced Obama of the rather counter-intuitive proposition that the way of hastening the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq was to send more troops in. Far from retreating from Bush's 'surge', Obama sought to step it up. Once troops had been withdrawn from Iraq then a 'troop surge' could also be used to hasten the end of the deployment of US forces in Afghanistan. However, the key to the stabilisation of the Middle East was ultimately the resolution of the protracted problem of opening up of Iran's vast oil reserves.

Iran, the Middle East and the political economy of oil

By the end of the 1990s it had become evident, at least to those interested in such matters, that the period of cheap and plentiful supplies of oil and gas, which had lasted for approaching two decades, would not last much beyond the end of the century. First, years of low prices had led to a sharp decline in investment in the exploration and development of oil production across the globe. Second, and far more importantly, it was becoming clear that the great oil and gas fields of western hemisphere, such as the North Sea, Alaska and the Gulf of Mexico, were more or less at their peak. Output from such fields could therefore be expected to begin to decline in the not too distant future. As a consequence the total supply of oil and gas would struggle to stand still let alone keep up with the growth in demand.

The first decade of the new century was therefore likely to see the beginning of a new period that would be marked by a scarcity of oil and thus far higher oil prices – with all the implications this might have for economic growth, inflation and growing international tensions. But this was not all. Even if the growth in oil production managed to more or less keep up with demand in the early years of the new century, by the second decade the decline in old oil fields of the western hemisphere would begin to gather pace. Furthermore, it was widely expected that at some point in the 2020s, the vast oil fields of

Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf States would more or less be reaching their peak of production.

Thus, even though the growth of demand for oil had slowed considerably with the emergence of the new 'weightless economy' since the 1980s, unless major new sources of oil could be opened up, the world faced the prospect in the medium term of a prolonged era of oil shortages and high prices, and in the longer term an oil crunch where supply would eventually hit the buffers.

The obvious places to look for new sources of oil were the largely untapped reserves of oil and gas in Iraq, Iran and Central Asia. Iraq and Iran looked the most promising since not only did they have the second and third largest proven reserves of oil and gas in world but also because the cost of production of oil was likely to be low – offering any investors the prospects of high returns. But the opening up of the oil and gas fields of Iran and Iraq would require an abrupt reversal in the direction of US foreign policy.

Up until the late 1990s, war and sanctions had succeeded not merely in preventing the development of both Iranian and Iraqi oil production but in their decline. This had served to prevent an oil glut and the collapse in the oil price that would have rendered much of the oil production in the western hemisphere uneconomic. But now it was necessary to open up the untapped oil fields of either Iraq or Iran. The issue was how this could be done after so many years of enmity and hostility between the US and the regimes of these two 'rogue' nations.

There were two main approaches: regime change, or rapprochement. The first meant replacing the rogue regimes by force, either through direct military action, or through the covert operations promoting a popular uprising or a palace coup from disgruntled members of the regime. Alternatively, the US could attempt to rehabilitate these regimes, welcome them into the international bourgeois community and then do a deal over the opening up their oil industry to US investment. Up until 9/11 the US had pursued both these approaches in tandem. Towards the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein the Americans had adopted a policy of regime change. Towards the Islamic Republic of Iran they had adopted a policy of gradual and measured rapprochement.

Obama, Iran and the oil question

By the end of Bush (jnr)'s second term in office the predictions of high oil prices had certainly been borne out. Oil prices had risen at least fivefold since the 1990s. However, the inflationary impact of rising oil prices had been more than offset in the West by the flood of cheap manufactured imports from China.



High oil prices, and hence the prospect of high returns for the investment of capital in the oil industry, had spurred the exploration and development of new sources of oil and gas in Asia, Africa and South America, and had in particular hastened the development of the large oil and gas fields of Russia and central Asia, which had been opened up to western investment following the fall of the USSR. Furthermore, high oil prices had made it economic to develop new technologies to squeeze more oil and gas from old declining fields, thereby slowing down the rate of decline of their output. As a result, although spare capacity was squeezed, the global supply of oil and gas had grown sufficiently to prevent any serious oil shortages. There was no return to either oil crises or the stagflation of the 1970s, as many had feared ten years before.

However, although for the time being the development of these new sources of oil and gas could be expected to bring about a sufficient growth in production to offset the accelerating decline in the old fields of the western hemisphere, this would not be the case in the longer term, particularly once the vast but aging oil fields of Saudi Arabia passed their peak and went into decline. Indeed, for the more pessimistic of 'peak oil theorists', who flourished at this time, it was argued that, due to the OPEC rules for determining oil quotas of each its member states, Saudi Arabia had systematically overestimated the amount of its proven recoverable oil reserves. As a result, Saudi Arabian oil production, it was argued, was already more or less at its peak and could from now on only decline. The almighty oil crunch was therefore nigh.

Of course, at the other extreme, there were those who pointed out the growing investments that were now being made in alternative sources

of energy, such as bio-fuels, wind turbines, solar energy and nuclear power. Perhaps more importantly there was also the far greater investments being made by the oil industry into the development of deep sea drilling in the Gulf of Mexico and off the coast of Brazil, the opening up of the Arctic with the retreat of the polar ice caps, and the exploitation of unconventional oil and gas - such as tar sands, shale gas and shale oil.

