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Still the World's Leader? US Foreign Policy in a Multi-Polar Era

Herzliya Report

Shmulik Bachar

Institute for Policy and Strategy (IPS)
Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy
Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) Herzliya

This paper reflects the opinion of its authors only

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Executive Summary

One of the major questions facing the world is whether the US will be able to maintain its position as the superpower currently leading the world system in the twenty-first century, or whether it will dwindle to a marginalized position while other powers supersede its economic, military and political capabilities. Over the past several decades the academic, political, economic and political discourses have attempted to cope with the prevailing perception of the ebbing of America's power. In recent years these discourses have intensified in light of the US' ongoing crises at home and abroad, the global recession's effect on the US economy and its military obligations around the globe, particularly the fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. Still, albeit the world system is becoming increasingly multi-polar in character, the US remains the world's leader as its economic, political and military power remains unrivaled by any other world powers.

In light of the US' apparently ebbing global position, Barack Obama stepped into office as President in January 2009 determined to set a new foreign policy in order to entirely differentiate himself from that of his predecessor, George W. Bush, whose eight year policy is perceived by millions in the US and around the world as the main cause responsible for the drop in the US' international standing since the beginning of the new millennium. Obama's supporters praise his new policy, which signifies America's readiness to engage in dialogue with its opponents and enemies worldwide in contrast to Bush's confrontational tactics. However, Obama's critics maintain that the new policy is actually an expression of the President's weak character and that he takes an intellectual position that is detached from reality. Furthermore, it is suggested that Obama might turn the US from the world's leading position into a *primus inter pares* at most, as exemplified by the US' constant drawdown from its responsibilities in several international arenas.

US-Europe: Despite the above mentioned criticism, Obama did manage to improve US relations with the EU, which acknowledges America's leading position in the international system and is willing to serve as a secondary partner to help the US carry out its obligations as a world leader, particularly with regard to the Middle Eastern peace process and the war in Afghanistan. Cooperation between the EU and the US also occurs via NATO, which will have to make several important decisions concerning the Iranian nuclear program. In this context one of the main issues expected to be discussed is the missile defense program that was supposed to be positioned in Eastern Europe in order to defend the European continent from any ballistic threat, especially from Iran. The US has suspended this program per Russia's demand, since the latter perceives this program as a threat against it. It seems that in light of the Obama administration's desire to renew the US' strategic relationship with Russia the program will remain suspended.

The US in Asia: In the Asian arena the US in the Obama era faces an additional challenge relating to the military-nuclear dimension. Although it is quite clear that America's economic and military power supersedes the capabilities of other nations, and notwithstanding the understanding that the US is the only power capable of ensuring collective good and global stability, there are still those who challenge this notion. One example is Japan, which is currently re-examining the necessity of the US Army bases positioned in Japan and its neighboring countries as part of the nuclear umbrella the US provides for this region. China has upgraded its naval capabilities in recent years, thus causing great concern for the US in challenging America's military hegemony in the region.

US-Russia: Since Obama arrived in office his administration has utterly transformed his predecessor's policy vis-à-vis Russia in order to enable better cooperation between the two powers, which is intended to enable the US to better handle the Iranian nuclear program by enlisting the Russians to join the sanctions regime the US wishes to impose upon Iran. Furthermore, the US was able to convince Russia to sign a new bilateral agreement for the reduction of nuclear proliferation (April 2010). Although Russia does not respond positively to every American demand, especially not with regard to Iran, the Americans are well aware of the importance of Russia in creating an international consensus against Iran and on several other issues the international system has to face.

The US and the Middle East Peace Process: Obama's election raised hopes in the Arab and Muslim world for a substantial improvement in US relations with Arab and Muslim countries and for increased American pressure on Israel to renegotiate with the Palestinians while consenting to American dictates; however, these expectations have not been realized. Despite the improvement in tone towards the Arab and Muslim world there are many in these countries who maintain that Obama has not reversed the US' strategic alliance with Israel. Nevertheless, despite this disappointment all parties to the process understand that there is no substitute for the US and its senior position as a mediator to motivate the parties to take bold steps for peace. It is important to recognize that the US political schedule requires rapid progress in the peace process in light of the upcoming mid-term congressional elections set to take place in November 2010. However, the US has thus far been unable to present an effective initiative for the resumption of the direct negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians.

US-Israel: The events over the past year have raised questions with regard to what has long been considered the unique relationship between the US superpower and its most important ally in the Middle East. The current right-wing government headed by Benjamin Netanyahu has raised doubts regarding the sincerity of its declared willingness to promote the peace process with the Palestinians while further building settlements in the Occupied Territories. On the US front, the Obama administration is believed by many observers in Israel both within and outside the government to be gradually changing the fundamental nature of America's relations with Israel and thus sacrificing Israel's most essential national interests by means of pressuring Israel to make concessions to the Palestinians in the framework of the negotiations to better serve the US' aspiration for rapprochement with the Arab and Muslim world and enabling Iran to complete its nuclear program. During the 10th Annual Herzliya Conference the speakers on the subject were asked to relate to the question on whether US-Israel relations are still as unique as they had been in the past. Speakers representing both sides of the debate maintained that despite the skepticism and the visible strains between the two, the US and Israel still maintain a very special, sustainable, close and natural alliance in the framework of which the US is still committed to Israel's security and defense. According to these speakers, despite

differences of opinion regarding the proper ways to implement the two-state solution and to handle the Iranian problem, these issues are at the center of attention in both countries which share a mutual interest in tackling them. Apparently, most of the Conference's speakers who were asked to relate to the matter refrained from publicly addressing the events of past year. In light of the tense relations between the two administrations during the course of the Conference, let alone in the months following the Conference, there appeared to be cognitive dissonance between the reality of the situation and the way things were presented by the various speakers at the Conference.

