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Article 1.

The Washington Post

## **Obama's Iran and Syria muddle**

Jackson Diehl

June 11 -- From one point of view the connection between our troubles with Syria and Iran is pretty straightforward. The Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad is Iran's closest ally, and its link to the Arab Middle East. Syria has provided the land bridge for the transport of Iranian weapons and militants to Lebanon and the Gaza Strip. Without Syria, Iran's pretensions to regional hegemony, and its ability to challenge Israel, would be crippled.

It follows that, as the U.S. Central Command chief Gen. James N. Mattis testified to Congress in March, the downfall of Assad would be "the biggest strategic setback for Iran in 25 years."

Making it happen is not just a humanitarian imperative after the slaughter of more than 10,000 civilians, but a prime strategic interest of Israel and the United States.

So why are both the Obama administration and the government of Benjamin Netanyahu unenthusiastic — to say the least — about even indirect military intervention to topple Assad? In part it's because of worry about what would follow the dictator. In Obama's case, the U.S. presidential campaign, and his claim that "the tide of war is receding" in the Middle East, is a big factor.

But the calculus about Syria and Iran is also more complicated than it looks at first. The two are not just linked by their alliance, but also by the fact that the United States and its allies have defined a distinct and urgent goal for each of them. In Syria, it is to remove Assad and replace him with a democracy; in Iran it is to prevent a nuclear weapon. It turns out that the steps that might achieve success in one theater only complicate Western strategy in the other.

Take military action — a prime concern of Israel. Syria interventionists (such as myself) have been arguing that the United States and allies like Turkey should join in setting up safe zones for civilians and anti-Assad forces along Syria's borders, which would require air cover and maybe some (Turkish) troops. But if the United States gets involved in a military operation in Syria, would it still be feasible to carry out an air attack on Iran's nuclear facilities? What if Israel were to launch one while a Syria operation was still ongoing?

The obvious answer is that the result could be an unmanageable mess — which is why, when I recently asked a senior Israeli

official about a Western intervention in Syria, I got this answer: “We are concentrated on Iran. Anything that can create a distraction from Iran is not for the best.”

Obama, of course, is eager to avoid military action in Iran in any case. But his strategy — striking a diplomatic bargain to stop the nuclear program — also narrows his options in Syria. A deal with Tehran will require the support of Russia, which happens to be hosting the next round of negotiations. Russia, in turn, is opposed to forcing Assad, a longtime client, from power by any means.

If Obama wants the support of Vladi-mir Putin on Iran, he may have to stick to Putin-approved measures on Syria. That leaves the administration at the mercy of Moscow: Obama is reduced to pleading with a stone-faced Putin to support a Syrian democracy, or angrily warning a cynically smirking Putin that Moscow is paving the way for a catastrophic sectarian war.

At the root of this trouble are confused and conflicting U.S. aims in the Middle East. Does Washington want to overthrow the brutal, hostile and closely allied dictatorships of Assad and Iran’s Ali Khamenei — or strike bargains that contain the threats they pose? The answer is neither, and both: The Obama administration says it is seeking regime change in Syria, but in Iran it has defined the goal as rapprochement with the mullahs in exchange for nuclear arms control.

Obama tries to square this circle by pursuing a multilateral diplomatic approach to both countries. But if regime change in Syria is the goal, Security Council resolutions and six-point plans from the likes of Kofi Annan are doomed to failure. Only a



combination of economic and military pressure, by Assad's opposition or outsiders, will cause his regime to fold.

A collapse, in turn, could undermine the same Iranian regime with which Obama is seeking a bargain. So it's no wonder Tehran sought to add Syria to the topics for discussion at the last session of negotiations — or that Annan wants to include Iran in a new “contact group” to broker a settlement in Syria.

The Obama administration rejected both proposals — because they are at odds with Syrian regime change. This muddle may delight Vladi-mir Putin, but it's not likely to achieve much else.

Article 2.

The Daily Beast

## **How Europe Could Cost Obama the Election**

Niall Ferguson

June 11, 2012 -- Could Europe cost Barack Obama the presidency? At first sight, that seems like a crazy question. Isn't November's election supposed to be decided in key swing states like Florida and Ohio, not foreign countries like Greece and Spain? And don't left-leaning Europeans love Obama and loathe Republicans?

Sure. But the possibility is now very real that a double-dip recession in Europe could kill off hopes of a sustained recovery in the United States. As the president showed in his anxious press conference last Friday, he well understands the danger emanating from across the pond. Slower growth and higher unemployment can only hurt his chances in an already very tight race with Mitt Romney.

Most Americans are bored or baffled by Europe. Try explaining the latest news about Greek politics or Spanish banks, and their eyelids begin to droop. So, at the end of a four-week road trip round Europe, let me try putting this in familiar American terms.

Imagine that the United States had never ratified the Constitution and was still working with the 1781 Articles of Confederation. Imagine a tiny federal government with almost no revenue. Only the states get to tax and borrow. Now imagine that Nevada has a debt in excess of 150 percent of the state's gross domestic product. Imagine, too, the beginning of a massive bank run in California. And imagine that unemployment in these states is above 20 percent, with youth unemployment twice as high. Picture riots in Las Vegas and a general strike in Los Angeles.

Now imagine that the only way to deal with these problems is for Nevada and California to go cap in hand to Virginia or Texas—where unemployment today really is half what it is in Nevada. Imagine negotiations between the governors of all 50 states about the terms and conditions of the bailout. Imagine the International Monetary Fund arriving in Sacramento to negotiate an austerity program.

This is pretty much where Europe finds itself today. Whereas the United States, with its federal system, has—almost without discussion—shared the burden of the financial crisis between the states of the Union, Europe has almost none of the institutions that would make that possible.

The revenues of the European central institutions are trivially small: less than 1 percent of EU GDP. There is no central European Treasury. There is no federal European debt. All the Europeans have is a European Central Bank. And today they are discovering the hard way what some of us pointed out more than 13 years ago, when the single European currency came into existence: that's not enough.

Indeed, having a monetary union without any of the other institutions of a federal state is proving to be a disastrously unstable combination. The paradox is that monetary union is causing Europe to disintegrate—the opposite of what was intended. According to the IMF, GDP will contract this year by 4.7 percent in Greece, 3.3 percent in Portugal, 1.9 percent in Italy, and 1.8 percent in Spain. The unemployment rate in Spain is 24 percent, in Greece 22 percent, and in Portugal 14 percent. Public debt exceeds 100 percent of GDP in Greece, Ireland, Italy, and Portugal. These countries' long-term interest rates are four or more times higher than Germany's.

Perhaps the most shocking symptom of the crisis on the so-called periphery is youth unemployment. In Greece and Spain, more than half of all young people are out of work. That's right: one in two young Greeks and Spaniards are unemployed, eking out an existence on doles, cash-only gray-market jobs, and rent-free accommodations with mama and papa.

In the north European “core” of the euro zone, however, the picture is completely different. Unemployment in Germany is 5.4 percent. In the Netherlands and Austria it is even lower. These economies are growing. Their governments have no difficulty borrowing. The phrase “two-speed Europe” hardly does justice to the bifurcation. There are in fact now two Europes: a Teutonic core and a Latin periphery.

Privately, senior politicians and businessmen now admit that Europe would be in a much better position today if the monetary union had never happened. If there had been no euro, there would have been no borrowing bonanza on the periphery and no property bubble in Spain. And if they still had the drachma, the lira, the peseta, and the escudo, the weaker European economies could simply devalue their way out of recession, as they used to, rather than try to cram down wages, slash spending, and hike taxes.

The trouble is that the costs of a monetary breakup would in all likelihood be even greater than the costs of a transition to American-style federalism. On June 17 many Greek voters will cast ballots for parties that reject the austerity conditions imposed on their country under the terms of two bailouts. True, a clear majority of Greeks say they don’t want to leave the euro zone. But it’s hard to see how a Greek government could ditch austerity without being forced back to the drachma.

Even the possibility of a “Grexit” has made people in the other Mediterranean countries nervous. The most telling sign of contagion is the deepening crisis in the Spanish banking system as depositors withdraw their money. After all, if the Greeks return to the drachma, that would mean converting all Greek

bank accounts back to the old currency. And if that could happen in Greece, why not in Spain too?

Europe's monetary union has entered a doom loop. Recessions in peripheral Europe are driving down tax revenues and increasing welfare spending. Despite German-imposed austerity programs, deficits keep overshooting the targets. But these governments can no longer borrow at affordable rates. Meanwhile, their banks are hemorrhaging deposits. Up until now, broke banks could prop up broke governments by borrowing from the European Central Bank and using the cash to buy their governments' bonds. But that game is over. For there is nothing the ECB can do to stop panicky Spaniards swapping "Spanish euros" for "German euros"—in other words, putting their savings into German banks for fear that Spanish accounts will one day be converted back into pesetas.

This is a potentially explosive process. Already the centrifugal forces at work have generated a vast imbalance within the TARGET2 system, which processes payments between the euro-zone member states' central banks. In effect, the peripheral central banks owe the German Bundesbank €650 billion. This is a figure that grows larger with every passing week.

What makes all of this so terrifying is that it vividly recalls the events of the summer of 1931. It's often forgotten that the Great Depression, like a soccer match, was a game of two halves. If the first half was dominated by the U.S. stock-market crash, the second was kicked off by a European banking crisis. It began in May 1931, when the biggest bank in Austria, the Creditanstalt, was revealed to be insolvent. The lethal blow was the collapse two months later of the Danat Bank, one of the biggest in

Germany.

As economic confidence slumped, unemployment soared to unprecedented heights. At the peak in July 1932, 49 percent of German trade-union members were out of work. We all know what the political consequences were. All over Europe, the extremists of the right and the left—fascists and communists—surged in popularity. Hitler came to power in 1933. Six years later Europe was at war.

Nobody expects all of that history to repeat itself. Europe's population is older today and much less militaristic. Nevertheless there are disquieting signs of a populist backlash in many countries—and not just in Latin Europe. In the Netherlands and Finland, right-wing parties win votes by denouncing both Europe and immigration. In the upcoming French and Greek parliamentary elections, the far right will also do well, as will the hard left. And maverick politicians and movements are springing up in the most unlikely places: the comedian Beppe Grillo in Italy, the Pirate Party in Germany.

Today's populism won't lead to war. But it is making the task of governing Europe progressively harder every time an election is held. In Europe there is now no such thing as a two-term leader. In the age of austerity, the incumbent always loses.

So, after more than two years of procrastination—known universally as “kicking the can down the road”—Europe has reached the moment of truth.