However, back in 2008 it was difficult to separate the hype over these alternatives generated to attract venture capital into funding such investments from realistic projections. At least for US policy makers in the State Department, and think-tanks concerned with such matters, it was probably better to err on the side of caution and discount claims that the USA could become self-sufficient in hydro-carbons in a few years' time.

Most mainstream analysts still put Saudi Arabia's peak sometime in the 2020s. Although the growing demand for oil from China and the emerging economies of the Global South would probably bringing the crunch point forward substantially closer. However, the huge investment of capital required to fully develop the productive capacity of either Iran's or Iraq's oil industries could be expected to take the best part of a decade to come to fruition. But before such investment could be made it would be likely that there would have to be several years of diplomatic and then commercial negotiations. Time to act was therefore beginning to run out. For most mainstream analysts, therefore, the long term aim of US policy had to remain the opening up and development of the vast oil fields of Iraq and/or Iran and there was a mounting urgency in starting the lengthy process of achieving this objective. But the opening up of these fields was further away than it had ever been.

In 2008, with Iraq having been just about pulled back from the brink of an all-out civil war, the Iraqi government had at long last been able to complete the first round of concessions to foreign oil companies. But although it could be hoped that these concessions would lead to the restoration of Iraq's existing oil industry to levels of oil production not seen since the 1970s, there was little appetite from the major oil companies to risk making the large scale and long term investments that would allow Iraq's oil industry to reach anything like its full potential. In the foreseeable future, it seemed, Iraq might be able to make a significant contribution to global oil output in the next few years, but there was little prospect of Iraq's oil fields solving the longer term problems of the world's oil supply.

But if the opening up of Iraq's vast oil fields seemed unlikely any time in the near future, so were those of neighbouring Iran. Even the most

hawkish neo-conservatives had now conceded that, with the US army tied down in Iraq and Afghanistan, there was little prospect of sending ground troops to topple the Islamic Republic. Of course there were those neo-conservatives that advocated overwhelming air strikes against Iran so as to halt Iran's nuclear programme. Some of these neo-conservatives also argued that such air strikes might bring the additional bonus of toppling the Iranian regime. However, given the failure of the attempts to 'liberate' the wider Middle East by force, there was little appetite in the Bush administration for further military adventures in the near future. Even Donald Rumsfeld had concluded that the restructuring of the wider Middle East was part of a long war that, like the cold war against the USSR, might take one or two generations to win. All that could be done for the time being was to wait and hope for a rebellion against the regime, but this was largely in the hands of the Iranians.

If regime change was off the agenda for the time being, so was the alternative of doing a deal. Having accepted Bill Clinton's hand of friendship and adopted a policy of rapprochement with the US in the late 1990s, and then having given Bush tacit support in both his invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, the Iranian government had suddenly found itself at the top of US hit list for regime change following the fall of Saddam Hussein. For the hard-liners in the Iranian regime, the perfidious Americans could not be trusted. Rather than accept another offer of friendship it was far better to take advantage of the US Army being tied down in Afghanistan and Iraq and hasten to develop Iran's nuclear capability. Once Iran had the nuclear option it would be in a position to deter any large scale US military intervention once and for all. Iran would therefore be in a far stronger bargaining position.

On coming into office, President Obama had been long committed to offering Iran the 'open hand of friendship, rather than a clenched fist'. By resetting US relations with Iran, Obama could hope to pave the way for a grand deal that would prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, ensure the pursuit of the common interest of establishing a stable and unified Iraq - which would facilitate the withdrawal of US troops, and open the way for the development of Iran's oil and gas resources on terms favourable to the interests of the American oil corporations.

At the same time, a rapid move towards a grand deal with Iran, combined with the swift withdrawal of troops from Iraq and Afghanistan, would serve to stabilise the situation in the Middle East and open the way for Obama's Pivot to Asia. Thus the objective of securing access to Iranian oil dovetailed neatly with the urgent need to address the rise of China.

However, there were two formidable obstacles to making such a grand deal with Iran. First, the American oil corporations had long given up any hope that the oil fields of either Iraq or Iran would be opened up to any large-scale foreign investment in the near future. Encouraged by the persistence of high oil prices, the oil corporations had by now committed themselves to making large scale investments in the development of oil from the development of deep sea drilling, the opening up of the Arctic, and the exploitation of unconventional forms oil and gas. They were far from happy that cheap oil from Iraq or Iran could start flooding on the global oil market, thereby undercutting the economic viability of their investments, anytime soon.

Second, there were the 'hard-liners' within the Iranian regime. They could reasonably argue that even if he was in good faith about doing a deal, there was no guarantee that Obama would be able to pass such deal through Congress given the power of the oil lobby and its allies. Furthermore, even if he did manage to have a deal with Iran ratified by Congress, it seemed likely Obama might not even secure a second term, and any subsequent Republican President could then very well tear up any agreement. Once bitten, it was perhaps better to be twice shy.

Of course, as was to become manifest following Iran's own Presidential elections in June 2009, there were considerable numbers of Iranians, both in the population as a whole and within the regime itself, who saw the election of Obama as an opportunity to bring to an end to years of sanctions and economic stagnation. However, Obama's hopes of launching a diplomatic charm offensive to tip the balance of power within the Iranian regime to favour a grand deal during the opening months of his administration was soon blown off course. The sudden eruption of the financial crisis meant that the overriding foreign policy concern of Obama's administration first six months in office was co-ordinating the international efforts necessary avert a global economic meltdown.