The US in the Broader Middle East: In the broader Middle Eastern arena conventional wisdom holds that the US' position is gradually weakening, especially in light of the Obama administration's handling of the main spheres of friction and struggle, i.e. Iraq, Afghanistan-Pakistan and Iran:

- **Iraq:** Over the past two years there has been a major improvement in Iraq's security situation. The Obama administration has committed itself to ending the US Army's primary combat missions in Iraq by the end of August 2010, while at the same time transferring security responsibilities to the Iraqi security forces. No more than 50,000 American troops will remain in Iraq at this stage. The remaining American forces will focus on training the Iraqi police and armed forces; meanwhile the gradual drawdown of all American troops from Iraq will continue until the end of 2011. However, it is assumed that the administration's decisions will be affected by domestic developments in Iraq, especially in light of the prolonged complex process of government formation due to the highly ambiguous results of the March 2010 parliamentary elections. Both the US and Iraq's neighbors fear an Iranian takeover in Iraq, hence it is currently impossible to ascertain whether or not the optimistic drawdown scenarios will hold up.
- **Afghanistan-Pakistan:** The security situation in Afghanistan is more complicated than that in Iraq. NATO forces, led by US troops, find it extremely difficult to recruit and persuade the local forces and civilians to take control of their own affairs. Most of the Afghani country is controlled by the Taliban forces and warfare has spilled over to neighboring Pakistan, thus causing domestic instability there. According to the new strategy declared by President Obama, it was decided to launch 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan to join the 70,000 troops already there. Additionally, it was decided that the American drawdown from Afghanistan will commence in mid-2011, by which time the main goals are expected to be the stabilization of the Afghan government and the crushing of the active terror networks in the country.

Obama's new policy has been met with harsh criticism both at home and abroad. Critics of his policy maintain that not enough troops were sent to Afghanistan, consequently forcing the narrowing of the US' goals in the war. There are also differences of opinion regarding the future character of Afghanistan and whether a sustainable Afghan nation-state is a realistic vision, or if the US will have to maintain its presence in Afghanistan much longer than originally predicted. Moreover, the war's spillover into Pakistan raises concerns that the rule over this country might fall into the hands of radical Islamists despite tremendous efforts by the Pakistani army to control the situation. Either way, a prolonging of the war in Afghanistan without tangible achievements will decrease the American public's support of it, especially in the event of a significant rise in the number of American casualties. Under such circumstances, the US will have to decide whether it should carry out a "respectable" drawdown or whether it should invest even more resources in the

war, thus prolonging its presence in Afghanistan even further in order to prevent it from falling into the hands of the radical forces at work.

- **Iran:** The need to face Iran's nuclear program head on is at the top of the Obama administration's priorities list. Following his election President Obama declared his intention to invoke a new policy of engagement with Iran in complete contrast to that of his predecessor. Obama stated that he hoped this kind of engagement, based on a carrot and stick policy, would convince the Iranian regime to be more flexible: if the Iranian leadership will be prepared to give up the country's military nuclear program, the international community will be willing to reach out to Iran, but in the event the Iranian regime refuses give up its program, severe sanctions will be imposed upon Iran by the international community.

Supporters of this engagement policy maintain that it has enabled Obama to garner broad international support, even from Russia and China that had both previously refused to join the sanctions regime. Clear evidence for this claim is the new round of sanctions that was imposed on Iran in early June 2010. Critics of this policy, however, claim it was a mistake to give Iran the engagement "carrot" in the first place.

While US administration officials claim that Iran will not cross the nuclear threshold, Obama critics maintain quite the opposite declaring that Iran strives to become a regional hegemon. It is already clear that the international community will find it extremely difficult to implement the new sanctions effectively and that these sanctions will not be harsh enough to convince the Iranians to renounce their nuclear program. Furthermore, there is great concern among several Middle Eastern countries that eventually the US will accept the Iranian nuclear program in exchange for Iran's silent consent to allow the Americans a respectable pullout from both Iraq and Afghanistan. It is also possible that Arab and Muslim countries will ask for Iranian patronage in light of their disappointment with regard to America's poor handling of the Iranian problem. Alternatively, Arab and Muslim countries might launch a nuclear arms race in order to deter Iran due to these countries' mistrust of the US' assurances for a nuclear extended deterrence against Iran.

A. Preface: Is the Sole Superpower Dwindling?

Over the past several decades an academic, political, economic and cultural discourse has been taking place regarding the dwindling power of the US as the leading superpower of the international system. This discourse notwithstanding, no power has ever been able to overtake the US' economic and military capabilities, let alone its political impact on world affairs. Whether the US will maintain its primary position amongst the world powers in this challenging century or whether it will retreat to a secondary position remains to be seen.

Currently, there are three main scenarios to the understanding of the new global order. The first scenario views the international system as an arena in which several powers operate without any single authority imposing its will on any of the other powers. The Copenhagen Climate Conference (December 2009) was a concrete expression of this trend as it became clear that it would be very difficult to form a collective response to global climate issues. The second scenario views a multi-polar world in which there is no equality between the powers and the US still remains the sole uncontested

superpower. The third scenario exhibits an economically and politically multi-polar system with several new power centers, of which the US still remains the strongest military superpower. Each of these scenarios is presented as a possible solution against the outbreak of inter-power wars due to the creation of new balances of power.