It's binary. Either German Chancellor Angela Merkel has to bow to the logic of her predecessor but one, Helmut Kohl, who always saw monetary union as a route to federalism, or it's

over—and the process of European disintegration is about to spiral out of control. Put another way: if Europe's leaders try kicking the can one more time, it will turn out to be packed with explosives.

For the Germans, it's an agonizing dilemma. The federal route means breaking the news to German voters that they are going to be handing over very large sums of money to Southern Europeans for the foreseeable future—maybe as much as 8 percent of GDP. That's much more than German reunification cost in the 1990s. But the breakup scenario could also cost Germans hundreds of billions, because the financial shock waves would be immense. Not only would the Germans risk hefty losses on those TARGET2 balances, but the collapse of the peripheral economies would hardly leave German business unscathed, since 42 percent of German exports go to the rest of the euro zone—eight times the amount that goes to China.

So what is to be done? If Alexander Hamilton were alive today, he'd advise the creation of a federal system much more like the U.S. Constitution than the unworkable Articles of Confederation. That would mean three things: a European banking union complete with Europe-wide deposit insurance, the recapitalization of ailing banks with funds from the new European Stability Mechanism, and some kind of scheme to convert part of national debts into euro bonds backed by the full faith and credit of the EU.

So far the Germans have been willing to entertain the first option while strongly resisting the second and third. To justify the risk of guaranteeing Spanish bank deposits, the Germans want even more central control over the fiscal policies of



member states than they were already given under last year's fiscal compact. The trouble is that such arrangements strike Italians and Spaniards as—to quote one key decision maker in Rome—“quasi colonial.”

Germany's qualms about bailing out Latin Europe are understandable. Why should the Southerners get serious about reforming themselves if the Germans keep ponying up? But Europe is on the brink of disintegration, and euro bonds must be an essential part of any meaningful solution, just as U.S. Treasuries were crucial for America in the 1780s. Sometimes the best really is the enemy of the good. Structural reforms in Latin Europe are highly desirable, but they would take years to implement. Europe doesn't have years. It may have only days.

My best guess is that all this brinksmanship will ultimately end with the Hamiltonian solution: fiscal federalism and, ultimately, a United States of Euro Zone. An important step was taken in this direction over the weekend, with the announcement that 100 billion euros will be made available to bail out Spain's ailing banks. This was a major victory for the talented Spanish Economy Minister Luis de Guindos, who cleverly asked for more than twice what the International Monetary Fund deemed necessary, and got away with far fewer conditions than were imposed on neighboring Portugal when it sought a bailout. The mood in Madrid this weekend was one of relief, even confidence. But there are all kinds of hazards along the way, not least the impending Greek and French elections. Meanwhile, the world waits—and braces—for a European Lehman Brothers moment.

Even in a best-case scenario, this crisis has already delivered a



massive economic shock to Latin Europe. The consequences are already detectable in the rest of the world in sagging stock markets, purchasing managers' indices, and job-creation numbers. Europe's agony threatens to inflict a double-dip recession on the United States as well as slow down growth significantly in big emerging markets like China. Remember, exports to the EU account for 22 percent of total U.S. exports. For some big American companies like McDonald's, Europe accounts for as much as 40 percent of total sales.

The most recent U.S. jobs numbers were lousy: employers added only 69,000 jobs in May, and the unemployment rate actually rose. Manufacturing activity has also slowed. Consumer confidence is down. And, despite last week's rally, the U.S. stock market has given back nearly all the gains it made in the first three months of the year. This is partly due to mounting worry about the fiscal cliff facing this country at the end of the year. But it is mainly a consequence of Europe's "viral spiral."

As for the political consequences of a U.S. slowdown, it doesn't take a Ph.D. in political science to see why the White House is worried. Even when people were still talking about recovery, President Obama was neck and neck with Mitt Romney on his handling of the economy, the No. 1 issue in voters' minds. Back in 1980 Ronald Reagan asked Americans the question that ensured Jimmy Carter was a one-term president: "Are you better off than you were four years ago?" Asked the same question in last month's Washington Post-ABC News poll, just 16 percent of Americans said they are.

The law of unintended consequences is the only real law of history. If the disintegration of Europe kills the reelection hopes

of a president Europeans fell in love with four years ago, it will be one of the supreme ironies of our time.

Article 3.

Foreign Policy

## **Processing Delay**

Elliott Abrams

JUNE 8, 2012 - Summer 2012. Israel's elections have been delayed until late next year by the formation of a new coalition government. The "Arab Spring" is producing Muslim Brotherhood victories, Salafi gains, chaos in Syria, disorder in Egypt, tremors in Jordan. Iran's nuclear program moves steadily forward despite tougher sanctions and ongoing negotiations between Iran and the world's major powers. In the United States, Barack Obama and Mitt Romney begin to face off in the upcoming presidential election. Amid these developments, the so-called "peace process" will enter its 46th year on June 10. For it was on that day in 1967 that a cease-fire in the Six-Day War was declared, leaving Israel in possession of the West Bank, Gaza, Sinai, the Golan Heights, and Jerusalem but divided over what to do with its newfound gains.

Israel withdrew from the Sinai in 1982 and from Gaza in 2007, and no one is discussing the Golan these days due to Syria's internal crisis. But the future of Jerusalem and the West Bank remains a matter of intense international -- including American -- diplomatic effort. While professional peacemakers may want to

get negotiations going again, the inconvenient truth is that none of the parties to this conflict have adequate incentives to take serious political risks right now. Forget about reaching a final settlement for the next year and likely far longer -- neither the situation on the ground nor the politics in Israel and among the Palestinians makes it at all likely.

In the fall of 2003, Israel took the first steps to withdraw its forces and settlers from Palestinian territories. Despairing of any possibility for productive negotiations while Yasir Arafat led the PLO, but under heavy pressure to make some move, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon turned to Gaza, which the old general viewed as a military burden rather than as an Israeli asset. After a grueling political battle that extended through 2004 and half of 2005, a resolute Sharon carried out his plan to remove Israeli settlements and military bases from Gaza in August 2005, breaking up his own Likud party over it.

This political move, which resulted in the creation of the Kadima party, would hardly have made sense had Gaza been Sharon's final plan. By late fall of 2005, Sharon had already fought and won in Likud for the Gaza disengagement. But he wanted, his closest collaborators believe, to go further -- to set Israel's borders in the West Bank more or less along the current fence line, taking in roughly 12 percent of the territory and protecting all the large settlements. In his view, that 12 percent would shrink in some future final status agreement with the Palestinians, but an interim move in the West Bank would provide defensible lines until then. It would also serve as the basis for a Palestinian state in the West Bank, thereby finally separating Israel from the Palestinians. It would allow Israel to act, not wait decade after decade hoping for the day when

Palestinian moderation allowed the PLO's leadership to sign a deal.

Sharon's stroke in early 2006 did not kill that plan, and indeed, Ehud Olmert ran and won on something like it when he succeeded Sharon as leader of Kadima. Olmert called it hitkansut -- translated as convergence, gathering, or rallying together. The idea was the same: pull back from isolated settlements and set Israel's final borders.

Under pressure from U.S. President George W. Bush, Olmert agreed to wait and try to negotiate a deal with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. In Bush's view, a negotiated deal would bring Israel the Palestinian commitments it needed, and bring Abbas the legitimacy he needed. Olmert, believing he had a full term of office before him, thought he could comply with Bush's wish and move unilaterally later if no breakthrough was forthcoming. He never had the chance, however, falling victim to a combination of personal scandal and Israel's disappointment with the outcome of the 2006 Lebanon war. Moreover, the June 2007 Hamas coup in Gaza left the Palestinian populace and leadership split, and it suggested to Israelis that withdrawal of any sort from the West Bank might permit the same sort of terrorist takeover that withdrawal had allowed in Gaza and in south Lebanon.

Now that former Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz -- who had previously presented a peace plan that would result in the creation of a Palestinian state in 60 percent of the West Bank's land -- has won control of Kadima and joined the government, there has been some speculation about whether the "peace process" will soon be revived. It will not. There have been no

negotiations for three and a half years, the result mostly of foolish and inept diplomacy by the Obama administration. By declaring that a freeze on construction in settlements and in Jerusalem was a prerequisite for negotiations, Obama and his envoys (led by George Mitchell) cornered Abbas -- how could he appear less "Palestinian" than the Americans?

But the breakdown of negotiations presented Abbas with another problem. His greatest asset in his rivalry with Hamas was the claim that he could produce a state while Hamas could produce only violence. No negotiations, no state -- so Abbas has been forced to look elsewhere for validation during the Obama years.

In the absence of negotiations, Abbas has grasped for a unity government with Hamas. Despite previous failed agreements, notably a pact mediated by the Saudi king in February 2007, Abbas is now trying this route again. Talks beginning on May 27 were to select a new cabinet within 10 days, and though they have been delayed, they may succeed by the end of June. The plan is for that new government to rule for six months and then hold elections, but neither Hamas nor Fatah wants to subject itself to the unpredictability of the polls. For Abbas, elections might end his years of happy globe-trotting. He claims that retirement is his fondest wish, but if the Palestinian population will put up with him for a few more years, he will put up with them.

Elections aren't even the toughest challenge such a coalition would face. Security tops the list. Who would lead the Palestinian Authority's various forces? Who can expect Hamas to disarm when it has never been defeated by Fatah, either in

combat or at the ballot box? Because "national unity" is widely popular among Palestinians, Abbas and Hamas will keep at it and may even briefly achieve a "unity government" -- but it won't last.

Even a short-lived unity government with Hamas would doom any chance of a negotiation with Israel, but that doesn't bother Abbas. He can't see a way to climb down from his demand for a construction freeze, and he doesn't have high hopes for negotiations in the first place. Negotiations demand compromises, and he knows that any he makes will immediately be denounced by Hamas as treason. Meanwhile, he's not in a good position for serious talks with Israel anyway. His minister for negotiations, Saeb Erekat, had a heart attack this spring, and the other old negotiating hands -- former Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei and PLO Secretary-General Yasser Abed Rabbo -- are out of favor.

All this leaves Abbas simply muddling through, declaring that he will go back to the United Nations, hold elections, or insist on a new government. But he's shuffling those claims like cards in a deck -- now one on top, now another. The shuffling will continue until the United States has a new president and Abbas can decipher what, if anything, the new administration will demand of him and of Israel. The most likely outcome for Abbas is more years that look like the last three: lots of travel, occasional efforts at the United Nations, and discussions of elections and unity governments that never get beyond the talking stage.