The re-election in June of Ahmajinedad made it clear that the supreme leader, Khamenei, had come down in favour of rejecting Obama's offer and hopes of doing a rapid deal with Iran therefore soon began to fade. Obama was therefore obliged to adopt a Plan B. In a counter-intuitive move that in many respects echoed that of his adoption of outgoing administration's policy of 'troop surge' in Iraq and Afghanistan, Obama not only continued Bush's policy of imposing economic sanctions against Iran, but proposed to ratchet them up. By imposing increasingly punitive sanctions, at the same time as keeping the door ajar for talks, Obama hoped to cajole the Iranian regime into doing a grand deal. But the

threat of punitive sanctions – war by other means – no doubt only served to confirm both Iran’s own conservatives and neo-conservatives view of American belligerency.⁶

By the time of the outbreak of the ‘Arab Spring’ there were growing concerns that Obama’s policy of cajoling the Iranian regime into coming to the negotiating table was getting nowhere fast. Having come down firmly on the side of Ahmajinedad and the hard-liners in 2009 - both in Presidential elections and against the mass protests that followed - Khamenei could not have been expected to have reversed his position any time soon for fear of showing weakness in the immediate wake of the ‘Green Revolution’. But more than a year after the repression of the mass movement for ‘reform’, the Iranian regime was still remained stubbornly resistant to any of Obama’s diplomatic overtures. It was now becoming evident to many in Washington that the next window of opportunity to deal with Iran might not be until the Iranian Presidential elections in mid-2013. By then the outcome of the US Presidential elections would be known and the Iranian regime could be expected to be in a position to take stock and decide whether it was better to stick or twist. But by 2013 time would be pressing.

Now as far as the ‘oil crunch’ was concerned, the ‘great recession’ had at least brought Obama time as the growth in the global demand for energy was put on pause. But in 2011 it was still expected that a rapid economic recovery would be along very shortly, thereby giving rise to a resumption of the pre-crisis growth rate in the demand for oil. By 2013 Obama, if re-elected, would be beginning to slip behind schedule.

As China, India, Japan the European Union and other major oil importers began to increasingly worry about where they were to going to secure future sources of oil vital for the continued growth of their economies, the temptation to break ranks and defy - or at least circumvent - UN sanctions and do a deal with Iran could only increase. American oil capital could then find itself locked out of the consequent Iranian oil bonanza, as more countries broke ranks and the US government sought to hold the line to prevent the international sanctions regime from crumbling. If the US failed to take advantage of the window of opportunity that seemed likely to open up in 2013 then the issue of how much longer effective international sanctions against Iran – the Americans’ main bargaining chip in any

negotiations with the Iranian regime - would start becoming a serious issue.⁷

By the time of the US Presidential elections in 2012, a further problem might be looming the horizon – the prospect of Iran ‘breaking out’ of the restrictions of the Non-Proliferations Treaty (NPT) and obtaining the capability to produce ‘the bomb’. Whatever their opinions on the Iranian regime, all the powers in both in the region and the world as a whole could agree that it would not be a good idea for Iran to obtain nuclear weapons, thereby potentially triggering a complex destabilising nuclear arms race not only in the Middle East with Saudi Arabia and Israel but also in Southern Asia with the existing nuclear powers, China, Pakistan and India. It had been relatively easy for the Bush (jnr) administration to build an international consensus for UN sanctions at least ostensibly aimed at preventing Iran from gaining the capacity to develop nuclear weapons. Sanctions had certainly made it difficult for Iran to develop its nuclear programme. Apart from what little that could be smuggled in, all the raw materials, component parts and technology had to be produced from by Iran itself. As a result, Iran’s nuclear programme was confined to a snail’s pace. When UN sanctions were imposed in 2006 there had seemed little prospect of an Iranian nuclear breakout any time soon.



⁷ By 2012 it became clear that the investment in the development of unconventional oil had begun to bear fruit with what became known as the shale gas revolution. Fracking, it was now proclaimed, would make the US self-sufficient in oil within a matter years. The US would therefore no longer be dependent on opening the oil fields of the wider Middle East. But the fallacy of such hype has become evident with the collapse of oil prices due to this very surge in US shale gas production, coupled with the slowdown in the Chinese economy. The fall in prices has rendered more than half of the shale gas produced in the America unprofitable, bring the revolution to an abrupt halt.

⁶ In ‘Lebanon, Iran and the “long war” in “the wider middle east”’ in *Aufheben* #15 we discussed the distinctions between what we termed the Iranian regime’s reformists, conservative and neo-conservative factions.

But by 2011 international inspectors were reporting that Iran had managed to accumulate a stockpile of several tons of uranium – a quantity of uranium that could potentially provide the fissile material for an entire arsenal of nuclear weapons. The Iranians could point out that this uranium had only been enriched to ‘reactor grade’ uranium and was therefore compliant with Iran’s obligations under the NPT only to produce uranium for peaceful purposes. However, it was also becoming clear that Iran had made important technical advances that meant that it could now begin the process of further enriching its stockpile. Again the Iranians could argue that the purpose of such medium grade enriched uranium was for medical and other civilian purposes.