It is clear that at the turn of the twenty-first century the US is facing new challenges, due to both the changing nature of the world and to the US' domestic dynamics. The new division in world power, in addition to globalization processes, implies that the US can no longer rule the global system alone, since the power is spread among both state and non-state actors. Furthermore, the US suffers from severe domestic problems, including an enormous external debt that increases US dependence upon foreign banks, a dependence on energy resources outside the US and inadequate functioning of the country's political system. These domestic issues are the main obstacle that faces the US' global leadership. Additionally, the US is becoming increasingly isolationist and protectionist, as exhibited by its reduced openness to trade, immigration and foreign investment. These problems will make it very difficult for the Americans to further lead the global system. Despite the fact that the American economy is still considered one of the best worldwide, in financial and technological terms – and is even expected to grow in relative terms – the global recession of the last few years rendered the US in a very bad economic state and its relative position internationally is expected to drop. For these and other reasons the US will be less capable of projecting its power in terms of influence. Hence the question is whether this is merely a temporary state from which the US can recover gradually as it has done before, or whether the problem is much graver due to the unique nature of the current crisis.

Furthermore, despite the fact that the US Army is the strongest, most powerful and most sophisticated army in the world, it seems that the extension of US troops throughout the world in numerous and diverse multiple missions – some may say too many missions – has become a heavy burden on the American army, putting strains on its commanders and challenging it tremendously. Moreover, the US alone guards the supply of global energy in the Persian Gulf although most of this energy is not even designated to ever reach the US.

Still, and despite all of the above, it is possible to assume that the US will remain first among unequal powers, especially due to the enormous size of its economy and its tremendous power. Many of Obama's foreign policy critics maintain that the problem lies not with US power, but rather with America's willingness to project that power in the global system while defending its most vital national interests and the interests of its partners, friends and allies worldwide.

Twenty-first century challenges – from globalization to climate change, global terrorism, energy and security –necessitate a new logic for contemporary international relations. Even if the goals of foreign policy have not transformed fundamentally over the years they currently contain increasingly unfamiliar variables. President Obama has adopted an utterly different foreign policy than his predecessor, George W. Bush, whose critics claim that he implemented a very dangerous foreign policy which overestimated America's capabilities. Obama's supporters claim that under his presidency a new era has begun between the US and its allies, one which realizes that competition need not be in conflict with cooperation in mutual fields of interest. The US has turned into a team player and has added "soft power" to its familiar foreign policy toolbox, gradually moving beyond its traditional force element. During his first year in office President Obama has managed to create a new dynamic that has

adjusted US global and regional interests to global and regional reality. A typical example of this new dynamic is the realization that the US must both integrate the Afghan civilian element as well as stabilize the Afghan system by leaning upon the regional players. Obama's critics at home and abroad, however, maintain that US weakness is the result of the President's own weakness, typified by his universal intellectual approach that is a far cry from reality. The current administration is now facing the test of the region's reality, and will thus have to forgo the intellectual discourse and high rhetoric.

B. US-Europe Relations: A Demanding Partnership

According to each of the above mentioned possible scenarios regarding the world order, the US still remains a superpower with substantial influence over the international system, even if that influence is limited under certain circumstances. However, it is specifically in this current multi-polar system that the US needs strong allies that share its same values of freedom, democracy and human dignity. The US' strongest ally today is the EU. The European Union, both as a unified body with a coherent foreign policy and as a collection of nation-states with their own agendas and interests, acknowledges America's senior position as leader of the Western world despite certain differences of opinion between the US and some of Europe's leading powers. The EU maintains that its global function is to assist the US and strengthen the latter's leading position in the international community. Over the past year Obama and the US have seemingly developed a close relationship with Europe, unlike the complications and setbacks which characterized the relationship during the Bush era. There are those who define this new relationship as a "demanding partnership"; the EU shall be required to take more political, economic and military commitments upon itself in the international arena if it wishes to become an active partner in the American administration's decision-making processes in its main foreign affairs areas, i.e. the war in Afghanistan, Iran's nuclear program and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

The relations between the US and Europe are also conducted through NATO. One of the main challenges the organization is currently facing is how to punish Iran if the latter does not abide by UN Security Council's resolutions and international law regarding the demand that it freeze its nuclear program. Like the US, the EU now enforces two policies with regard to Iran, , by recognizing the need to hold a dialogue with the Iranian administration while simultaneously threatening to impose sanctions against it . There is no certainty that NATO and the EU will manage to make a coherent unified stand when confronted with the dilemma on whether or not to attack Iran in order to prevent it from achieving military nuclear capability. It seems that in the framework of NATO there will have to be a reconsideration of the American decision to cancel the positioning of missile defense systems in the Czech Republic and Poland, although it seems that in light of Russia's sense of strategic threat and its pressures on the US not to deploy these systems, the American decision will remain unchanged.

C. US-Japan-China: A Dangerous Triangular Relationship

When one examines the capabilities of other powers in the global system, particularly those of Asian nations, one reaches the conclusion that the prevailing perception regarding the ascent of China and India running concurrent to the US' decline is a limited perception that analyzes the international

system solely from an economic point of view. A nation's power should be measured in both military terms and its capability to supply collective good and global stability. Although Japan and China provide non-military collective good, they still are unable to project power since they do not provide for military and security collective good. In the latter area the US still remains the most important power in the Asian arena. Nevertheless, China's military power is rising, especially in the maritime domain: the Chinese navy's increased strength is raising serious concerns in Washington. An additional issue the US must face is an attempt made by Japanese officials to raise doubts regarding the need to keep US Army bases in the region as part of the nuclear umbrella the US provides for Japan and its neighbors in the Pacific and in East Asia. Thus it seems that in order to maintain its leading position in Asia the US must nurture its relations with Japan and China.