Don't expect any initiatives out of the United States until after the presidential election either. If Romney is elected, he and his

new team will need time to get settled and will likely see Israeli-Palestinian negotiations as a bottomless pit for diplomatic energy rather than as a priority. If Obama is reelected, he will have no Middle East hands to whom he can turn. Mideast advisor Dennis Ross has left; Jeffrey Feltman, assistant secretary of state for Near East affairs, departed for a post at the United Nations; and Deputy Secretary of State Bill Burns will in all likelihood leave when a new secretary of state is appointed or a few months later.

In January 2009, Obama appointed Mitchell as special Middle East envoy on his second day in office. That kind of priority will not be assigned to the "peace process" in January 2013 -- no matter who wins.

The new Israeli coalition has some room to maneuver, but don't expect it to make diplomacy with the Palestinians a priority. It will want to make decisions on Iran first and see who will be the U.S. president for the next four years. An Israel that is worried about stability in Syria, Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon and facing a growing Iranian nuclear weapons program is unlikely to take many risks in the West Bank.

That's not to say the new government can afford to ignore the Palestinian issue. Polls show that Israelis do want peace and do want separation from the Palestinians, but have little faith that much can be achieved. If Iran's nuclear program is halted, through either a bombing campaign or a negotiated deal, and Iran's ally, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, falls, attention may turn back to the West Bank. An Israel that has defied the counsels of restraint from the United States, Russia, China, and all of Europe by bombing Iran may well seek to patch things up



by appearing in a more "moderate" and cooperative light on the Palestinian issue.

Such peace talks, however, would likely fail. If the Palestinian president could not agree to the startlingly generous offer a falling Olmert made in late 2008, nothing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu can offer will elicit a yes. This would leave Netanyahu facing two alternatives: continue economic and institutional development in the West Bank without talks, or undertake a Sharon/Olmert/Mofaz move in the West Bank.

Netanyahu's government could adopt some combination of consolidating (perhaps even annexing) the major settlement blocs while unilaterally pulling settlements back to the security fence. This would allow the Palestinians more political and security sway in large areas of the West Bank, while also compensating settlers who move "back" -- mostly to other, larger settlements, not behind the Green Line.

The problem with unilateral steps is that they go unrequited. Sharon, contemplating disengagement from Gaza, said this straightforwardly to Bush. In the absence of concessions from the Palestinians, he sought and received political and ideological compensation from the United States. This came in the form of Bush's April 14, 2004, letter to Sharon, wherein the United States said that there was no "right of return" and that the Palestinian refugee problem had to be solved in Palestine "rather than in Israel." It also affirmed that "it is realistic to expect" Israel would keep the major settlement blocs, which were "new realities on the ground."

Both houses of U.S. Congress endorsed these views soon after



Bush articulated them, but the Obama administration foolishly devalued this compensation for Israel in 2009, treating the letter as a sort of private missive to Sharon that does not affect U.S. policy now that Bush is no longer president. They have thus made Obama's own words cheap and not acceptable as compensation for taking political and security risks.

Nothing this year or even next, when Netanyahu faces an election in the fall, would lead the prime minister to act unilaterally. Sooner or later, however, he may discover what Sharon did in 2003: Nature abhors a vacuum, and so do the European Union and many Israelis. The same may hold true for a reelected Obama administration. Attention is now on Iran, Syria, and Egypt, but in another couple of years attention could shift back to demands to "end the occupation," featuring a variety of proposals -- many of them foolish and dangerous -- for how to do so. At one point in 2003, Sharon caustically joked to me, "There is a boom in plans," referring to the various innovative proposals whose common denominator was that Israel should give up assets it held.

Pressures on Israel will mount. Take, for example, the "Quartet Principles," which require that Hamas recognize Israel, renounce violence, and adhere to all previous diplomatic agreements before joining any Palestinian government that the United States would recognize and assist. Remarkably, these principles have been supported by other members of the Quartet: the United Nations, Russia, and the European Union. That support, however, was less a matter of principle than the product of the absolute bloody-mindedness of Hamas. The Palestinian Islamist movement would not move an inch and would not give eager Russian and European diplomats even the slightest hint of

compromise -- through ambiguous formulations of what "recognition of Israel" meant or how "adherence to" or "respect for" previous diplomatic agreements might be interpreted.

But that could change. Now, six years later, with its own popularity in Gaza at a low-water mark and its former ally in Damascus on the ropes, Hamas may decide to encourage those diplomats who are determined to be encouraged. That wouldn't take much of an ideological shift on their part. After all, not only European but American diplomats are happily engaging the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt without imposing demands on it to change positions on women, Copts, or sharia, much less Israel.

The damage of an EU decision to deal with Hamas would be unavoidable. First, Israelis would be further confirmed in their belief that the Europeans could not be trusted, diminishing even further the European Union's role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Second, such a move could only undermine Fatah and the Palestinian Authority, which view Hamas as an enemy to be defeated rather than as a genuine partner. Third, peace talks would themselves be impossible if Hamas were part of the Palestinian government or, worse yet, of the PLO, which is the formal negotiating body for the Palestinians.

So why would the Europeans be tempted to do it? Frustration, for one thing. Nothing is moving, so let's shake things up, the argument would be. Such wishful thinking would then produce learned arguments about how Hamas is changing, how the "military wing" is declining in power while the "moderates" are rising, and how no peace is possible without Hamas's buy-in.

But these arguments, honest or disingenuous, are only part of the picture. The truth is that domestic politics push European leaders to take such stances and condemn Israel. This is one of the few genuinely new developments since the "peace process" began. In many constituencies across the continent, Muslims now comprise a significant minority of voters. France's recent presidential election is instructive. One poll found that a remarkable 93 percent of Muslim voters went for François Hollande, while 7 percent voted for Nicolas Sarkozy; another leading poll found that Hollande got 85 percent. The usual estimate is that there are 2 million Muslim voters in France; if 85 percent of them supported Hollande, that translates to 1.7 million votes. As Hollande's margin of victory over Sarkozy was 1.1 million votes, the impact of the Muslim voters was clear.

This is a point well worth remembering when Europeans condescendingly point to U.S. politics as the source of America's support for Israel -- as if their own policies emerged from some Platonic ideal of a foreign ministry or think tank. It is difficult to believe there will ever again be a constellation of European leaders as sympathetic to the Jewish state as figures like British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, Spanish Prime Minister José María Aznar, Sarkozy, and -- the lone survivor among them today -- German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

The prevalence of anti-Israel views among the European left also helps explain why EU governments are increasingly critical of Israel. This is a dangerous development for Israel, but one over which it has little control. The Israelis cannot ignore Europe because of its economic importance to them: 30 percent of Israeli exports go to the European Union. So they are

condemned to fighting efforts at boycotts and divestment year after year, country by country, battle by battle, and one need only chat with any Israeli ambassador in Europe to discover how difficult, and how tinged with anti-Semitism, those battles now are.

Combine all these factors, and it becomes clear that there are few reasons for Netanyahu or Abbas to take risks to revive the "peace process." If not dead, it is dormant, quiescent, moribund -- choose your synonym. Any remotely likely change will leave Abbas worse off than he is today. Whatever action Netanyahu might take would bring enormous political problems in Israel and few gains outside it. Sooner or later Israelis will have to once again make decisions about their relations with the Palestinians, but not while the outcomes of the "Arab Spring," the Iranian nuclear program, and the U.S. presidential election remain unclear.

As Israeli and Arab journalists, diplomats, and political leaders pass through Washington, I sit down with them on occasion for an hour. I watch the clock, and when the hour is up I find I can say, in meeting after meeting, "We've been talking about the Middle East for an hour, and neither of us has said the word 'Palestinian.'" That's an issue for next year, or the year after that.

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The New Yorker

## **What would Obama do if reëlected?**

Ryan Lizza

June 18, 2012 -- In November, 1984, President Ronald Reagan was reëlected in a landslide victory over Walter Mondale, taking forty-nine states and fifty-nine per cent of the popular vote. The Reagan revolution was powerfully reaffirmed. Soon after, Donald Regan, the new chief of staff, sent word to a small group of trusted friends and Administration officials seeking advice on how Reagan should approach his last four years in office. It was an unusual moment in the history of the Presidency, and the experience of recent incumbents offered no guidance. No President since Dwight D. Eisenhower had served two full terms. John F. Kennedy was assassinated. Lyndon Johnson, overwhelmed by the war in Vietnam, had declined to run for reëlection in 1968. Richard Nixon resigned less than seventeen months into his second term. Gerald Ford (who was never elected) and Jimmy Carter were defeated. By the nineteen-eighties, it had become popular to talk about the crisis of the Presidency; a bipartisan group of Washington leaders, with Carter's support, launched the National Committee for a Single Six-Year Presidential Term.

Regan's effort to foresee a successful second term is documented in a series of memos at the Reagan Library. President Obama, who in November could face one of the tightest bids for reëlection in history, has periodically spoken of

his admiration for Reagan. “Ronald Reagan changed the trajectory for America,” he told a Reno, Nevada, newspaper in early 2008. “He just tapped into what people were already feeling, which was we want clarity, we want optimism.” From the inception of his Presidential bid, Obama has sought to present himself as a leader with far-reaching ideas, and has prided himself on his ability to look past the politics of the moment. To the degree that he is able to ponder his strategy for the next four years, it’s natural to think he might steal a glance at the Reagan playbook. Responding to Reagan’s confidential memo, Tom Korologos, an adviser to every Republican President from Nixon to George W. Bush, told the Reagan White House that the second term should be viewed from the standpoint of the President’s intended legacy.

“It seems to me that the President needs to decide what his legacy is going to be,” Korologos wrote on January 24, 1985, a few days after Reagan’s second inaugural. “What is he going to be the most proud of when he’s sitting at the ranch with Nancy four and five years after his Presidency? Is it going to be an arms control agreement? Is it going to be a balanced budget? Is it going to be world-wide economic recovery? Is it going to be a combination of all of this: peace and prosperity? . . . Every speech; every appearance; every foreign trip; every congressional phone call and every act involving the President should be made with the long-range goal in mind.”

Every President running for reelection begins to think about his second term well before victory is assured. In early 2009, Rahm Emanuel, Obama’s first chief of staff, told me that the White House was already contemplating the Presidency in terms of eight years. He said that it was folly to try to accomplish

everything in the first term. “I don’t buy into everybody’s theory about the final years of a Presidency,” Emanuel said. “There’s an accepted wisdom that in the final years you’re kind of done. Ronald Reagan, in the final years, got arms control, immigration reform, and created a separate new department,” that of Veterans Affairs.

Obama’s campaign is well aware that he may end up like Jimmy Carter or George H. W. Bush, the two most recent one-term Presidents, who were both defeated despite some notable—even historic—accomplishments, including the Camp David Accords, under Carter, and the Gulf War, under Bush. The country remains closely divided, and the economy is teetering again. After several months of relatively positive news, the employment report released in June was gloomy. Barring a disastrous revelation or blunder, Mitt Romney will be a more formidable opponent than many assumed during his rightward lurch to secure the Republican nomination.

