

Position Paper

Is there a change in the strategic priorities of the Obama administration?



The appointment of Senator John Kerry, former chairman of the Senate's Foreign Relations Committee and one of the active American personalities in foreign politics throughout Obama's first term, has provoked speculation in many circles as to whether the USA is at a new juncture regarding the reorganisation of its global strategic priorities. Most of the speculation was around whether Obama chose Kerry because of his significant experience in US relations with European allies and Middle Eastern states - seeing as these are the regions with which the USA is mostly concerned - after a noticeable neglect of both regions during Obama's first term.

This is an attempt to explore the early trends of Obama's second administration at a global level and to answer the question as to whether Obama is in the process of changing US policy in the Middle East in regard to his country's strategic global priorities.

Obama's first management strategy

In January 2012, the first Obama administration (January 2009 to January 2013) published a document highlighting its perception of the USA's global strategy. At the time, the document raised considerable controversy, particularly in Europe and China, without drawing any attention from most of the Arab world. In fact, the document did not indicate a new US foreign policy (including a defense policy) from the previous three years of Obama's first term. Everything it had done was confirmed by this policy, which was outlined in detail, and provided the required justifications.

What Obama's announcement confirmed, in short, was a change of US priorities from Europe and the Middle East to the Pacific Basin, due to the decline in risks which threaten US interests in both these regions, or due to the relative dwindling in importance of both; while China has become a major threat to America and its role in the international arena. Europe, of course, was a US priority throughout the long years of the Cold War, but during the 1990s, US strategy had undergone a transition that was not clearly defined. Since 2001, the administration of George W. Bush made the Middle East, its strategic priority while at the same time promoting the development of NATO and the expansion of its relationship in Central and Eastern Europe.

In the first few months of Obama assuming office of the US presidency, the Obama administration announced its full determination to withdraw US troops from Iraq as well as a plan for a major military withdrawal from Afghanistan within a few years and also to reduce the level of conventional military presence in US military bases in Western Europe. At the same time, US policy succeeded in opening up Myanmar (Burma), and worked to forge closer ties with India and Pakistan. It signed a series of agreements that allowed for the establishment of US military bases, or access to military facilities, in Australia and a number of Asian countries neighbouring China.

Unlike the Bush administration, which pledged a policy of active intervention in conflicts in the Middle East, it seemed that the Obama administration has been pursuing a policy of reconciliation with the people of the region, keeping intervention to a minimum, except in regard to the Palestinian issue, where the Obama administration has avoided any provocation of Israel. The administration did not try to provide any support worth mentioning to its allies in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen when popular revolts broke out against them. Whereas Washington expressed sympathy with the Libyan and Syrian people, American intervention in Libya was slow and hesitant. It seemed that the Americans were ultimately driven to intervene more because of the inadequacy of NATO rather than a genuine desire to intervene. In Syria, the Obama administration did not oppose its Arab allies' support of the Syrian rebels, but at the same time refrained from extending a concrete helping hand. In general, the role of the first Obama administration

in the Syrian crisis was limited to a policy of sanctions against the regime and inconclusive efforts at the United Nations. Here too, Washington did not show any willingness worth mentioning to make a deal with Moscow or Tehran in exchange for them dissociating from the Assad regime, or for any other purpose.

There are a number of reasons behind the rise of the Pacific Basin to the forefront of US strategic priorities in the world, and decline - though not complete withdrawal - of its stance in the Middle East and Europe:

- The United States, and the Atlantic bloc as a whole, have been suffering from a deep and protracted financial and economic crisis since 2008, requiring a reconsideration of spending priorities in different parts of the world.
- The United States is making active progress in efforts for self-sufficiency in energy sources, which has given the Middle East greater importance over the past few decades.
- China's economic rise, despite the relative slowdown after 2008, will eventually allow it to be a competitive defensive force and not only an economic and financial one.
- The ongoing transformation in the Middle East poses no immediate risk to the interests of the United States. Russia is also too weak to pose a threat to Europe and so it is possible, through a network of regional alliances, to realise the USA's pressing political goals in both Europe and the Middle East without having to bear any significant burden.

These, in brief, were the main features of the strategic approach that guided Obama's first administration. But John Kerry's assumption of leadership of the US State Department and the programme of his first trip outside the USA fuels speculation around whether Obama's second administration is reviewing the direction of the global strategy which it had adopted in the previous four years.

Is there something more than speculation?

Soon after he assumed the office of the US Secretary of State, Kerry undertook a customary visit to Canada. This is carried out by each new US Secretary of State and is not considered unusual. But the new US Secretary of State's first trip, which lasted eleven days, included visits to London, Berlin, Paris, Rome, Ankara, Cairo, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Doha while his predecessor Hilary Clinton's first trip included visits to Japan, Indonesia, South Korea and China. Kerry's numerous European and Middle Eastern destinations were the main source of interest.

Clinton's first trip to South and East Asia four years ago did not spark a great interest among US foreign policy observers at the time. Neither President Barack Obama nor Clinton mentioned anything outright after signaling a change of US priorities from the Middle East to the Pacific. Indeed, many predicted then, in light of both Obama's speeches to Arabs and Muslims in Turkey and Egypt that the new administration would make great efforts to build new relationships with countries in the Middle East and find a solution to the Palestinian question and the Arab-Israeli conflict, which has weighed heavily on the region for decades. But Clinton's trip became more significant over the next two years, due to the extent of the shift in US policy towards the Pacific Basin, and the significant decline of the US role in the Middle East and Europe became clear. Therefore, it was not surprising that Kerry's extensive tour in Europe and the Middle East raised questions around a new change in US strategy.