D. US-Russia: A Constructive Pragmatism?

Since President Obama came into office his administration has been running a highly intensive dialogue with Russia, in complete contrast to his predecessor. Under Obama the US has adopted a policy of "constructive pragmatism", believing that cooperation with the Russians will bear useful results, both in terms of the sanctions against Iran and in terms of the reduction of the proliferation of their respective nuclear weapons capabilities. The US has already been able to persuade Russia into signing an agreement according to which both the US and Russia guarantee to reduce the number of their respective nuclear weapons (April 2010). An indication of America's attempts to appease Russia's nuclear concerns lies in the US administration's decision to halt its plan to deploy missile defense systems in Eastern Europe. Still, it is uncertain whether American optimism regarding Russia's conduct in the international arena is justified, since the latter is not always attentive to US demands, and the Iranian case is a striking example: the US had to soften the new sanctions' draft proposal per Moscow's request. However, the US is well aware of Russia's important role in the attempts to convince Iran to relinquish its nuclear program. Hence, despite inherent difficulties in US-Russia relations, the Americans realize that the international consensus necessary to broadening the sanctions against Iran must include Russia and China in order to make the threats to impose them more reliable.

E. The US' Role in the Middle East Peace Process

Obama's election as US President raised hopes and expectations in the Arab and Muslim world that have not yet materialized. When he first came into office, Obama declared his intention to achieve a comprehensive peace between Israel and its neighbors within a year which has proved unrealistic. Obama's attempts to reach out to the Arab and Muslim world have not garnered positive responses mainly due to disappointment in light of what they perceive as the US' non-assertive treatment of Israel in the peace process and its unchanging position regarding its alliance with Israel. As a matter of fact, despite Obama's desire to differentiate himself from his predecessor he has thus far not been able to take an active, firm stand regarding the Arab-Israeli peace process. After a year and a half in office, it is quite clear to Obama and his administration that they cannot work miracles in the Middle Eastern turmoil. Nevertheless, there is still no replacement to America's active, leading role in the region. The world powers and the International Quartet members acknowledge the US' leading position in the

Middle East; hence they do not wish to replace it but to assist its regional policy. It is clear to the US and to the entire international community that the peace process must be renewed as soon as possible, since without evidence of substantial progress by the mid-term congressional elections (November 2010) it will be unrealistic to promote the process afterwards. Therefore, renewal of the peace process must be the administration's first priority while designating a strict timetable for the Israeli-Palestinian talks. However, at this stage it seems that the US administration does not have an organized plan and is unable to deliver anything as far as the peace process is concerned.

F. Still Special? US-Israel Relations

Further to the above, the events over the past year since Obama came into office have raised doubts regarding the close strategic alliance between the US and Israel. While a Democratic administration was elected in the US, a rightwing government, headed by Benjamin Netanyahu, was elected in Israel. In light of Obama's desire to shake off his predecessor's policies by reaching out to the Arab and Muslim world and by engaging with Iran without any prior conditions, Israel has expressed its mistrust of America's intentions. On the other hand, Israel's rightwing policy vis-à-vis the Palestinian Authority has raised the American administration's suspicions regarding Israel's willingness to promote peace. So far, every step taken by the current Israeli government in the framework of the peace process has been the result of American pressure. This was the case in the period prior to Netanyahu's Bar-Ilan Speech (June 2009) and also before the Israeli decision to freeze settlement building. Either way, American officials, along with governmental and non-governmental elements in Israel, have raised doubts concerning the special relationship between the US and its strongest and closest ally in the Middle East. Moreover, the de-legitimization of the existence of the State of Israel that has been spreading throughout Europe in recent years has also penetrated through to the US. This trend should cause much concern, although the American government reiterates its commitment to fight against those who try to undermine Israel's right to exist.

Nevertheless, despite skeptical voices and despite the past year's tensions, official and non-official spokesmen from both Israel and the US reiterate that the two nations are natural partners and that the core of these unique relations has remained unaltered. According to these officials, both nations share a common set of values and ideals that transcend any administration in Washington or government in Jerusalem. The fact is that over the past few decades all American administrations, with no exception, have expressed an unequivocal commitment to the special relations with Israel and to the security and existence of the Jewish state. Moreover, in his Cairo speech President Obama expressed his deep commitment to Israel and urged the Arab and Muslim world to accept its existence. Furthermore, if one examines American public opinion regarding Israel it seems that there has been almost no change in America's constant support of and sympathy with Israel over the past year, although it must be noted that support for Israel does not necessarily mean automatic support of its controversial settlement policy. In addition, if we examine US-Israel relations through the scope of cooperation between the nations it seems that these relations are stronger than ever: immediately following his appointment, President Obama authorized the annual military aid package to Israel; military and intelligence cooperation between the countries has broadened even further in the past few years; and Israel is the US' largest trade partner in the Middle East.

It seems that the past year and a half has been characterized by largely unsuccessful attempts for mutual understanding and adjustment between the two governments. The relations between Washington and Jerusalem mainly revolve around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and it is important to recall that differences of opinion have occurred many times in the past between Israel and the US regarding the proper solutions and strategies to end the conflict. Furthermore, the reality of the conflict has forced the US administration to face difficulties and criticism at home and abroad. The Obama administration is coming to realize that it is a mistake to regard the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the core of all problems in the region. Nevertheless, the administration does believe that the achievement of a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians is critical for the survival of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state.

The second focal point of US-Israel relations is the Iranian nuclear program. American officials maintain that the current administration regards the Iranian nuclear program as the most urgent problem in the international arena. According to the American government, the proper measures to be taken include cooperation between the US and other international actors and the UN Security Council's approval and legitimization for each action taken against Iran. Based on its belief that sanctions should be taken against Iran even if they are not absolute, the US administration has managed to gain support from within the international community in order to impose another round of sanctions on Iran in June 2010. However, faced with the objection of certain countries such as China and Russia, these new sanctions are not effective enough to make Iran relinquish its nuclear program. Nevertheless, the US still believes that the option of imposing sanctions should be exhausted before a decision to carry out any military step is taken. As far as the US is concerned, Israel's role in the Iranian context is to be part of the moderate pragmatic camp in the Middle East and to cooperate with Arab and Muslim countries that feel threatened by the possibility of Iranian nuclear capability.