But as the neo-conservatives and the Israeli government were keen to point out, this technical breakthrough was a major step towards Iran acquiring the capability to produce weapons-grade uranium.⁸ In theory, once they had mastered the next few steps in upgrading their stockpile, the Iranians could produce enough weapons-grade uranium for a nuclear weapon within a matter of months. However, Iran still faced formidable technical problems. Even if it was able to overcome the difficulties involved in

further enriching their stock pile of uranium, it would still be necessary to devise a way of using it to produce a reliable and effective nuclear weapon.

Thus although the more alarmist predictions that Iran was only months away from producing ‘the bomb’ could be largely discounted, there was still cause for concern that if they were not brought to the negotiating table in the next few years then sooner or later the Iranian regime would reach the capacity to produce nuclear weapons. Indeed, if they won a second term, the Obama administration could conceivably find themselves facing the nightmare dilemma of having to take highly risky pre-emptive military action, or having to learn live with a nuclear armed Iran and the credibility of America’s resolve in tatters.

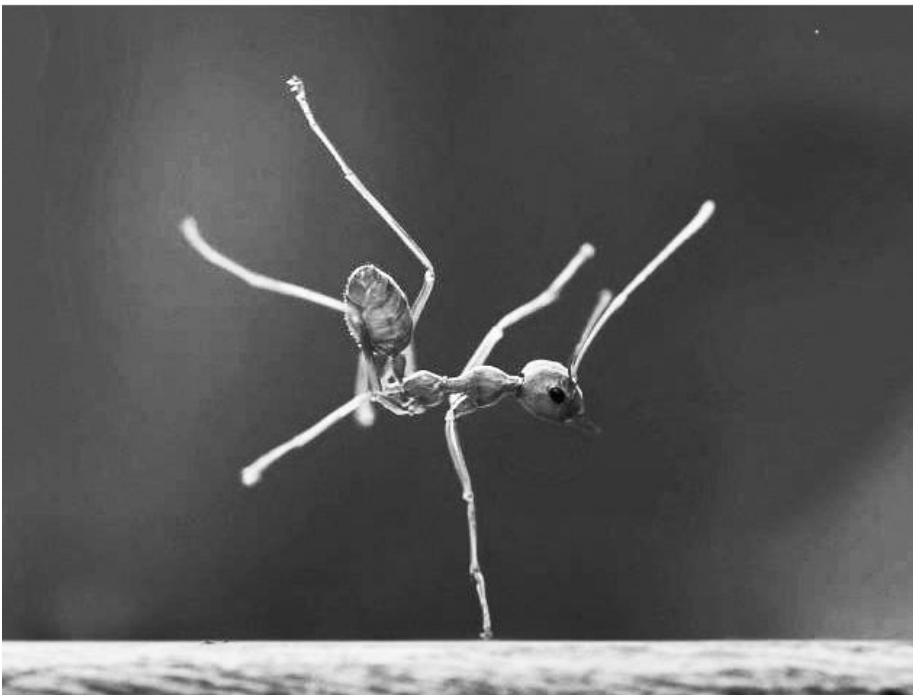
Thus, by the time of the Arab Spring there had been mounting concerns within the Obama administration that tougher action had to be taken if Iran was to be brought to the negotiating table in time. As a consequence, there was a step change in the sanctions applied against Iran. Up until then sanctions had made life inconvenient for senior figures of the Iranian regime, succeeded in restraining the development of Iran’s nuclear programme to a snail’s pace, and, perhaps most

importantly, succeeded in blocking large scale foreign investment in Iran’s oil industry, thereby condemning Iran to years of economic stagnation. But in 2011 sanctions were ratcheted up to the point where they would cripple the Iranian economy. By 2013 oil revenues – Iran’s main

source foreign earnings – was to slump by 60%. This was to have serious impact on the living standards of the Iranian population. In case such punitive sanctions might not be considered enough, the Arab Spring had opened up the possibility of the quick and easy overthrow of the Syrian regime – Iran’s sole state ally in the region. As we have seen, as the protests of the spring began to turn into civil war in the summer, the Obama administration was easily lured into coming off the fence

and backing the overthrow of Assad’s regime.

Not being privy to the inner discussion of the Iranian regime we cannot tell how far the threat of isolation following the overthrow of their Syrian allies or the threat of serious social unrest due to the hardship caused by crippling economic



⁸ Weapons grade uranium has undergone a process of ‘enrichment’ so that it is made up of at least 90% of the most fissile uranium isotope U-235. Naturally occurring uranium consists of only 0.7% U-235. This has to be enriched to 3-5% of U-235 for use in nuclear reactors for power production and 20% for the medium grade used for medical and other purposes.

sanctions forced their hand. Nevertheless, the election of Rouhani In June 2013 clearly signalled to the US that Khamenei and the Iranian regime were prepared to cash in their chips and do a deal. The long awaited window of opportunity had at last been prized open.

However, having rallied the unholy anti-Iranian alliance of Saudi Arabia and allied Gulf States, Israel, Turkey and Qatar to back the overthrow of the Syrian regime - and as a result having boxed himself inside his 'red lines' over Assad's alleged use of chemical weapons - Obama was now in a rather difficult position. It would require Obama's foreign policy to finesse a diplomatic pirouette in order to redefine the US relationship with its long-standing allies in the Middle East.