Many White House officials were reluctant to discuss a second term; they are focussed more on the campaign than on what comes after. But the ostensible purpose of a political campaign is to articulate for the public what a candidate will do if he prevails. “It’s a tension,” David Axelrod, Obama’s longtime political adviser, said. “On the one hand, you don’t want to be presumptuous in assuming a second term. But campaigns are about the future, and there is an imperative to spell out where we’re going.”

Obama has an ambitious second-term agenda, which, at least in broad ways, his campaign is beginning to highlight. The President has said that the most important policy he could



address in his second term is climate change, one of the few issues that he thinks could fundamentally improve the world decades from now. He also is concerned with containing nuclear proliferation. In April, 2009, in one of the most notable speeches of his Presidency, he said, in Prague, “I state clearly and with conviction America’s commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons.” He conceded that the goal might not be achieved in his lifetime but promised to take “concrete steps,” including a new treaty with Russia to reduce nuclear weapons and ratification of the 1996 Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty.

In 2010, Obama negotiated a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty with the Russians and won its passage in the Senate. But, despite his promise to “immediately and aggressively” ratify the C.N.T.B.T., he never submitted it for ratification. As James Mann writes in “The Obamians,” his forthcoming book on Obama’s foreign policy, “The Obama administration crouched, unwilling to risk controversy and a Senate fight for a cause that the President, in his Prague speech, had endorsed and had promised to push quickly and vigorously.” As with climate change, Obama’s early rhetoric and idealism met the reality of Washington politics and his reluctance to confront Congress.

Obama’s advisers say it is more likely that the President would champion an issue with greater bipartisan support, such as immigration reform. Obama has also said that he hopes to have the time and the attention to address a more robust aid agenda for developing countries than he was able to muster in his first term. These issues will loom over his potential second term, awaiting a push from the President. So, too, will the lingering question of who Obama “really” is: an aspiring compromiser, a



lawyerly strategist, or a bold visionary willing to gamble to secure his legacy.

Whatever goal Obama decides on, his opportunities for effecting change are slight. Term limits are cruel to Presidents. If he wins, Obama will have less than eighteen months to pass a second wave of his domestic agenda, which has been stalled since late 2010 and has no chance of moving this year. His best opportunity for a breakthrough on energy policy, immigration, or tax reform would come in 2013. By the middle of 2014, congressional elections will force another hiatus in Washington policymaking. Since Franklin Roosevelt, Presidents have lost an average of thirty House seats and seven Senate seats in their second midterm election. By early 2015, the press will begin to focus on the next Presidential campaign, which will eclipse a great deal of coverage of the White House. The last two years of Obama's Presidency will likely be spent attending more assiduously to foreign policy and shoring up the major reforms of his early years, such as health care and financial regulation.

As William Daley, who served for a year as Obama's chief of staff, put it, "After 2014, nobody cares what he does."

## II

Sooner or later, every reelected President confronts the frustration lurking in a second term: reelection to power does not necessarily grant more of it. Richard Nixon and his aides were obsessed with using a second term to take command of a federal government that they believed was hostile to the President and his agenda. "Faced with a bureaucracy we did not control, was not staffed with our people, and with which we did

not know how to communicate, we created our own bureaucracy,” White House aides wrote in a 1972 memo found in the files of H. R. Haldeman, who later went to prison for covering up Watergate crimes.

Nixon gave his aides detailed directions about how to flush unsympathetic bureaucrats from the government after he won reelection. Early in the 1972 campaign, he wrote his aides with instructions for a “housecleaning” at the C.I.A.:

I want a study made immediately as to how many people in CIA could be removed by presidential action. . . . Of course, the reduction in force should be accomplished solely on the ground of its being necessary for budget reasons, but you will both know the real reason. . . . I want you to quit recruiting from any of the Ivy League schools or any other universities where either the university president or the university faculties have taken action condemning our efforts to bring the war in Vietnam to an end.

Nixon’s paranoid theory was that none of his second-term priorities—from his China policy to his health-care plan—could be addressed until the White House controlled the rest of his government. The housecleaning efforts were not technically a part of Watergate, but they were a harbinger of his second-term self-immolation.

The Reagan Administration quickly grasped that whatever power it had gained through reelection had to be spent judiciously. As part of Regan’s brainstorming exercise about the President’s second term, Alfred Kingon, then the Assistant Treasury Secretary, urged the President to choose his top

priorities with care. The best that Reagan could hope for was victory on a few big initiatives. “Please remember that there are about 50 or 60 issues going at once,” Kingon wrote. “We can only keep track of 20 or 25, concentrate on a mere handful and hope to have legislative success in a fraction of that.”

James Baker, Reagan’s chief of staff preceding Regan, wrote to the President after the election and made a similar point. “Unlike the campaign in 1980, you have campaigned with little specificity,” he told the President. (Reagan’s “Morning in America” theme had not been burdened with detailed policy proposals.) “There are very many items that any right-thinking president would want to achieve,” Baker wrote. “But frankly, there are too many. You must set priorities.”

A key challenge for a second-term President lies in managing the delicate balance between what he wants (his priorities) and what he thinks the public wants (his perceived mandate)—and taking care not to confuse the two. George W. Bush was less adept at this than Reagan. Bush approached his second term with two broad goals. In foreign policy, he attempted to steer his White House away from the radicalism of the first four years. During the 2004 campaign, Bush came close to jettisoning the two people—Vice-President Dick Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld—most associated with extreme views of how to handle post-9/11 foreign affairs. After the election, Cheney saw the influence of his principal ideological opponents—Stephen Hadley, the new national-security adviser, and Condoleezza Rice, the new Secretary of State—rise, especially on issues such as Syria, North Korea, and the Administration’s policy on torture. Cheney’s recent memoir boils with his indignation at being sidelined. At a National

Security Council meeting in 2007, Cheney made the case for bombing a Syrian nuclear reactor. “After I finished,” he writes, “the President asked, ‘Does anyone here agree with the Vice President?’ Not a single hand went up around the room.”

Domestically, however, Bush miscalculated his position. Early in his second term, he made a strong play for Social Security reform; it failed miserably, for lack of Democratic backing. “If I had it to do over again, I would have pushed for immigration reform, rather than Social Security, as the first major initiative of my second term,” Bush lamented in his memoir. “Unlike Social Security, immigration reform had bipartisan support.”

In 2005, Bush won approval of an energy bill, a trade agreement, and a bankruptcy-reform bill. But the remainder of his Presidency was consumed by scandal (the Valerie Plame case, the N.S.A.’s warrantless wiretapping program, the firing of eight U.S. Attorneys for political reasons) and by badly managed catastrophes (Katrina, deterioration in Iraq, the crash of financial markets). The Democrats took over Congress in 2006, and on Election Day in 2008 Bush’s Gallup approval rating stood at twenty-five per cent.

There is an argument, common on the right, that if Obama is reëlected he will pursue a more ideological, even radical, agenda because he will be unbound by the moderating influence of another election. As Dick Morris, of Fox News, put it in March, “A second term for Obama would bring on a socialist nightmare hellscape as he moves further to the left.” This argument is often bolstered by noting that Obama recently told the Russian Prime Minister, Dmitry Medvedev, that he would have “more flexibility” to pursue negotiations on missile defense “after my

election.” Ed Morrissey, of the conservative blog Hot Air, warned that the comment should cause voters “to fear an Obama second term.”

But a President who has won reelection can also feel less tied to his political base and more free to shift toward the political center. At the start of Reagan’s second term, Kingon advised the White House that the victory had allowed him to pursue policies that would advance only with bipartisan support—a precondition for success, given that Democrats controlled the House. Kingon noted that only twenty per cent of Americans agreed with Reagan’s anti-abortion policy and that many Americans voted for Reagan “knowing that he believes in these things but understanding that he would not push for them.” He argued that this was the implicit promise of the Reagan reelection campaign. Aggressively pursuing social issues, Kingon wrote, would substantially diminish the President’s political support, and would risk failure in other key areas. “I think it is important to remember that there is a point beyond which popular Presidential support erodes, and he can do nothing, e.g., Jimmy Carter,” Kingon warned.

Reagan largely heeded this advice, and he had one of the most successful second terms in American history. He passed immigration reform, a major reform of the tax code, and an arms-control treaty with the Soviets. He also appointed two conservative Supreme Court Justices, Antonin Scalia and Anthony Kennedy. He ended his Presidency with an approval rating of more than fifty-five per cent.

Obama entered office with what many considered a mandate. Taking advantage of large majorities in Congress, he spent the

first two years passing major Democratic legislation: financial regulation and health-care reform. But the second two years were devoted to managing the gridlock created by the backlash against the first two, with a resurgent Republican Party intent on Obama's defeat.

Axelrod told me that Obama has learned from recent history. "President Bush claimed a mandate after the last election and took steps that he never ran on," Axelrod said, pointing to Bush's miscalculation on Social Security. "You have to govern boldly, but with the humility of knowing that you can't assume that people embrace your case—you have to make it, even after the election. The thing that trips you up, and certainly tripped up Bush, is the assumption that, if you win, somehow you can then embark on an agenda that is wholly different from the one you campaigned on."

If Obama aims to leave a legislative mark in his second term, he'll need two things: a sense of humility, and a revitalized faction of Republican lawmakers willing to make deals with the President. Given the polarized environment and the likelihood of a closely divided Congress, it seems more implausible to suppose that Obama would turn radical in his second term than that he would cool to his Democratic base.

### III

After every Presidential election, the winner likes to declare why he won, often in terms that set the tone for the following year. "I earned capital in the campaign, political capital, and now I intend to spend it," Bush said at his first post-election press conference on November 4, 2004. Cheney went further:

“President Bush ran forthrightly on a clear agenda for this nation’s future. And the nation responded by giving him a mandate.” But, as his defeat on Social Security soon made clear, Bush had no mandate.

The idea of a mandate from the people defies the intentions of the Founders and is contrary to the way that most early Presidents viewed their role, according to Robert Dahl, the Yale political scientist. Early Presidents argued on behalf of their policies with appeals to the Constitution rather than to the people. Even Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt, who asked for sweeping new executive powers, did so with strictly constitutional arguments rather than with populist ones.

The concept of a mandate was essentially invented by Andrew Jackson, who first popularized the notion that the President “is the direct representative of the American people,” and it was later institutionalized by Woodrow Wilson, who explicitly wanted the American government to be like the more responsive parliamentary system of the United Kingdom. Like Jackson, he argued that the President was the “one national voice in the country.” Every President since Wilson has at least implicitly adopted this theory, and the Presidential mandate has become enshrined in our national politics.