Further to the varied optimistic statements regarding the relations between the US and Israel, it seems that the majority of the speakers at the 10th Herzliya Conference who had been asked to relate to the issue refrained from publicizing the deterioration of relations between the two nations in the past year and a half. In light of the strained state of relations during the course of the conference, let alone in the months since, a cognitive dissonance has been created between reality and the way this state of affairs was presented by the various speakers. The assumption in Israel today is that the relations between the US and Israel have succumbed to Obama's new strategy, according to which the US should reconcile with the Arab and Muslim world even if it means that vital Israeli interests should be sacrificed for the sake of American rapprochement with the Arabs and Muslims.

G. The Broader Middle East: US Foreign Policy in Reality Test

It seems that there is no other theater other than the broader Middle East in which American foreign policy is constantly tested, primarily focusing on America's conduct in light of its military involvement in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and its handling Iran's ambitions to get military nuclear capability at any price. As mentioned in the preface, the US is perceived as a superpower in constant decline that neither cannot nor does not wish to continue to run the international system. As far as the Middle East is concerned, this perception is reinforced by US foreign policy critics in both the US and abroad, as well as by America's allies and friends, who dispute Obama's political decisions related to the Middle

East and believe that current American policy damages both American national interests and global interests. Furthermore, the US is perceived as a declining power in the Arab and Muslim world as well, both among America's allies and its bitter enemies. In addition, it seems that US broader Middle Eastern policy is aimed at reducing America's military involvement in the region as part of the fundamental change in the US foreign and defense policies that were implemented in the Bush era. This change is exemplified by the US intention to draw back the majority of its troops from Iraq by the end of 2011 and to transfer the center of gravity in the war in Afghanistan from fighting against the Taliban to fighting against al-Qa'ida forces, hence stabilizing the country in a manner to enable an eventual and gradual drawdown of US and NATO forces.

One of the main criticisms of the Obama administration is its decision to adopt a policy of engagement with US adversaries around the world. Critics of this policy maintain that it has done nothing to improve the situation in the global system, and certainly has not improved America's position vis-à-vis its Middle Eastern foes, especially Iran. These critics maintain that throughout his first year in office Obama manifested a great deal of naïveté and inconsistency in his Middle East policy, as shown by his belief that he could persuade Saudi Arabia to take confidence building measures towards Israel in order to speed up the peace process, and to make the Israelis and Palestinians return to the negotiations table. The US administration soon came to understand that the situation in the region is more complicated than it had initially estimated and had to adjust itself accordingly. The problems came to a head with the Syrian government refusing to abide by American dictates, the Iranian government continuing their nuclear program despite the threats of sanctions and despite the international community's attempts for dialogue with Tehran. The US' Iran policy is perceived in the Middle East as cautious thus leading the Arab countries that fear Iran's nuclear program to believe that the US has already resigned itself to the existence of a nuclear Iran.

1. Iraq: American Realignment and Domestic Challenges

Current Security Situation: Cautious Optimism

Observers and experts on Iraq agree that since the US' new military strategy for the war in Iraq was implemented (initially implemented by the Bush administration and continued by the Obama administration), there has been a substantial improvement in the country's security situation over the past two years. Iraq is slowly but surely recovering from the bloody sectarian civil war that erupted with the American occupation in 2003. The year 2009 saw the lowest number of terror attack casualties and American troops killed since the war broke out. In light of these positive changes, the US continues to implement its "responsible drawdown" policy, in the framework of which more than 40,000 soldiers have already left Iraq, and those forces still operating there are assisting the Iraqi security forces in running the country, especially in the main cities. The massive terror attacks that had been carried out in Iraq in the months prior to the March 2010 elections were unable to prevent the election process from running comparatively smoothly, and the Iraqi government together with the citizens of Iraq managed to meet the difficult security challenges. In fact, the terror attacks carried out by both Sunni al-Qa'ida groups and radical Shiite groups (aided by Iran) only strengthened security cooperation between the Iraqis and the Americans. Consequently, the Americans' main concern now is more political than security-related, because the timetable for the US' withdrawal from Iraq depends

upon the completion of the new Iraqi government's formation process in the aftermath of the elections.

The Timetable for US Troops' Drawdown from Iraq

Obama's declared Iraq policy maintains that the war there should be terminated as soon as possible, American troops should be drawn down and security responsibility should be handed over safely to the Iraqi forces based upon President Obama's commitment from February 27, 2009. According to the President's declaration, the US Army's combat missions in Iraq are to end by August 31, 2010 at the latest, and the Iraqi security forces will have taken over the main routine security tasks. At this stage, 50,000 American troops are expected to remain on Iraqi soil. From September 2010 through the end of 2011, the remaining American forces will focus on training the Iraqi army, supplying it with equipment and guidance, helping its forces in the fight against terror and defending the civilian and military network of the US and the UN that is deployed in Iraq. According to Obama's commitment, based on the Status of Forces Agreement that was signed by Iraq back during the Bush era (November 2008), all American troops are expected to leave Iraq by the end of 2011. With the exception of training and guiding personnel bases, there are not supposed to be any permanent US bases in Iraq. It is important to note that the American drawdown timetable was planned in advance so as to carry out the withdrawal in 2009 at a slower pace in order to confirm that the elections and the government formation processes were concluded peacefully, with a higher-paced withdrawal expected from the summer of 2010 onwards.