The souring of relations between the US and Russia over the civil war in Ukraine has not been allowed to prevent Russia continuing to act as a mediator in negotiations with the Syrian regime over the disposal of its chemical weapons, nor has it been allowed to disrupt progress towards an agreement over the issue of Iran's nuclear programme. Obama has remained steadfast in seizing the opportunity for rapprochement with Iran. However, the legacy of American involvement in the Syrian civil war has meant that rapprochement with Iran has not ensured much stability in the Middle East.

Previously, in making diplomatic or military interventions in the Middle East the US had always taken the lead. Even those allies that would end up paying the bill for such interventions - such as Saudi Arabia at the end of the Gulf War - had to subordinate their own interests to the aims set by the US. By taking more of a back seat with regard to the Syrian civil war, the Obama administration had left the powers in the region to take the lead in backing the anti-Assad opposition. But, as we have seen, this was to lead to the Syrian civil war to become increasingly, not only a sectarian and ethnic conflict, but also a proxy war for the competing powers in the region: a proxy war not only between Iran and the anti-Iranian alliance but also between the liberal 'moderate' Sunni powers such as Qatar and Turkey and the conservative powers such as Saudi Arabia.

Now, as Obama attempts to make his diplomatic pirouette, and it becomes clear that they can no longer depend on US protection, Saudi Arabia along with the other powers in the anti-Iranian alliance have felt obliged to increasingly take a more assertive and independent foreign policy. This has been evident in the United Arab Emirates launching air strikes in Libya, Saudi Arabia's military intervention in the civil war in Yemen, and more recently Turkey launching airstrikes against American favoured Kurdish forces fighting both the Syrian Army and ISIS.

Indeed, it is with the eruption of ISIS, having slipped the leash of their former Saudi paymasters, that the consequences of the US policy of 'relative disengagement' have most dramatically come home to roost.

The eruption of ISIS

By the end of 2013, following the sustained success of the Syrian regime's counter-offensive of the previous spring, it had become clear - even to die-hard neo-conservatives and liberal interventionists in Washington - that the conflict in Syria was unlikely to end any time soon. Attempts to promote the swift overthrow of Assad and the smooth transition to an amenable pro-American regime had ended up plunging Syria into a bitter sectarian and ethnic civil war that had also become a complex proxy war between the powers of the region. However, the Obama administration could console itself that at least they had confined the conflict to within the borders of Syria, and that in doing so they had at least managed to avoid direct armed intervention by American forces. But such consolations were soon to be shattered by the eruption of ISIS into Iraq.

Widely believed to be funded by Saudi money, ISIS had first emerged as one of the major

organisations of the Sunni resistance that had risen up against both the US occupation and the Shia dominated Iraqi government. Following the US troop surge and the mobilisation of the 'Awakening Councils' in 2008, ISIS had been more or less subdued as a fighting force in Iraq. However, with Syria's slide into civil war, ISIS were able to shift their operations to Syria, providing a valuable supply of battle hardened Iraqi jihadists to join the fight against the Syrian regime.

ISIS had largely been overshadowed by other Jihadist groups fighting the Syrian government until the Syrian Army's counter-offensive of early 2013. The Syrian Army had succeed in rolling back insurgent forces by concentrating its forces into attacking the rebel-held neighbourhoods in the towns and cities of western Syria. However, this concentration of forces in the west had required the depletion of troops levels in the under-populated areas of eastern Syria. As a result both ISIS and the Syrian Kurds were able to make substantial territorial gains in the north-eastern regions of Syria that bordered on Turkey and Iraq.

Violently breaking with its former jihadist allies in the Al-Nusra Front, ISIS now began to shift its focus back to Iraq. In the face of the sectarianism and arrogance of the Iraqi government, along with its failure to honour the promises made by the Americans that Sunnis would be integrated into the state and national army, many Sunni Iraqis who had supported the Awakening Council's efforts to eject Al Qaeda and other jihadists in 2008 were now having second thoughts. Through 2013 ISIS had been able to rebuild considerable support in the Sunni heartlands of north-western Iraq. At the beginning of 2014 they had sufficient support to lay siege to Fallujah. With the fall of that city, ISIS launched an audacious offensive aimed at overrunning the Iraqi capital – Baghdad – in one fowl swoop. Despite all the time, money and training lavished on it by the Americans, the Iraqi army was easily swept aside. Towns and cities fell to the advancing ISIS forces like Australian wickets in the face of a swinging and seaming ball under the cloudy skies of an English summer.⁹ Within a matter of a few days in early spring, ISIS had reached striking distance of Baghdad. With the Iraqi Army routed, it was left to the Shia militia to save the Iraqi capital.

All the painstaking efforts the Americans had undertaken to stabilise Iraq were now demolished and the risk was growing that the civil war in Syria might spread further in Turkey and elsewhere. Obama was finally obliged to take

direct military action in both Syria and Iraq by launching air strikes against ISIS forces. What is more, in order to prevent the fall of Iraq to ISIS, the Americans were obliged to ally both politically and militarily with Iran and the pro-Iranian Shia militia. This meant a more rapid rapprochement with the Iranian regime than might otherwise have been expected only a few months earlier. This sudden turn in US foreign policy has prompted concerns amongst those in the anti-Iranian alliance that the Americans have changed sides.

What happened to the Pivot?

Hence, with the continued instability in the region, any hopes that the Americans could extricate themselves from their entanglements in the Middle East any time soon have been shattered. At best there is now a long and arduous diplomatic road that the US must climb if it is to construct a stable balance of power that will ensure stability in the Middle east, allow the opening up of the Iranian and Iraqi oil and allow for a shift in US foreign policy towards the rise of China and Asia.