But the idea is mostly a myth. The President and Congress are equal, and when Presidents misinterpret election results—especially in reëlections—they get into trouble. In a 2006 book, “Mandate Politics,” the political scientists Lawrence J. Grossback, David A. M. Peterson, and James A. Stimson apply some fancy methodological techniques to congressional voting patterns and find only two modern cases in which



Presidents had true mandates, which they define as elections that push members of the opposition party in Congress toward the President's positions on key issues. This occurred in 1965, when Johnson passed the Voting Rights Act, and in early 1981, when sixty-three Democrats helped Reagan pass his first budget in the House. The media interpreted those elections as representing tectonic changes in politics, and members of Congress followed along. The changes in congressional behavior didn't last long, but they enabled both Presidents to achieve major legislative victories in their first year.

But in 1965 and 1981 the two parties were still ideologically mixed. Liberal Northern Republicans voted with Johnson, and Reagan, even though the Democrats controlled the House, could rely on dozens of conservative Democrats to support his agenda. Unlike those periods when some members of Congress feared crossing the President, in 2009 almost all Republicans were willing to bet that Obama's popularity was temporary. Instead of fearing a new Democratic tide and helping a popular President pass his agenda, almost all Republicans united in opposition, and in 2010 they took over the House and gained seats in the Senate. Obama's aides speak of a victory in November not in sweeping terms of realignment but simply as an opportunity to nudge Republicans away from a policy of pure obstructionism and toward some limited compromise around a few key issues.

"The hope is that some of the moderate Republicans—if there are any left—are like, 'Look, we tried it your way, we lost the election,' " a senior Obama adviser said. "You have to compromise in American politics and divided government. But it depends on whether the interpretation, if Obama wins, is that Republicans didn't coöperate enough or that they coöperated too



much.”

One thing is nearly certain: if Obama wins in November, his margin of victory will be among the narrowest in history. Since 1916, seven Presidents have won a second term, and all of them exceeded the percentage of the popular vote that they received in their first election. With each reelection since Nixon’s, the President’s margin of victory over his opponent has steadily declined. In 1972, Nixon won another term by a popular-vote margin of twenty-three points. In 1984, Reagan won his reelection by eighteen points. In 1992, Clinton won his by nine points. In 2004, Bush beat John Kerry by just 2.5 points, the smallest margin of victory for the reelection of a President since the nineteenth century. Obama won in 2008 by seven points. If he manages to win this year, it is likely to be by less than that, which would make him the first President in a hundred and twenty-four years to win a second term by a smaller margin than in his initial election. Whatever a mandate is, Obama won’t have one.

#### IV

Reelected Presidents often enjoy a brief respite after their second campaign. The new Congress isn’t sworn in until January, and the interregnum is used to hire new members of the Administration and plot out a fifth-year agenda. But the aftermath of the 2012 election will be unlike any other transition in memory. Election Day is November 6th. Fifty-five days later, on New Year’s Eve, the size and the scope of the federal government are scheduled to be radically altered. Federal tax rates for every income group will shoot up to levels not seen since 2001. Payroll taxes for employees will jump by two

percentage points. Unemployment benefits for some three million Americans will be cut off. The Pentagon will start the new year with a fifty-five-billion-dollar budget cut. The budget allocated to everything from the F.B.I. to the Park Service to meat inspections will be slashed by the same amount. Soon after, federal payments to doctors who treat patients using Medicare, the federal health program for the elderly, will be slashed by about a third.

The huge increase in taxes and the precipitate drop in government spending would equal an economic contraction of more than five hundred billion dollars, more than three per cent of G.D.P. The impact could send a fragile economy back into a recession. “It’s two to three times bigger in negative terms than even the biggest year of the stimulus was in positive terms,” Austan Goolsbee, Obama’s former chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, said. It is this frightening confluence of fiscal time bombs, starting on December 31, 2012, that has earned the name Taxmageddon.

What’s more, sometime in mid-February the government will reach the limit of its authority to borrow money. If Congress doesn’t raise the debt ceiling, the United States will default on its loans and will no longer be able to pay all its bills—to doctors, defense contractors, Social Security pensioners, Chinese bondholders, and almost anyone else who receives funds from the federal government.

Although the Presidential campaign seems to be dominated by absurd minutiae, such as Romney’s and Obama’s respective treatment of canines and Donald Trump’s theories about the President’s ancestry, at some point this year the debate will

focus on the looming fiscal crash. When that happens, the election may end up being a referendum on what to do about it. Obama will need to beat back Romney's charges that he's a hapless economic steward, and somehow make the case—unpopular thus far—that the economy's woes are best treated by raising taxes and spending. Yet, in a quirk of history, a reëlected Obama could suddenly find his best historical opportunity thrust upon him.

Here the arc of Obama's Presidency begins to resemble that of Bill Clinton's. Both pursued bold domestic agendas in their first two years before Republicans made large midterm gains in Congress, which led to repeated clashes over fiscal issues. The outcomes of Clinton's battles, including the government shutdown of 1995, weren't sorted out until after the 1996 Presidential election. An Obama Administration official told me, "The first year of Clinton's second term was the resolution of the climactic moments of his third year. I suspect a similar opportunity will open up here."

Clinton's reëlection victory made possible a breakthrough on the budgetary issues that had divided him and Republicans for two years. "The ideal conditions for both sides to come together and get something done are when you have a President who is at the peak of his power but is not going to benefit politically from it," the official said. Solving Taxmageddon would be a major policy achievement, and Obama could argue that he had fulfilled his promise from the 2008 campaign: that he would bring the two major parties together to forge bipartisan agreements.

Last year, though, offered a painful reminder of how simplistic that campaign theme was. By the end of 2011, five groups of

bipartisan leaders had tried to negotiate a settlement on all the major tax, entitlement, spending, and deficit issues. Each one failed. First there was the Simpson-Bowles commission, created by the White House. Its report appeared in December, 2010, with a tough series of proposals of exactly the kind that Obama had asked for. But, as it turned out, the President was not about to trim Social Security benefits and end popular tax deductions without Republicans in Congress agreeing to do the same.

In May, 2011, shortly after a government shutdown was averted, Vice-President Joseph Biden and the House Majority Leader, Eric Cantor, two politicians opposed in ideology and temperament, held talks exploring whether a deficit deal was possible. This time, they had a major incentive to reach an agreement: the debt ceiling had to be raised by the end of the summer. The Cantor-Biden talks ended two months later, and Obama and Speaker John Boehner worked until July to reach a “grand bargain” of modest tax hikes, entitlement reforms, and spending cuts. A fourth group, consisting of three Republicans and three Democrats in the Senate, dubbed the Gang of Six, ended up torpedoing the Obama-Boehner negotiations when it came to light that they were negotiating a plan to raise far more revenue than the deal that Obama was ready to strike with Boehner.

Instead of a grand bargain, in late July the White House and Republicans agreed to raise the debt ceiling enough for about eighteen more months of government borrowing, and they created yet another bipartisan group to address the long-term fiscal issues. This group was called the Super Committee, and Obama and Congress agreed: if the committee could not find a solution, government spending in 2013 would automatically be

reduced by a hundred and ten billion dollars, a cut known in Washington budgetese as “the sequester.” The Super Committee failed.

If Obama wins, his immediate task will be to settle more than a decade’s worth of deferred arguments about how big the government should be and who should pay for it. By this spring, the gamesmanship had begun. “It’s a discouraging day to talk to me,” a top White House official fumed. That afternoon, May 15th, Boehner had delivered a speech in which he insisted that Republicans would not raise the debt ceiling next year unless a dollar in government spending was cut for every dollar of new borrowing. “I just can’t believe somebody, even him, would say something that irresponsible again,” the official said.

Notwithstanding Boehner’s antics, there is a possibility that a second Obama term could begin with major deficit reduction and serious reform of taxes and entitlements. A similar opportunity arose in the second terms of Reagan (who in 1986 signed into law a historic tax-reform bill) and Clinton (who in 1997 reached a significant budget deal with Republicans). Although both victories occurred when the two parties were less polarized, many White House officials regard the successes as encouraging precedents. Several senior Clinton officials involved in the 1997 deal now work for Obama, including Jacob Lew, Obama’s chief of staff, and Gene Sperling, the head of the National Economic Council.

“You have a dynamic that is similar to the nineteen-nineties,” one White House official said. “There are a number of areas where a Republican Congress and a Democratic Administration sat down, couldn’t get an agreement, and eventually said, ‘No,

we're going to have to take this to the country. We'll see how the country resolves that.' ” He added, “Who knows what the new landscape will be? It really depends on who controls Congress.”

Almost every permutation of government control is possible after November. There are plausible scenarios in which either party could be in charge of the House, the Senate, or the White House. If the election were held today, the Democrats likely would gain some seats in the House and lose some seats in the Senate, and Obama would be narrowly reelected. Under these conditions, the White House is cautiously optimistic that a compromise could be reached.

“If both chambers are more evenly divided, it could be a recipe for actually getting some things done,” David Plouffe, Obama’s senior adviser, said. “Because of the closeness, neither party’s going to be able to do anything on its own, so either zero gets done for two years or there is kind of a center.” He argued that, despite the failures of the five bipartisan groups that had tried to negotiate a budget deal last year, there was movement on the toughest issues. For Democrats, the most painful decision is how far to go in making changes to entitlements like Medicare and Social Security. For Republicans, the biggest hurdle is agreeing to higher government revenues. “By the end, more Republicans said they’re open to revenue than at the beginning,” Plouffe said. “And at the beginning Democrats were very cool to any entitlement reform. By the end, they were willing to do something. That’s what we learned.”

Clearly that’s an optimistic spin, given Boehner’s recent remarks. Yet Plouffe and other Obama officials who were

involved in the talks insist that the G.O.P. caucus in the House is not as monolithically opposed to a deal as one might think. Last year's talks taught the White House that there are divisions between the hard-right Tea Party faction that is unilaterally opposed to any tax hikes and more traditional Republicans who are so concerned about the long-term deficit that under some circumstances they would vote for higher taxes. Plouffe said that the key will be whether Boehner is prepared to alienate the Tea Party bloc.

"All the paperwork's done!" he said. "We know what the options are. It's all been done! It's not like they're starting from scratch."

Over in the Senate, there is a hint that the ice could thaw if Obama wins. Several senators from both parties have begun to meet behind closed doors to address the looming fiscal crisis, with the aim of delivering a tax-and-budget package by September. "Everyone is kind of holding their cards, because we realize that it's not game time yet," the Tennessee Republican Bob Corker told Politico last week. In late May, Mitch McConnell, an architect of the G.O.P. strategy of non-coöperation since 2009, also told Politico, "I think we have plenty of members in the Senate on both sides of the aisle who fully understand that we weren't sent here just to make a point—that we were sent here to make a difference."