Concurrent to its military preparations, the US State Department has started implementing the terms of the Strategic Framework Agreement that was signed with the Iraqi government together with the drawdown agreement (November 2008). The Framework Agreement defines long-term cooperation between the US and Iraq in a broad range of aspects, among them science, technology, culture and security. The Agreement also deals with the fight against sectarianism, the cracking down on al-Qa'ida nests in the country, and the need to contain neighboring countries' (especially Iran's) involvement in Iraq's domestic affairs. Critics of the American government at home maintain that there is a substantial gap between US diplomatic obligations in light of the troops' drawdown and the budgets and resources allocated to the State Department, which will not be able to keep its commitments with regard to the training of the Iraqi military police and the funding of the Iraqi construction and rehabilitation groups that operate in the country's various districts.

Forecast: Risks and Opportunities

Although the American administration wishes to stick to the timetable set for the drawdown from Iraq, the decision of whether or not to reduce the number of troops after the summer of 2010 will be affected by domestic developments in Iraq. The indecisive results of the elections may significantly prolong the government formation process, which took more than half a year in the 2005 elections. Under these circumstances, the US will probably not be able to operate in accordance with the American political timetable (Congress mid-term elections are due to take place in November 2010), and will have to adapt to Iraq's political reality.

The possibility that Iran may take over Iraq politically is extremely disconcerting for the American administration, which is aware of the fact that not only will Iraq be affected by such Iranian maneuvers, but also Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States and Jordan. The main concern in Washington is that the Iraqi

security forces will not be able to fill in the security vacuum that will be created in the aftermath of US withdrawal. Such a scenario may reduce the security situation in Iraq to that of the political and military chaos of 2003-2008. In light of these concerns, US government critics maintain that the US may have to engage with Iran in order to ensure itself a dignified withdrawal, and that in exchange the US will lift the sanctions against Iran and will guarantee that neither Israel nor the US will attack.

American government officials maintain that the pessimistic scenarios describing the possible lapse of Iraq back into violence are highly unlikely to be realized, since the war-torn country has come a long way in the past two years, both politically and security-wise, which substantially reduces the probability for another round of sectarian bloodshed: the Sunni terror networks have been crushed although they can still carry out sporadic operations; most of the Shiite anti-governmental organizations have been co-opted into the political process; the Iraqi security forces have significantly improved their capabilities; US-Iraq relations, in both the governmental level and the military-security level have strengthened with both sides aware of the need to maintain these tight relations in the long-run as well; and Iraqi nationalism and the citizens' willingness to defend their sovereignty have strengthened over the past few years. American government critics are skeptical of these optimistic scenarios, claiming that Iraq is far from being unified and that it is hard to predict what role the Iraqi Shiites will play vis-à-vis Iran in the future. The question of whether they will join forces with Iran as part of their religious affiliation or stand by the Iraqi state and adopt a clear supra-sectarian approach is still uncertain.

2. Afghanistan-Pakistan: Obama's "Just" War

Current Security Situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Military and Political Entanglement

The Obama administration has decided to focus on the war in Afghanistan maintaining that this "forgotten" war is in fact the "just" war the US must wage against global terror as opposed to the war in Iraq. The political and security situation in Afghanistan is much more complex and difficult for the Americans to control than that in Iraq. Afghan President Hamid Karzai's government is extremely weak and can barely control the area around the capital, Kabul. The rest of the country is controlled by Taliban forces, which are estimated to control more than 70 percent of Afghanistan, and the rest by the tribal warlords. In the absence of effective governance American forces cannot manage to recruit the local forces (as opposed to the situation in Iraq). Furthermore, the Northern Alliance forces, which welcomed the Americans when they first came to Afghanistan, are now acting out against them. Unlike Iraq, where the war takes place inside the country, the war in Afghanistan has long ago spilled over to neighboring Pakistan, where the Taliban has seized control of several impact zones, thus destabilizing the country and diminishing the willingness of Pakistani government and military elements to cooperate with the American army. Moreover, President Zardari and his government are fundamentally corrupt, and radical Islam has spread into both the army and the bureaucracy.

Obama's New Strategy in Afghanistan

In November 2009 President Obama announced that the US would send 30,000 troops to Afghanistan to join the 70,000 troops already positioned there in order to accelerate the struggle against the radical Islamic forces in the country. At the same time the President declared that American withdrawal from

Afghanistan will start in mid-2011. US goals in its war in Afghanistan are to crack down on the terror networks in the country and to prevent them from carrying out terror attacks against American interests outside Afghanistan or against America's allies; to help the Afghans to form an effective governance capable of serving its citizens and taking care of their security with minimal foreign support; to train the Afghan security forces to fight Islamic terror; and to motivate international elements and institutions to achieve these goals as soon as possible. American officials maintain that this new policy is the best way to balance America's military capabilities and the superpower's economic situation, especially in light of the fact that so far the US has spent more than a trillion USD on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. According to American government officials, the US Army's overstretching of itself in its various battlefields around the world has already undermined America's position and has enabled other powers, especially China and Russia, to enter the markets in Africa and the Arab world at the expense of the US and other Western countries.

Despite the American administration's decisiveness in sending a reinforcement of tens of thousands of troops, its critics maintain that under current circumstances it will be almost impossible to achieve the goals that had been set for the mission, especially those relating to building a sustainable Afghan nation-state; hence, the administration may have to limit its goals to liquidating Taliban and al-Qa'ida nests in Afghanistan. As a matter of fact, it is estimated that in order to run an effective strategy against the Taliban it takes a force three times bigger than the one the administration has sent as reinforcement; therefore, the US will have to depend more than ever on the Afghan army in the fight against terror. According to these critics, the mere fact that President Obama emphasized the anticipated withdrawal of American troops by mid-2011 may undermine the necessary war effort. Obama's critics maintain that these drawdown intentions are a signal to US adversaries that America is willing to surrender in advance.