The continued rise of China and the US Pivot to Asia

Obama's two terms in office have seen the continued rapid transformation of China. As the old capitalist economies of USA, Japan and Europe have only been able to slowly crawl out of the 'great recession' that followed the financial crisis of 2008, the Chinese economy, after a short lived slow-down in 2009, bounced back – recording more or less double-digit growth rates for almost five years. As a result the Chinese economy raced ahead, leaving Germany and Japan in its wake, to become by a long chalk the world's second largest economy.

But this continued transformation of China has not merely been one of quantitative economic expansion. The sharp recovery of the Chinese economy certainly confounded those that in 2008 had dismissed China as little more than an 'export platform' for Asian manufactured goods destined for consumer markets in the US and Europe. An economic slowdown in the West, it had been predicted, would necessary bring to an end the Chinese 'economic miracle'.

Instead the sharp Chinese economic recovery has revealed - in a process that had certainly begun before the crisis, but which was greatly accelerated by it - that China had already gone past being merely an Asian 'export platform', and was moving beyond what we have previously termed a 'distinct epicentre in the world

⁹ See www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02yyx6p and <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02ybt8v>

economy',¹⁰ towards establishing itself as the second (southern) pole in the global accumulation of capital – the antipode to the US. The rapid development in trade and particularly investment flows to the 'emerging economies' of South America, Africa and particularly Asia not only allowed China to overcome the drag of economic stagnation in the West on its own growth, but allowed China to take over, at least temporarily, the Americans' traditional role as the 'locomotive of the world economy'. What is more, with much of the development of these trading and investment links being embedded in inter-state commercial treaties, it has also served to draw the emerging economies of the global south increasingly into China's economic and political orbit.

Concern at the relentless rise of China, and with it the proposed 'Pivot to Asia', has gained far more urgency for US foreign policy over the last seven years. Yet with the US still tied down in the Middle East, the Pivot has remained stuck.

With Obama's 'Pivot to Asia' jammed, Hillary Clinton, on assuming office as US Secretary of State, found herself dumped with the rather awkward task of presenting a semblance of substance to a policy that was as yet little more than a vague aspiration. Her most distinctive policy initiative in this regard, that could at least be seen as prefiguring the Pivot, was to spend time and effort in rejuvenating the long established diplomatic and military ties and alliances amongst China's neighbours that had originally been developed during the cold war. Through such means Clinton sought to encourage China's neighbours, with the promise of American diplomatic and even military backing, to stand up to what she insisted was China's increasingly assertive diplomacy.

China could certainly have been seen to have become increasingly assertive in its territorial claims over both the East and South China seas. There had been long standing disputes between China and the other nations bordering these two seas over the ownership of various uninhabited rocks, and hence the vast areas of the surrounding sea which could be then claimed as territorial waters under international law. Over the decades these disputes had sporadically flared up, but usually with little long term consequence.

Ostensibly these disputes were to do with fishing rights but lurking not far below the surface was the rather distant prospect of oil. There had long been a small scale but significant littoral extraction of oil and gas along the coast line of the South China Sea, and it had been long suspected that in the depths of the sea there were

far more substantial oil reserves. However, deep sea drilling had required prohibitively expensive and untried technology that made the exploitation of these deep sea oil fields economically unviable. Of course, at the time, statesmen of the region no doubt felt it wise to keep their nations' claims alive. After all you might never know when such a vital resource such as oil might be needed or when its extraction might become profitable.

By 2008 not only were oil prices far higher than they had ever been previously, but also the development of deep sea drilling technology in the Gulf of Mexico and elsewhere had meant the extraction costs of deep sea oil were falling. The point was being reached when large scale investment in the production of oil in the South China Sea would not only be feasible but also highly profitable. But before any such large scale investment could be made the territorial disputes would have to be settled.

For China, however, the issue of control over the East and South China Seas was not merely a matter of oil. In Mao's day, the existential military threats to China were either a mass armed invasion or air strikes against its major cities. Now that it had become integrated within the global economy, China had become dependent on the trade routes across the China Seas. If a hostile power was to take control of either of the China Seas they would be able to impose a naval blockade that would bring China to its knees within months if not weeks. Chinese military planners had, perhaps a little belatedly, begun to take this issue more seriously in their plans to modernise the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

At least ostensibly, all sides in the disputes over the ownership of the China Seas agreed that the matters would have to be settled by negotiations in accordance with the well-established principles of international law. But international law is malleable to practical realities. Now was the time not only for asserting claims but also for imposing 'facts on the ground'. Emboldened by Clinton's diplomacy, China's attempts to assert their claims were countered by Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, and the Philippines asserting their counter-claims. As a result, Obama's Presidency was to see an escalation in the frequency of military incidents – ranging from island occupations, standoffs and skirmishes to incursions into disputed waters and air space.

In 2012 China went further and unilaterally imposed an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ), in which all foreign aircraft were obliged to report and identify themselves to the Chinese military authorities or risk being shot down. This imposition of the ADIZ, if respected, would have effectively expanded China's territorial airspace to cover most of the South China Sea.

¹⁰ See 'Welcome to the "Chinese century"?' in *Aufheben* #14

However, Hillary Clinton could reasonably claim that her policy of 'emboldenment' had succeeded in checking any incipient Chinese military expansionism. It had also been able to achieve such containment without seriously destabilising the region or souring US relations with China over other vital issues such as the world economy, climate change and the Middle East.