Several White House officials I talked to made it clear that if a deal, or at least the framework for a deal, is not reached before December 31st Obama would allow all the Bush tax cuts to expire—a tactic that would achieve huge deficit reduction, but in a particularly painful and ill-conceived fashion. The



Administration is preparing for that outcome, and Republicans may not be willing to budge without the threat of this cataclysm. Plouffe said, "I think we're going to have the ability to tell the American people, 'Hey, your taxes may go up on January 1st because these guys refuse to ask the wealthy to do anything. Hey, there are going to be cuts in spending that aren't done as smartly as they could because these guys won't agree to ask anything from the wealthy.' "

The White House believes that Obama needs to change the psychology of the congressional Republicans and that, if his reelection won't do it, perhaps Taxmageddon will. "To get anything done in the second term," another White House official said, "the President has to convince the Republican Party that obstructionism is a losing strategy."

## V

Increasingly, hints of Obama's second-term vision are becoming evident on the campaign trail. On June 1st, Obama spoke before a luncheon crowd at a farm-to-table restaurant in a converted warehouse in the North Loop of Minneapolis, just yards from the Mississippi River. The restaurant, the Bachelor Farmer, is owned by two sons of the Minnesota governor, Mark Dayton. They had designed a special menu, which highlighted fresh produce grown on the restaurant's roof, and the staff wore matching ties made to commemorate the President's visit. A hundred people who each gave five thousand dollars to the President's campaign dined on a salad of house-smoked pork and a choice of roasted chicken or Copper River sockeye salmon (a vegetarian menu was also available), as Obama spoke about the politics of his potential second term.

He noted, as he does with some frequency these days, that his original vision of a bipartisan Washington was a mirage. “My hope, when I came into office, was that we would have Republicans and Democrats coming together because the nation was facing extraordinary challenges,” he said. “It turns out that wasn’t their approach—to put it mildly.” He insisted that the G.O.P. had moved too far to the right to make bipartisanship possible. He and John McCain had agreed on issues like immigration, climate change, and campaign finance. “The center of gravity for their party has shifted.”

But maybe, Obama said, his reelection would halt that trend. “I believe that if we’re successful in this election—when we’re successful in this election—that the fever may break,” he said, “because there’s a tradition in the Republican Party of more common sense than that.” He noted a few areas of possible compromise: deficit reduction, a highway bill, immigration, and energy policy. He repeated the phrase that is becoming a mantra for his campaign: “If we can break this fever.”

If President Obama can indeed guide the parties toward an agreement that puts the federal government on a sustainable fiscal path, it would be a substantial achievement and would vindicate his early promise as a bipartisan leader. After that, he might have just one more chance to achieve a major domestic accomplishment before the next round of elections, in 2014. Gene Sperling noted that first-time Presidents are quickly confronted by the reality of whatever situation they’ve inherited. “President Clinton used to say to us, ‘Look, this is what every Presidency is like—you come in with your agenda and vision, and the fact is, whether you want it or not, ultimately a lot of the legacy for Presidents is how they handle the hand they were

dealt as opposed to what they might have thought their agenda was going to be,' ” Sperling said. “To me, in many ways, health care was President Obama making a decision that he was going to hold on to part of the vision that he had set for the country.” A second term, Sperling continued, could put Obama “back to where he might have wanted to have started his Presidency.” The big question that Obama will face is: “What are the things we’re doing to make ourselves compete so that globalization is working for the middle class, as opposed to what happened the previous decade?”

The President’s list of options will be short. Obama has been a national politician since 2004, and the priorities he’s discussed haven’t changed much since then. Depending on the makeup of Congress, he might first have to consider whether he needs to play offense or defense. If the President gets past the grand bargain, “it would be a legacy achievement,” Goolsbee, who has known Obama since 2004, said. “Then he would have to decide: Is the next issue protecting and establishing the health plan, or moving on to something new? Because it seems clear that the President’s opponents are going to try to take apart the law.”

There are hints that the Supreme Court could simply strike down the Affordable Care Act. It also might strike down the health-care mandate but leave the remainder of the law intact. In that case, it is likely that several provisions regulating insurance markets would send insurance premiums soaring. Insurance companies would be forced to take on expensive new patients regardless of preexisting conditions, yet without the anticipated new revenue from young and less expensive patients who would have been forced to buy insurance. Obama would face a choice: replace the mandate with a new policy or remove the remaining

market reforms.

One option for replacing the mandate is to push the uninsured into the new system by requiring them to sign up for insurance when applying for other government services, such as food stamps or school loans. But the prospects for this sort of legislation are bleak. “We looked at this,” a former Obama aide said. “We thought it was less constitutional than the mandate. Among the moderate Democrats, the idea that you would pass a bill like this is unimaginable.”

Whether the Supreme Court overturns the law in part or in full, the White House will need to respond publicly. “The strategy is to just go on the offensive and say, ‘Look at Citizens United, look at the health-care decision, look at Bush v. Gore,’” the former aide said. “We have an out-of-control activist court, and Romney will make it worse. That’s Plan A. Plan B is nothing.”

Even if the Court leaves the law alone, Obama may find himself fighting Republican attempts to defund it or to remove the mandate legislatively. If the House is still in Republican hands, even if he were to successfully navigate Taxmageddon he could easily find himself back in a situation like 2011 and 2012, when almost no bills moved forward.

But it seems plausible that Obama could have time for one more big policy change. What would it be? Several of his advisers talked about pursuing housing reform; the economy is still being dragged down by the seven hundred billion dollars in negative equity from homeowners who are stuck in houses worth less than their mortgages. The problem has bedeviled the White House since 2009, because any of the truly effective solutions

requires a version of the awful politics of a bailout: people or institutions that acted irresponsibly will be rewarded.

“Somebody has to eat the seven hundred billion dollars,” Goolsbee said. “There’s no way to cover up the fact. Either the banks and mortgage holders have to take seven hundred billion dollars of losses or the government has to come up with seven hundred billion dollars of subsidies to cover these costs. Or you can try to split it. But every significant policy that anyone can come up with has a really big price tag.”

Another major initiative under discussion is energy policy, but the politics of energy are almost as fraught as those of housing. As a candidate, Obama talked in stirring terms about the threat from global warming. In June, 2008, on the night he won the Democratic nomination, he declared that his victory marked “the moment when the rise of the oceans began to slow and our planet began to heal.” But climate change will remain a divisive issue after the election. Among Obama’s conservative critics, his call to halt the rise of the oceans is a frequently mocked piece of oratory. And one of the biggest failures of his first term was the Administration’s inability to win a deal on cap and trade—originally a Republican idea.

Obama talks about energy in most of his speeches, but, in contrast with 2009, when the centerpiece of his program was a cap-and-trade approach to reducing carbon emissions, his goal today is unclear. Early discussions on Capitol Hill suggest that, in a wide-ranging deal, a carbon tax might be part of a grand bargain to settle Taxmageddon. The proposition is not as absurd as it sounds. In 1997, the budget deal struck by Clinton and the Republicans was not so much a meeting in the middle as a swap

of major priorities. “That was a deal of trades,” one former Clinton official said. Clinton won policies such as a new children’s-health program, a higher-education tax cut, and some progressive changes to the welfare bill that he signed into law in 1996. “We won those things and then we just gave the Republicans big Medicare savings, and we let them cut the capital-gains tax for rich people.”

Obama’s 2010 fiscal deal with the G.O.P. was similar: he swapped an extension of all the Bush tax cuts for more stimulus. In a situation where many favored policies of both parties are on the table, a carbon tax—a heretical idea during the past few years, given the weak economy and high fuel prices—could be resurrected. Still, the Administration seems uncertain what its energy policy is; many of the stated goals are contradictory. Independence? Low energy prices? Reduction of carbon emissions? Job creation? Environmental protection? Unless Obama’s energy policy regains its clarity, a legislative breakthrough in a second term is unlikely.

Several White House officials said that the issue that Obama seems most passionate about is infrastructure. (One insider Democrat joked that Obama’s passion for infrastructure is matched only by that of the Vice-President, who loves trains.) Obama wants to spend an extra hundred and fifty billion dollars on infrastructure during the next six years and reform the process by which projects are awarded, so that it’s more about merit than about patronage. In 2009, he was aggravated when he was told that none of the money from the stimulus would be spent on a signature project, a modern-day Hoover Dam or Interstate Highway System. A bold infrastructure package has all the hallmarks of a major Obama policy: it would create jobs, it



has a government-reform component, and it could establish a legacy in the form of an upgraded power grid or a high-speed train, with which Obama might forever be associated.

But if, as seems likely, Obama will have just one chance of achieving a major piece of domestic legislation in his second term, the most promising focus, according to current and former aides, would be on immigration. “When you look at the whole second term, the biggest issue I think is fiscal soundness, which is the predicate for real economic improvement and growth,” Bill Daley, Obama’s former chief of staff, said. “And then the second big issue I see would be immigration reform.” The DREAM Act, which would legalize undocumented aliens who had come to America as children if they enrolled in college or joined the U.S. military, would be an obvious place to start.

Obama’s advisers believe that the politics of immigration may be the only chance for bipartisanship after Taxmageddon. After a party loses, it goes through a period of self-examination. If, despite the lacklustre economy and a general dissatisfaction with the direction of the country, Obama manages to defeat Mitt Romney, the explanation may be a simple matter of demographics: the Republican Party can no longer win the Presidency without increased support from nonwhite voters.

“If we win, Latino voters will play a big role in that,” David Plouffe said. “The Republican Party is going to have to make a decision. I don’t think it’s much of a decision, actually. They’re going to have to moderate.” The White House is so convinced of the centrality of Hispanics to the current election and its aftermath that Plouffe told me he has been preparing for months for an onslaught of advertisements from a pro-Romney group



attacking Obama from the left on immigration, arguing that Obama's deportation and border-security policies have been too Draconian.

One of the lessons from "Mandate Politics" is that the magnitude of a victory is not as important as defying expectations. Republicans won't coöperate with Obama simply because he's won, just as Bush's 2004 reëlection did nothing to move Democrats. But if the 2012 results reveal that the G.O.P.'s weakness among minority voters, especially Hispanics, is dire, political opportunities that seem unlikely today could quickly become conventional wisdom after November. Romney understands this. "We have to get Hispanic voters to vote for our party," he recently said at a private fund-raiser, unaware that reporters could hear him. Failure to do so "spells doom for us," Romney said. A rule that holds up quite well in American politics is that the longer a party remains out of power the more moderate it becomes.