On the other hand, American officials claim that the timetable set by Obama does not relate to the drawdown of all troops from Afghanistan, but rather to the beginning of the transfer of security responsibility to the Afghan forces, which will be preconditioned by the situation on the ground and in accordance with the capabilities of the Afghans. According to these officials, the US must make it clear to Afghanistan that it intends to leave the country in order to indicate clearly to the local government and armed forces that eventually they will have to take charge of their own affairs.

As for the American vision for Afghanistan and whether or not the US should aspire for a Western-style nation-state, Obama officials maintain that it is impossible to expect a regime change and the establishment of a Western democracy in Afghanistan. Cultural and historical differences should be acknowledged and the fact that Afghanistan has never been a real state but rather a concentration of tribes with a decentralized authority must be recognized. Therefore, each solution for this country will have to take into consideration regional, tribal and ethnic leadership, and agreements will have to be signed with the Pashtun tribes' leaders, among whom Taliban fighters are highly active.

Contrarily, there are those who believe that the US must not give up the hope for good governance and human rights in Afghanistan, since terrorism is the lot of uncivilized societies that are governed badly. Therefore, the US must do the utmost in order to turn Afghanistan into a success story even if that means an American presence of an additional 5 to 10 years, supplemented by an additional 15-20 years of American support in order to build the Afghan nation. According to this approach, one cannot

settle for small targets, but rather lead Afghanistan towards good governance that provides security, education and sustainable development for its citizens.

Pakistan: Dangerous Instability

It seems that one of the toughest challenges US foreign policy is facing today is the situation in Pakistan. The strategic location and nuclear capability of Pakistan make it a key player not only in the broader Middle Eastern sphere, both in terms of the war in Afghanistan and the conflict with Iran, but also in the Asian sphere, particularly in the ongoing Pakistani-Indian conflict. A significant destabilization of Pakistan's domestic situation that will bring about a pro-Jihadi government may destabilize the entire region and fan the flames between Pakistan and India, two nuclear powers already in conflict with each other. Therefore, the Obama administration's goals in Pakistan are fourfold: to expand cooperation between Afghanistan and Pakistan; to convince the Pakistani leadership to fight terror inside the country's borders and assist the Pakistani army in its fight against the radicals; to help stabilize the Pakistani economy and to strengthen the civilian democratic government; and to prevent Islamist terrorists from going back to places from which they have been ousted.

Obama's declared policy is also criticized by elements from within the Democratic Party who believe that the reinforcement of troops in Afghanistan will increase the number of terrorists fleeing to Pakistan, thus destabilizing the latter's domestic situation even further. US Congressmen's concerns are that the economic aid for Pakistan will not reach its exact destination. Furthermore, there are those who believe that the Pakistani government is only interested in US money and war materials and not in close strategic partnership. Critics of the American administration claim that although the Pakistani army is doing the maximum to fight against Islamic terror, its civilian government does not function properly, and this is why the US should encourage the growth of a more capable and stable civilian leadership. Pakistani government officials resent what they consider an American inconsistency, expressing their apprehension that the US may bail out on the fight against terror. They are also critical of the American army's conduct in Pakistani territory, especially in light of the missile attacks the US Army is carrying out from Pakistan.

Forecast: To Stay or to Leave?

Many observers, from within the US and abroad, believe that there is not much chance of the US achieving its declared goals, i.e. a decisive victory against the Taliban forces and the eradication of al-Qa'ida strongholds in Afghanistan, in light of the fact that the reinforcement that has been sent to the front is insufficient even according to American military doctrine. Therefore, the US may have to settle for stabilizing the area that is controlled by the Afghan central government and narrowing down the scope of terror in these territories.

However, the war in Afghanistan may continue beyond current expectations, with no breakthrough or meaningful American military achievement. If the number of dead American soldiers increases significantly this may lead to a growth of a protest movement in the US, as was the case during the Vietnam War. It is important to note, however, that currently there is no massive protest movement against the war in Afghanistan: it is perceived both in the eyes of the government and the public as a "just war", unlike the war in Iraq that has been regarded as fundamentally wrong and was a main focus of criticism back in the days of the Bush administration. In the event a public protest against the war in

Afghanistan emerges the administration will try to find a quick way out, which will include an early drawdown. Alternatively, the administration may seek to send more resources and reinforcements in order to create an image of success and victory. Another possible scenario is that the US may keep its forces in the area for an extended period of time under the assumption that there are strategic assets like Pakistan the US can under no circumstances abandon, otherwise radical forces, supporters of al-Qa'ida and the Taliban, may use the opportunity to seize control. It is further possible that Iran may take advantage of the instability in Pakistan for its own needs, thus infiltrating radical Shiite elements into the country.

3. Iran

The Policy of Engagement with Iran: Pros and Cons

The Iranian case is, and probably will be in the future as well, a top priority for the current American administration. Obama's engagement policy is a product of his attempt to disassociate himself from his predecessor's policy, which was severely criticized inside the US and abroad. The policy is based on two fundamental points: an American willingness to reach out to the Iranians in exchange for increased Iranian flexibility and their willingness to accept at least some of the international community's demands, and the possibility to impose sanctions together with the rest of the world powers in the event Iran refuses to abide by international demands to suspend its nuclear program. Prior to the UN Security Council Resolution 1929 resolving to impose a fourth round of sanctions against Iran, many observers had been highly skeptical regarding the possibility that the major powers, namely Russia and China, would be willing to accept US proposals for sanctions on Iran.