The press conference held by Kerry in London with his British counterpart, William Hague, on 25 February 2013, at the end of the first part of his tour, is the second source

of these speculations. What intrigued London's journalists at the conference was the amount of time both ministers spent speaking about the Middle East in their statements, particularly the Syrian issue. Kerry spoke critically about the loss of confidence in the Syrian president and regarded Assad's bombing of his people with Scud missiles as shameful. Despite his emphasis that US policy still gives priority to a political solution, he added, 'We are determined that the Syrian opposition is not going to be dangling in the wind, wondering where the support is, if it is coming'. Kerry's remarks in London, as he stood alongside Hague, who is known for his support for Western countries providing military assistance to the Syrian opposition, suggested that Obama's administration has reviewed its policy regarding Syria, and is at a juncture of playing a more effective role to tip the balance of power in favour of the opposition. This expectation of Kerry was reinforced by his saying that more positive steps would be announced in the days leading up to the 'Friends of Syria' conference in Rome.

British sources (The Guardian, February 26) further indicated that Hague and Kerry also spoke about other issues of peace in the Middle East, including the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Iran nuclear question. In response to a question on the issue of peace, Hague said that it would be the issue of utmost priority in 2013 while Kerry did not personally comment. Here too, the outcome was that expectations were that Obama's second administration will make more of an effort to revive the peace process, and that they are going to announce a new initiative in this regard.

At the Friends of Syria conference on 28 February 2013, the US policy towards the Syrian crisis only altered slightly. Kerry announced that Washington would directly provide the Syrian National Coalition with US\$ 60 million in aid which would not include deadly weapons. Although Kerry's subsequent statements in Ankara, Cairo, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Doha did not provide any additional references to the noticeable changes in the position towards Syria, the British newspaper, The Guardian stated on 8 March 2013 that Western experts, including the USA, the UK and the French, were overseeing the training and organisation of Syrian armed opposition affiliated with 'moderate groups' among the rebels in Jordan and Syria so as to ensure the control of moderates in a post-Assad scenario. If this report is true, and there is little to show that it isn't, the Obama administration and its European allies should be deeply concerned by the rise of the power and influence of radical Islamic groups in the rebel ranks of the Syrians, especially that of *Jabhat al-nusra* (The Victory Front – or the al-Nusra front).

In another development, the British Foreign Minister, immediately after the end of the Friends of Syria meeting, said that his country would provide armored vehicles and communication equipment to the Syrian opposition. Such a move must have been discussed between Britain and the United States before its announcement.

This then, is the overall evolution of the US position on the Syrian crisis. It does not suggest any American preparations for direct intervention, not even to provide any military aid to the opposition, such as that provided by the USA to the Afghan *mujahidin* (fighters) in the 1980s. With regards to the Palestinian issue, it is clear that there are no new American initiatives, not even an active move to resume negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians. As for the position in regard to the countries of the Arab revolutions and the transition process in these countries, Kerry's visit to Cairo gave a clear indication on that. In Cairo, Kerry avoided intervening in the dispute between President Mursi and his opponents, stressing Washington's respect for the *Shariah* (Islamic Law), and advising both parties to come to agreement. Kerry did not forget to mention the importance of Egypt and its stability and to extend a modest US\$ 190 million in financial assistance to help Egypt out of its economic crisis.

Nothing new

Despite Kerry's first trip being to Europe and the Middle East, which may be no more than a symbolic gesture to serve an international agenda, there is no indication as to a significant change in US policy regarding Syria, which many expected to be the centre of the USA's return to the Middle East. The US view of the Syrian crisis remains as it is, even though it is slightly modified. This should not be considered an indication towards active intervention. In fact, since its emergence as a dominant power in the international arena after World War II, the USA has hovered between resolving tension and conflict in the world by direct intervention, or by waiting for the balance of power to run its course, and extending a helping hand of varying degrees to its allies. It is clear that Washington opted for the second option in Syria since the Syrian Revolution turned into a regional and international crisis at the end of 2011. It does not seem that Kerry will adopt any new approaches to this crisis.

It is unlikely that Obama's upcoming visit to Israel – which is conditional on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's ability to quickly form his coalition government – will see any changes in the US position in the Arab-Israeli conflict. The USA's ability to make any progress on the peace process depends on the Israeli and Palestinian parties' willingness to adhere to it.

Despite conflicting Iranian statements about Iran's G5+1 talks in Almaty, Kazakhstan, it does not seem that Iran provided any substantial concessions in the talks, nor did the western powers retreat from their previous demands. Western sanctions remain, and will probably become more stringent. The military option is on the table but not imminent in any way.

On the other hand, particularly with regard to the countries of the Arab revolutions, which saw a rise of the forces of mainstream Islam, as in Tunisia and Egypt, there is no indication that the Obama administration will act either to undermine the rule of Islamists or to enhance their powers. Washington will approach the new political structures according to the importance of the state, their willingness to strengthen relations with the United States and the extent to which these structures achieve a transition towards a stable democratic rule that is supported by the popular majority.

In other words, until further notice, there is no obvious change in US policy towards the Middle East and unless the world sees a transformative event, the agenda of US strategic priorities during Obama's second term will remain similar to that of the first.

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