Although military incidents had become far more frequent, they were still soon resolved with one or the other party invariably backing-off before reaching the point of a serious military engagement. And, what is more, no plane daring to defy the ADIZ had been shot down. No one really wanted to risk going to war over a few islands. At the same time, the Americans could always claim that they were only supporting 'legitimate' territorial claims. They could also claim that they had merely promised military aid and backing to their allies as far as it was necessary to defend them from aggression of an unnamed hostile power – so why, they could ask, should this concern China?

One of the problems of Hillary Clinton's 'muscular approach' was that it depended on convincing both China and America's Asian allies that ultimately the US would be prepared to commit overwhelming military force to any showdown with the Chinese. With much of their military forces tied down in the Middle East, and with little appetite at home for further military engagements, there could be serious doubts concerning whether the Americans would be able or willing to take direct military action, particularly if this was to lead to a major diplomatic or military confrontation with China.

To limit this problem of the credibility of her bluff of direct US military intervention, Clinton had impressed upon America's Asian allies the importance of bolstering their own military capability. The keystone in Clinton's alliance to contain Chinese military expansionism was Japan. Japan was by far the most important power in the region after China. As such it was the obvious, if not only, candidate to lead an alliance that could contain Chinese

expansionism. But due to the 'pacifist constitution' imposed by the Americans after the second world war, Japan did not rate much as a military power. As consequence, Clinton had been quite sanguine about the rise of Japanese nationalism, growing Japanese military expenditure and proposals to amend Japan's constitution to allow military operations that are not strictly defensive.

But by allowing the emergence of Japan as a military power, Hillary Clinton could be seen as playing a dangerous game. In the short to medium term, Japan would be freed to take up the burden of countering the growth of Chinese military strength, and thereby relieve the burden falling on the US. At the same time, it would also reduce the risk of the US having to intervene on a scale that could cause a major confrontation with China. However, you do not need to believe that Japan will necessarily revert to the fascist-militarism of the early part of the last century to see that, in the longer term, the emergence of Japan as a military power anywhere near commensurate with the size of its economy could

store up serious trouble for US foreign policy in the future. No longer reliant on the Americans for defence, and with expanded military capabilities, the Japanese would be free to develop their own independent foreign policy that no longer had to be congruent with America's 'security concerns' in East and South East Asia. Indeed, by pushing Japan into the front line, Clinton might have reduced the risk of a major confrontation between China and the US, but only at the price of increasing the risk of a

destabilising arms race, or even a future war, between Japan and China over which the US would have little control.

But a far more fundamental criticism of Clinton's 'muscular approach' was that it simply missed the target. Now of course, Clinton's policy of 'emboldenment' had a certain political expediency. With the US foreign policy bogged down in the Middle East, it provided at least a semblance that the Obama administration was 'doing something' about the rise of China. Furthermore by concentrating on the threat of Chinese military expansionism it allowed Clinton



to exercise a little political triangulation. By taking an apparently hard line, it could spike the guns of both Republican and Democrat hawks who were concerned that the Obama administration was being 'too soft' towards China. At the same time it did not spoil good diplomatic and business relations with China.

Now it is true that China has in recent years begun to substantially increase military expenditure. However, China is very far from translating economic into military power in a way that could seriously challenge the US on a global scale. At best China could hope to contest US forces in the China Seas. In fact the challenge to US global hegemony has come far more from China's attempt to transform economic power into political and diplomatic 'soft power' in both Asia and the emerging economies of the Global South more generally.

The rapid economic recovery following the financial crisis of 2008, and the deepening economic ties with the emerging economies of the Global South – particularly those in Asia – that went with it, has led to both a quantum leap in China's political and diplomatic influence and growing pro-Chinese sentiment amongst the Asian bourgeoisie and government functionaries. Clinton may have been able to mobilise opposition to its territorial claims to long-disputed islands amongst China's neighbours, but this was only insofar that such opposition did not disrupt business as usual with China. For the Asian bourgeoisie, China has become where the money is to be made. China now appears as the future, and the US the past – a perception only reinforced by Clinton remixing the old Chinese containment tunes from the cold war that can only appear as decidedly retro.

As a result, with the US still preoccupied with the Middle East, China has been able to steal a march on the US in developing its soft power in Asia and elsewhere. The importance of this expansion of China's 'soft power' has now become evident with the launch of three major diplomatic initiatives - which ten years ago would have seemed beyond the capabilities of Chinese diplomacy - that together seriously challenge US hegemony in Asia and beyond.

First is China's proposal for a trans-Asian trade pact. Following the effective collapse of the Doha round of free trade negotiations in 2009, the US has sought to maintain the momentum towards further liberalisation of international trade and investment by abandoning attempts to obtain a global agreement in favour of two separate trans-Oceanic trade pacts. The first was proposal for a trans-Atlantic trade pact involving the nations making up the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and those of the European Union. The second was a parallel trans-

Pacific agreement between the US and selected nations in Asia with China pointedly excluded. China has responded by proposing an alternative Asian free trade pact that deliberately excluding the US – the 'Free Trade Area of the Asia and the Pacific'.