American officials support engaging Iran, stating that thus far the policy has given the US much more international leverage than the Bush administration was able to garner, and the current fourth round of sanctions that was imposed on Iran by all the major powers can be regarded as a proof for that. The Obama administration realizes that the Iranian regime will not give up its nuclear program, but claims that the attempts to engage with it served as a test for Iran's intentions and provided for a mechanism to create an international consensus for greater pressure on Iran in case the talks with Iran fail. According to American officials, the certain aspects of the engagement policy have been relatively advantageous in comparison to the previous administration's Iran policy: firstly, it has provided the US with an international consensus for more sanctions. The transformation in US policy, together with the failing attempt to reach an agreement with Iran on uranium enrichment outside its territory, have led to the significant support of the EU, Russia and even China for sanctions against Iran. Secondly, American credibility among the citizens of Iran is much higher than it was during the Bush era. This credibility enables the international community to impose sanctions on Iran more easily by creating a buffer between the regime and its citizens in order to avoid punishing the latter but rather to hurt the interests of the former. Thirdly, the US still maintains the option to implement a carrot and stick policy, i.e. a willingness to negotiate with the Iranians and give them a respectable way out without forcing them into a corner resulting in their taking more radical actions, particularly in light of the recent round of sanctions that has already been imposed on them.

American government critics maintain that the above mentioned advantages are no more than false assumptions. The greatest mistake was to announce the engagement policy with Iran a priori instead

of first demanding that the regime declare a fundamental change of policy as a condition to said engagement. Furthermore, there is no certainty that the opposition movement believes that the US is doing the right thing, all the more so in light of the fact that Obama administration had procrastinated for ten whole days before it endorsed the opposition movement in the aftermath of the controversial Iranian presidential elections of June 2009.

Crossing the Nuclear Threshold

Obama administration officials predict that Iran will not manage to develop into a full nuclear power in the near future. Rather, the Iranian regime will get progress in its development of a bomb and will acquire a virtual capability, which will enable Iran to enjoy all the benefits of a nuclear power without actually being one. Furthermore, the administration believes that Iran is entitled to hold a nuclear program for civilian purposes, but in order to do so it will need to prove to the international community that its intentions are peaceful. The only way for Iran to do so is to stop enriching uranium inside the country, give up the ambition to reach a military nuclear capability and provide the international community with guarantees regarding its intentions.

Critics of the Obama administration maintain that there is absolutely no foundation to the assumption that Iran does not intend to become a threshold state. The common wisdom around the Middle East is that Iran wants nuclear capability in order to reach a hegemonic status. Solely as a threshold state Iran will not be able to impose its will upon the Gulf States and will not be able to oust the US from its powerful status in the Gulf. Hence, Iran needs to create a genuine image of being a nuclear power. Moreover, Obama administration critics maintain that the threshold perception, which may have been relevant several years ago, is no longer viable as far as Iran is concerned; Iran has already gone too far in establishing its nuclear capabilities.

The success or failure of Obama's engagement policy will have a real impact on the US' regional status. While on the Iraqi and Afghani battlefields one can measure victory or defeat by stability, the number of casualties and military presence, as far as Iran is concerned the image of success or failure is much more misleading. If Iran does indeed cross the nuclear threshold it will be able to consider it a clear triumph over the international community. In any event, the impression made is that the US is unwilling to confront Iran, fearing it may damage American efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Future: America's Moment of Truth Is Near

It seems that despite the new round of sanctions on Iran the US administration has not yet reached a decision regarding Iran. On one hand, it is apparent to the US leadership that an Iranian nuclear weapon will bear severe consequences for US status and influence, not only in the Middle East but in the global sphere. Furthermore, the American administration is fully aware of the consensus among the Israeli leadership regarding the need to prevent Iran from completing its nuclear program at any price.

On the other hand, the administration certainly does not wish for a third Gulf war, or an Israeli attack against Iran; such actions are contrary to American interests due to serious geostrategic and geo-economic considerations, which include among them the fear from a sharp jump in oil prices, a severe blow to US relations with the Arab and Muslim world, etc.

It seems therefore that the US is determined to avoid at almost any cost a military attack against Iran. Although the administration is content in endorsing international support for imposing sanctions on Iran, critics of Obama doubt the ability to effectively enforce those already limited sanctions, especially in light of the stubborn approaches of China, Russia and several European countries that are unwilling to pressure the Iranian regime.

In light of the above, the Obama administration may be preparing for a move to legitimize Iran's nuclear program in a way that will enable Iran to become an unofficial threshold state, with enough uranium for ten bombs and a 6 months between it and bomb-making capability, based on an understanding between Tehran and Washington. Many Arab countries therefore fear that the US will neither stand behind its guarantees to do away with the Iranian danger nor behind its guarantees to provide extended deterrence to these countries, jointly and/or separately. Hence, it is possible to assume that these countries (led by Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the Gulf States) will strive for nuclear capabilities of their own, thus paving the way for an uncontrolled nuclear arms race throughout the region. Concurrently these same countries may decide to sign defense treaties with Iran, which is the rising regional hegemonic power, in light of the fact that the US is taking whatever steps it can in order to avoid attacking Iran, thus strengthening the latter's deterrence image. It is further possible to assume that the Arab regimes that fear Iran may cooperate with radical Sunni organizations that operate within their respective territories and throughout the region in order to join forces against Shiite Iran. Such a move may spiral out of control and turn the terror activity against US interests within and out of the region.

Only time will tell if when faced with the decision whether or not to attack Iran, President Obama will prefer to be remembered as the president who allowed Iran to develop into a nuclear power or as the president who went to fight another war in the Middle East.