## VI

On a recent Friday at the White House, Plouffe stood in front of a map of America, talking about swing states. In some elections, he said, two candidates may try to hide their differences as they woo moderate voters. But this year the Obama campaign would insure that the competing ideologies of the two major parties are not blurred. "Everything we do has to be with that in mind," Plouffe said.

He named some recent examples. In 1992, Clinton and Bush agreed on certain aspects of free trade and welfare reform. In 2000, Bush ran on a more progressive education platform than

his Republican colleagues. McCain once supported a cap-and-trade system and a version of immigration reform now condemned by almost all Republicans. There would be no such “zones of commonality” this time around. “On every major issue, every one, there are stark differences,” he said. “It’s much more ideological.”

This tone is a sharp change. Obama campaigned from 2004 through 2010 as a bridge between competing orthodoxies—a view of the world that flowed directly from his unique biography. In “Barack Obama: The Story,” by David Maraniss, Obama says, “What I retained in my politics is a sense that the only way I could have a sturdy sense of identity of who I was depended on digging beneath the surface differences of people. The only way my life makes sense is if, regardless of culture, race, religion, tribe, there is this commonality . . . and that we can reach out beyond our differences.”

Now Obama is emphasizing the ideological divide, not the bridge across it. “A lot of the tussles that we’ve had over the last three and a half years have had to do with this difference in vision,” he told the audience in Minneapolis, “and it will be coming to a head in this election.”

Much of the talk of bold contrasts is a strategic necessity. Obama wants voters to cast their ballots based on the platforms of the two candidates, not on the record of his first term. The tactic comes with risks, but it helps divert attention from a seeming inability to promote his successes thus far, such as health care (so long as it lasts), financial regulation, and a soft landing after the economic crisis. Never mind that this strategy defies the judgment of most academic studies of voting

behavior: that voters largely decide on incumbents based on a retrospective judgment of the economic situation during the last year or so in office.

As he spoke, Plouffe, a math whiz who has been compared to Dustin Hoffman's character in "Rain Man," sometimes wrote down the numbers as he spoke them: two hundred and forty-one, the number of Republicans in the House of Representatives last year when he was negotiating with them; 11/6, the date of the election. He had no illusions that 2012 would look like 2008, and pointed to the tiny group of states that would decide the contest. "We've been preparing all along for a kind of race where we have to win it fifty to forty-nine in seven states," he said. "We're facing, Grind it out in Virginia and Colorado and Ohio."

It took considerable arm-twisting to get Plouffe to think past the details of the daily campaign and consider the long view. "If we win," he said finally, "January of 2017, what do we want to look back and be able to say? One, we've recovered from the recession. Second, our economic and tax policies in this country are more centered on the middle class and on people trying to get in the middle class. Third, the big unmet challenges—health care, education reform, energy, immigration, and reducing the deficit in the right way—we met them.

"We've also ended a period of war while taking out our leading terrorist enemies," he added. "Think about that! That's a pretty important book of business, and I think that's the legacy he'd like to leave."

## VII

After I talked with Plouffe, I wandered down to the basement of the White House to meet with Ben Rhodes, Obama's deputy national-security adviser. That day, Obama was meeting with François Hollande, the new French President; the building was filled with foreign-policy luminaries. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was climbing up the staircase alone as I descended.

Rhodes's windowless office has a large printer marked with a sign that says "Classified." On his desk was a thick briefing book, "The President's Trip to Camp David for the G8 Summit." ("It would be shockingly boring to you, I think," Rhodes said.) Rhodes is also a speechwriter, and part of his job is to help transform the untidy, sometimes contradictory business of the Administration's foreign policy into a coherent world view. When I asked him what his favorite speech-writing resources were, he pulled a few books from a shelf: "American Speeches: Political Oratory from the Revolution to the Civil War," William Safire's "Lend Me Your Ears," and a collection of Lincoln's speeches and writings. "You can actually lose yourself for an hour or two in that stuff," he said.

The final two years of a second term need not be a loss for a President. All but exiled from domestic affairs, Presidents inevitably focus more attention on foreign policy, where many leave a lasting mark. Rhodes said that he is just beginning to research in a more formal way how foreign policy was conducted in the second terms of recent Presidents, but he knows how important it could be to Obama's legacy. "I'm aware of the fact that Presidents in the last couple of years just kind of go into that," he said. Next year, Obama will have more flexibility to make foreign visits. "We didn't travel much this year, and just after an election year we'll have a lot more time to

travel,” Rhodes said.

The Obama project of the first four years was to end the two wars it had inherited and move the U.S. away from defining itself globally in terms of a multigenerational struggle against terrorism. (The ten-year defense budget that Obama announced earlier this year shifts the Pentagon away from planning for the types of multiyear nation-building exercises that America undertook in Iraq and Afghanistan.) Instead of conducting massive land wars, Obama’s terrorism policy became defined by targeted assassination of Al Qaeda leaders by teams of Navy SEALs and Predator drones. In cooperating closely with Israel to develop Stuxnet, a computer virus aimed at Iran’s nuclear program, the U.S. engaged in the first known act of pure cyberwarfare against another country. Obama has revealed himself to be more hawkish than either his supporters or his opponents expected.

Only recently has Obama begun to implement a post-post-9/11 foreign-policy vision. Its most significant aspect is the so-called “pivot” toward the Pacific, where the U.S. has spent a great deal of diplomatic energy strengthening economic and military relationships with Burma, Vietnam, the Philippines, Thailand, and other Southeast Asian nations in an effort to counterbalance China’s rise. (In November, Obama also announced that U.S. marines will now be stationed in Australia.) The rebalancing of American power from the Middle East to Asia will continue if Obama wins reelection.

“When we went to Asia last November, it was the first trip that we’d taken where everything we were talking about and doing was affirmative initiatives that had begun under our

Administration,” Rhodes said. “It felt like, Boy, this is what American foreign policy could look like if we weren’t anchored in these wars.” He added, “We want the U.S. to be able to essentially help set the agenda in the Asia-Pacific region.”

Foreign policy is often determined by unanticipated events, but the U.S. relationship with China could end up being a defining issue in a second Obama term. China currently faces the prospect of a major financial and political crisis. In “Confront and Conceal,” a new book about Obama’s foreign policy, David Sanger notes that China is also about to experience a dramatic transformation in its leadership; many have observed that the next generation of Chinese officials is likely to be more nationalistic than its predecessors and more alarmed by Obama’s policies in the Pacific. Sanger points out that “roughly 70 percent of China’s leadership jobs will be turning over in 2012,” a change that could be the foreign-policy equivalent of Taxmageddon. One of Obama’s “most senior diplomats” tells Sanger, “If we get China wrong, in thirty years that’s the only thing anyone will remember.”

Obama’s other second-term foreign-policy priorities include a renewed push for peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians. But the President would not get personally involved, as his two predecessors did, unless he was certain that Israel’s Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, wanted a deal. (The White House assumes that Netanyahu is hoping for a Romney victory.) In an Obama second term, containing Iran might take precedence over a Middle East peace agreement, even as the Administration continued to try to manage the post-revolution transitions across the region and North Africa. Obama doesn’t believe that there is much he can do to change

the status quo in North Korea. Meanwhile, the situation in Syria threatens to become a focal point in the November election. Romney has begun to attack Obama's wait-and-see policy and has called for arming the Syrian opposition. Soon, Obama may have to decide if he wants to push harder to topple President Bashar al-Assad, possibly by force.

When I asked Rhodes about a historical analogy to Obama on foreign policy, he replied, "I think Reagan is actually the best recent model, because he laid down some very ambitious rhetorical markers and he reoriented foreign policy from his predecessor in many respects, and a lot of the dividend on that started to come on line the second term." He went on, "A lot of the threads of stories that we've begun—from Asia to the Arab Spring, to even Africa, to Middle East peace—the ability to complete the story in the second term will go a long way toward defining the legacy of the President."

Rhodes reminded me of a story told in David Halberstam's book "War in a Time of Peace," which covers foreign policy during the Presidencies of Clinton and George H. W. Bush. Lee Hamilton, the former chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and Rhodes's former boss, met with Clinton shortly after the 1992 election and tried to interest him in a long list of foreign-policy challenges. "Lee, I just went through the whole campaign," Clinton said, "and no one talked about foreign policy at all, except for a few members of the press." Hamilton responded that Clinton was wrong, and noted that all Presidents eventually realize their legacy in foreign policy. He recited a list of recent examples: Johnson and Vietnam, Carter and Iran, Bush and the Gulf War. Years later, when Clinton was consumed with war in the former Yugoslavia, air strikes in Iraq, and a late effort



to reach a Middle East peace accord, Hamilton knew that he had been vindicated. Rhodes said, “The President can make a huge mark on the world, and often that’s what people remember.”

There is a symmetry to Obama’s experience on foreign and domestic policy which may shed light on what a second term would offer. Early in his first term, the President opened negotiations with Iran and failed to speak out as the regime began killing protesters in the Green Revolution. “It turned out that what we intended as caution, the Iranians saw as weakness,” a senior national-security adviser to Obama told Sanger. Obama’s first efforts to engage China were rebuffed for similar reasons. Obama hardened his approach to both countries. He attacked Iran’s nuclear program through cyberwarfare, built a coalition to punish the country with U.N. sanctions, and warned that he would use military force to keep Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons. On China, he began to reach out to its neighbors to make the U.S. a counterweight in the region. Afghanistan presented an equal challenge: Obama spent his first years fighting his generals, who sought to maneuver him into sending more troops and prolonging the nation’s commitment there. He eventually gained the upper hand and won the policy he wanted: withdrawal.

Congressional Republicans aren’t Iranian mullahs or five-star generals, but Obama’s approach to them is beginning to look familiar, as coöperative idealism gives way to hard-nosed realism. As his first term ebbs and threatens to take him with it, Obama seems to be learning how to be a forceful President. Whether he’ll be remembered as a great one depends on his reëlection.

The New Republic

## **They Died for Westphalia**

Leon Wieseltier

June 8, 2012 -- WHAT A SPELL of cultural miseries. Oprah Winfrey commended "Pierre de Chardin" to the graduates of Spelman College and exhorted them to "let excellence be your brand." Yale University elected to have its commencement addressed by Barbara Walters. Al Sharpton appeared in the pages of The New York Times Book Review, which warmly noted that its reviewer has lost a lot of weight and eats fish twice a week and many vegetables. And Daniel Bell was made responsible for the Iraq war. The latter comedy took place in the wastes of Salon, where it would have stayed if The New York Times had not seen fit to circulate, without challenge, the description of that great American liberal as having "essentially invented the neoconservative movement that would inspire George W. Bush in his disastrous invasion of Iraq." Must error also be stupid? This howler first appeared in an overheated piece about some trivial connections between The Paris Review and the Congress of Cultural Freedom, which was of course supported in part by the CIA and therefore was an instrument of

evil. The revelation of a friendship between The Paris Review and the Congress for Cultural Freedom is the best news I have heard about that flavorful journal since the announcement of its current editor. The solidarity of beauty and democracy has always been one of my fondest dreams.