Second, China has also put forward an ambitious programme for the development of two new trade routes from China to the Middle East, Europe, and Africa, which are known as the New Silk Road and the Maritime Silk Road, which will be independent of the control of US and European capital. One route will be overland, following roughly the course of the Old Silk Road of ancient times, through Central Asia. The other is a maritime route via the ports of the Indian Ocean. Through a series of commercial agreements and treaties with its Asian partners, China hopes to build the vast transport and communications infrastructure – i.e. ports, roads and railways – necessary to develop both the New and Maritime Silk Roads.

Third, and perhaps more significantly, in order to finance the investment necessary to construct the Silk Roads and other infrastructure projects across Asia, China has recently launched the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). The AIIB has been clearly seen by the Americans as a direct challenge to the American dominated World Bank in the region. Much to the dismay of the Obama administration, however, China has not only been able to persuade key Asian governments to sign up and subscribe to the AIIB but has also been able to sign up the UK, Germany, France and other western governments. The AIIB, together with China's participation in the New Development Bank set up together with Brazil and South Africa threatens to erode New York's continued dominance of global finance, particular for the Asia and the Global South.

Nevertheless, in her defence, it could be argued that, with US foreign policy bogged down in the Middle East, Hillary Clinton had few other options with regard to the 'Pivot'. Certainly she did more than her successor as Secretary of State, John Kerry, who on being appointed found himself having to grapple with the repercussions of the Arab Spring.

CONCLUSION

So, we might conclude, it was not the tenacity and defiance of the anti-war movement that gathered in their hundreds in Parliament Square on August 29th 2013 that stopped not one but two wars. Nor was it that at long last the anti-war movement had won the argument over the invasion of Iraq and 'humanitarian interventionism' in general. Contrary to the crude anti-Americanism and simplistic analysis of the

Stop the War Coalition and much of the liberal-left, the US was very far from being hell-bent on war with both Iran and Syria.

As we have argued, the over-riding long term foreign policy objectives of the Obama administration have been the need to secure access to both Iran's and Iraq's oil fields and to stabilise the situation in the Middle East in order to refocus military and diplomatic efforts towards the rise of China – both of which required a rapprochement with the Iranian regime. The ratcheting up of sanctions against Iran and support for the overthrow of the Syrian regime had been merely a means to force the Iranian regime to the negotiating table. August 2013 had seen this contradiction between the means and the ends of US foreign policy towards the Middle East come to a head. As a consequence, far from looking for a pretext for war, the Obama administration found itself desperately trying to escape from the entanglement created by its own 'red lines'.

The Obama administration has managed to start the long diplomatic process of 'doing a deal' with Iran with the signing of the agreement over Iran's nuclear programme and the lifting of economic sanctions - although, of course, this agreement could still be scuppered by the US Congress or a future Republican President. However, this has failed to lead to the stabilisation of the Middle East and, far from clearing the way for the Pivot to Asia, has led the US to become even further embroiled in the region.

But what of the claims that it was ultimately all to do with the decline of US imperialism? Was the Americans' reluctance to stick to their 'red lines' further evidence of the weakness of US imperialism, which is no longer able to impose its will in the world?

Of course, 'sophisticated Marxists' have been claiming that US imperialism is in decline for more than forty years. But now we are told that the US – if not capitalism itself – is now in *terminal* decline. As it gradually sinks in the quagmire of economic stagnation, we are told, the US foreign policy has become increasingly frantic and irrational as it flails about desperately trying to save itself from its inevitable doom. It had been such desperation in the face of its now unavoidable decline that underlay the reckless decision on the part of the US to invade Iraq.

But as we have previously argued,¹¹ this explains little or nothing. The actions of US imperialism being totally irrational become completely inexplicable. This 'sophisticated

analysis' ends up merely reproducing in more convoluted form the rather simplistic notions of the anti-war movement ideology that the Americans are just 'mad and bad'. Furthermore, far from being a product of desperation, the decision to invade Iraq can be seen to be more a result of the triumphalism and hubris that followed victory in the cold war. Having seen off both the USSR and Japan to become the world's sole military and economic superpower, the American neo-conservatives in their manifesto the *Project for a New American Century* had envisaged to prolonging US dominance for another hundred years!

Now of course, with hindsight, the invasion of Iraq can be seen to have been an unmitigated disaster for US foreign policy, which far from prolonging American hegemony has ended up undermining it, and, as we have seen, has made it far more difficult for the Americans to address the real challenge to their continued world dominance – the rise of China. As we have argued, since the financial crisis of 2008, China has surged ahead in terms of capital accumulation to become the 'locomotive of the world economy'. In doing so it has stolen a march on the US and is on the way to becoming a distinct pole in global accumulation of capital. But China is still a long way from seriously challenging US hegemony. The USA still remains the centre of global accumulation of capital.

What is more, the recent sharp slowdown in the Chinese economy has revealed the limits of China's post-crisis economic surge. It is still unclear whether the current economic slowdown of China and the emerging economies of the global south will lead to global economic stagnation, or whether the US economic recovery will be sufficient for the US to resume its traditional role as the locomotive of the world economy. At present, and for the foreseeable future, there is nothing inevitable about the decline of US hegemony or of US imperialism.



¹¹ For a more detailed critique of 'sophisticated Marxist' analyses such as those of H. Ticktin and the CPGB, see 'Lebanon, Iran and the "long war" in "the wider Middle East"' in *Aufheben* #15.