THERE IS MORE, BUT it is in no way amusing. “Aides say Mr. Obama has several reasons for becoming so immersed in lethal counterterrorism operations,” wrote Jo Becker and Scott Shane in The New York Times, in a riveting investigation of the president’s personal campaign of drone warfare. “A student of writings on war by Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, he believes that he should take moral responsibility for such actions.” And so the president, alone at the top, in the isolation of his exquisiteness, decides who to kill. The president’s sense of his accountability is laudable, but—I say this as a supporter of the president’s ruthlessness against terrorists—Becker and Shane otherwise paint a portrait of casuistry, hypocrisy, and an almost unfathomable arrogance. Whose faith in Obama can survive the spectacle of his faith in himself? The flattering reference to the medieval philosophers was obviously provided by sources in the White House, and it suggests that the president has been qualified for the power of life and death by his reading. Perhaps he once taught the texts and their arguments; but the Oval Office is not a seminar room. This raises an interesting scruple about the relation of ideas to power. It is that the relation should never be unmediated by experience. No president can govern well without taking ideas seriously; but the mechanical application of ideas to circumstances can be dangerous, and historically amateurish, and lacking in wisdom. It is fanatical, or professorial, to move from a book to a trigger. The case of Abu

Yahya al-Libi did not call for a memo about Summa Theologica II-II, Q. 64. But I do not believe for a moment that Obama reviews the old churchmen before giving the order, or that his drone war is motivated chiefly by philosophy. That is more of the Obama legend—the highbrow spin. If the president were really moved by the theory of just war, the massacre of the children of Houla would not have left our Syrian policy unmodified. What is the difference, really, between a man who cares but does nothing and a man who does not care? I refer the bystander president to Augustine: “The death of an unjust aggressor is a lesser evil than that of a man who is only defending himself. It is much more horrible that a human being should be violated against his will than that a violent attacker should be killed by his intended victim.”

HENRY KISSINGER responded to the massacre of the children with a hissing reiteration of his contempt for humane intentions in foreign policy. American action against Assad, he frigidly lectured in *The Washington Post*, would be a betrayal of “the modern concept of world order [that] arose in 1648 from the Treaty of Westphalia,” which was designed to put an end to the “seventeenth-century version of regime change [that] killed perhaps a third of the population of Central Europe”—note the implication that democratic rebellion, and the support of it, is a variety of religious war—and replace it with “the preservation of equilibrium” as the controlling principle of international affairs. “Does America consider itself obliged to support every popular uprising against any non-democratic government, including those heretofore considered important in sustaining the international system?” Kissinger does not explain why the Assad regime is a Westphalian necessity, when there is no longer any

equilibrium in Syria to preserve. The stability of tyrants is an artificial and passing stability. (Augustine: “Peace vied with war in cruelty and surpassed it: for while war overthrew armed hosts, peace slew the defenseless.”) Kissinger acknowledges that the fall of Assad is an American interest, but “not every strategic interest rises to a cause for war; were it otherwise, no room would be left for diplomacy”—as if diplomacy is the end, and not the means, of foreign policy. Moreover, infringements of sovereignty are a regular feature of the global state system, legally, economically, politically. Kissinger himself was a master infringer of sovereignty, not least militarily, when he was in power: he has no compunctions about interfering in the domestic affairs of another country for reasons of state. He merely cannot abide reasons of conscience. “And if they put Jews into gas chambers in the Soviet Union,” he remarked to Richard Nixon in 1973, “it is not an American concern. Maybe a humanitarian concern.” Yeah, maybe.

IT IS NOT ONLY because of Houla that an intervention against Assad would be justified. But Kissinger and the other elders who know better than to be stirred by the sight of children with their faces blown away will carry the day. We will arrange no intervention in Syria. Instead we will wager on the moral sense of Vladimir Putin, whose memories of Beslan do not seem to have affected his thoughts about Houla. Russia is the key: that is the smart, brandy-soaked opinion now. Why is it less fanciful than more active measures? The really shocking thing is not that a massacre of children occurred. The really shocking thing is that a massacre of children hardly mattered. They died for Westphalia.

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The Daily Star

## **The Arab Spring has confused China**

Johan Lagerkvist

June 11, 2012 -- One man, fruit seller Mohammad Bouazizi, sparked the Arab Spring with his self-immolation in the Tunisian city of Sidi Bouzid in January 2011. Since then, leaders in Beijing have grappled with how to handle the political fallout of the democratic youth-quakes reverberating across the Middle East and North Africa. China's initial response was to advocate stability, return to normalcy and hold high the banner of state sovereignty. This familiar spinal reaction is the logic of the five principles of peaceful co-existence laid down in 1949 by Mao Zedong as guidelines for China's foreign policy.

Yet, in the course of events in the Arab world, Beijing's stance shifted from resistance to foreign intervention to a surprising abstention on the March 2011 U.N. Security Council vote on Resolution 1973, which aimed to halt the Gadhafi regime's onslaught on rebel groups in Libya. Then in February 2012

China backtracked to its usual principle of noninterference and together with Russia vetoed a draft resolution to end the horrific violence in Syria.

China's wobbling on intrastate conflict is puzzling to scholars and policymakers. How then can China's recent veto behavior in the Security Council be explained? Previous Chinese actions vis-à-vis the atrocities inside Sudan provide insights. While China still cherishes the principle of state sovereignty, Beijing has actually over time become more socialized into the framework of international norms.

It's well-known that China does not condone any criticism of Chinese policies regarding Taiwan or the regions of Xinjiang and Tibet. Less understood is under what conditions China may accept infringements on sovereignty far from its own territory. It is tempting to read China's shifting posture as purely driven by external resource dependency and capitalist expansion.

Arguably, however, the three capitals of Khartoum, Juba and Beijing have mutual vulnerabilities. The two Sudanese states, especially South Sudan are in desperate need of investments for development. With more than \$12.5 billion invested in the petro-sector, much of it in the disputed Abyei and South Kordofan oil fields, China has both substantial leverage and vulnerability. China's power and potential mediator role in the escalating border conflict between governments in Khartoum and Juba was illustrated by the news of an April 29 agreement that China and South Sudan had agreed on an infrastructure development package, mostly consisting of loans and investments, worth \$8 billion – a huge figure which has not, however, been confirmed by Chinese state officials.



China's concern for stability is motivated by pecuniary self-interest, of course. However, other factors that make Beijing vulnerable also determine China's behavior on Sudan.

China cares about its reputation. In the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics, international activists and U.S. lawmakers branded the event as the "genocide Olympics," pointing to China's negligence on atrocities in the Darfur region. China acted fast. In September 2006, Beijing went out of its way to persuade Sudan's government to accept U.N. Security Council Resolution 1769, thus endorsing the U.N.-African Union hybrid peacekeeping mission, or UNAMID. Beijing can tolerate a universalistic discourse on human rights, as shown by its statement on the Darfur crisis as a "humanitarian disaster."

With such conflicts posing risks to Chinese lives, Beijing had little choice but to act. About 30,000 Chinese nationals work in the oil and construction sectors in Sudan, and China's oil operations in Southern Kordofan have come under repeated attacks since 2007. In October 2008, nine Chinese oilmen of the China National Petroleum Corporation were kidnapped. And on Jan. 28 this year, anti-government rebels kidnapped 29 Chinese construction workers. These events and the exodus of thousands of Chinese fleeing Libya in 2011 were closely followed in real time by Chinese media and ordinary citizens on Twitter-like microblogs.

Therefore, alongside the value of Chinese investments in the country and pressure from both Western and Arab countries, domestic public opinion weighed heavily on Beijing's decision not to thwart the Western-backed U.N. resolution on Libya, where stability was deteriorating quickly, posing imminent

danger to the more than 35,000 Chinese nationals caught in civil war.

The oscillating veto behavior in the U.N. Security Council reflects China's expanding economic engagement with the world and the effect of rising overseas Chinese migration to all corners of the globe, including some of its most unstable and conflict-ridden parts. China's veto actions also shows the necessity to accommodate demands from other state actors to shoulder broader responsibilities for safeguarding international security and recognize the emerging norm of responsibility to protect.

Thus, several factors – some new and gaining traction – influence China's alterations of its absolutist stance on sovereignty and noninterference.

Some trends are apparent. For China to accept intervention inside the territory of another state, the issue must go through the U.N. Security Council, and regional organizations must favor the actions.

Moreover, one or several of the following questions must be answered in the affirmative: First, is there significant risk of military intervention in an area of Chinese economic influence? Second, are the level of Chinese investments and prospects of resource extraction high or promising? Third, are Chinese lives in harm's way? Fourth, will China's image among the community of states and in the court of worldwide public opinion be negatively affected?

In Libya, China accepted intervention due its own commercial interests, the risks posed to Chinese lives, a negative fallout in world opinion and growing pressure from the West and the Arab

League.

In Syria, only the last and arguably least important factor for China – an image problem – exists. Even if the Syrian conflict is highly internationalized through the world's media, the indecisive Western position on responsibility to protect increases the likelihood for Beijing to stick to its traditional stance of nonintervention.

Also, the interest of veto ally Russia was a priority, compounded by a sense of “betrayal” by Western countries’ interpretation of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1973 and swift implementation of a no-fly zone over Libya by the United Kingdom and France.

Recent and ongoing crises in Libya, Syria and between the two Sudanese states show how case-dependent China’s evolving stance on both state sovereignty and noninterference has become. Clearly, China has moved away from an archconservative and principled stance on sovereignty.

But its future position is not so clear-cut. It could continue to evolve with China’s increasing clout in world affairs and its groping for new footing in staking positions on conflicts inside territories of other states. At times, as in the case of Libya, China’s changing status may necessitate a less rigid approach to sovereignty issues. On other occasions, void of material interests and concerns for Chinese lives, the old-style rigid posture will feel more comfortable.

The implications of China’s evolving position on state sovereignty may entail more of a “responsible stakeholder” approach as wished for by many Western states. Beijing,

however, needs to balance its perceived obstructionism against perceptions in developing countries of Chinese acquiescence to Western hegemony. Adding to the uncertainty is that further erosion of China's principles on sovereignty and noninterference may lead to a flexible approach that suits Beijing – but goes against interests in the trans-Atlantic world.

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