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Article 1.

NYT

After Meeting With Clinton, Egypt's Military Chief Steps Up Political Feud

Kareem Fahim

July 15, 2012 -- CAIRO — Egypt's top military official stepped up his feud with the Muslim Brotherhood on Sunday, saying the army would prevent Egypt from falling to a "certain group," according to the state news agency.

The remarks by the official, Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, did not mention the Brotherhood by name but were

widely seen as a reference to the group and to Mohamed Morsi, Egypt's newly elected president and a former Brotherhood leader. And they came just hours after Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton met with the field marshal in Cairo in an effort to prod Egypt's military to hand its power to civilians.

The accelerating dispute between the military and the Brotherhood marked the latest unpredictable turn in Egypt's chaotic transition, and underscored the challenges Mrs. Clinton faced on her two-day visit to Egypt.

Constrained by an almost complete mistrust of the United States' motives, Mrs. Clinton was forced to avoid strong calls for a quick end to military rule, favoring language instead that called for Egyptian solutions along with respect for minority rights.

And with little leverage except a promise of economic assistance, she struggled to coax the military and Mr. Morsi to resolve their rift.

She also faced anger from Christian leaders, including some who boycotted a meeting with her on Sunday, objecting to what they said was interference by the United States in Egypt's politics in order to aid an Islamist rise to power.

Though there is little evidence that the Islamists needed American help in gaining power — or indeed, received it — the complaints reflected the country's anxious politics and growing concerns among many Christians and secular-minded Egyptians about Islamist rule.

After meeting Mr. Morsi on Saturday, Mrs. Clinton sat down on

Sunday morning with Field Marshal Tantawi, whose military council took power after President Hosni Mubarak was deposed last year. The military still retains broad legislative and executive authority, having seized further powers before the presidential election in June.

After the meeting, which lasted a little over an hour, a senior State Department official said Field Marshal Tantawi and Mrs. Clinton had discussed the economy, regional security, “the political transition” and the military’s “ongoing dialogue with President Morsi.”

Field Marshal Tantawi emphasized that Egyptians needed “help getting the economy back on track,” the official said. “The secretary stressed the importance of protecting the rights of all Egyptians, including women and minorities.”

But just hours after the meeting, Mrs. Clinton appeared to have achieved little reconciliation between the two sides. “Egypt will not fall,” Field Marshal Tantawi said at a military ceremony. “It is for all Egyptians, not for a certain group — the armed forces will not allow that.”

Mrs. Clinton’s afternoon meeting with leaders of Egypt’s Christian minority touched on one of the transition’s rawest nerves: the fear that Mr. Morsi and his allies would move swiftly to lay the foundations of a pious, Muslim state.

Those anxieties have caused some liberals and Coptic leaders to support the military in its feud with the Brotherhood, and even to call on the generals to keep power until new elections for Parliament can be held.

In trying to ease the Islamists' grip on government, liberals have also been accused of being content to subvert the will of Egyptians, who voted a majority of Islamists into Parliament. And despite the Brotherhood's repeated successes at the ballot box, some have continued to implicate the United States.

Youssef Sidhom, who attended the round-table afternoon meeting with Mrs. Clinton at the American Embassy here, said some of the discomfort was rooted in the timing of American statements on Egypt, which seemed to "bless democracy" just as Islamists were winning.

"She kept repeating and assuring us that she has no intention to take sides," said Mr. Sidhom, who edits a newspaper that deals with Coptic concerns. He said that Mrs. Clinton, noting the Brotherhood's political skills, spoke to the Christian leaders about becoming a more organized political force.

A senior State Department official, speaking of meetings on Sunday with entrepreneurs, women's groups and Christian leaders, said Mrs. Clinton was trying "to make absolutely clear where we stand on this political transition, which is that we support a full transition to civilian democratic rule and a constitution that protects the human rights and freedoms of all Egyptians."

In Egypt's current muddled politics, though, those goals are hard to reconcile. Revolutionary groups and human rights activists have warned that continued involvement by the military, which many people here accuse of staging a de facto coup, would undermine the Constitution's legitimacy. But others, including Christian leaders Mrs. Clinton met with on

Sunday, see the military as the only guarantor of a constitution that protects minority rights.

“She can say what she wants concerning the issue,” said Emad Gad, a former member of Parliament who said he had refused to attend the meeting with Mrs. Clinton.

“We are living in an unstable period. If the SCAF goes back to its barracks,” he said, referring to the military council by its initials, “the Brotherhood will control everything.”

Mr. Gad added: “It’s an Egyptian issue. It’s not for the secretary of state.”

Article 2.

The Wall Street Journal

Obama Lets the U.N. Tie His Hands on Syria

Douglas J. Feith

July 15, 2012 -- To retain power in the face of a popular revolt, Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad has killed nearly 15,000 civilians. From a humanitarian point of view, this is a crisis. From a national-interest point of view, it is an opportunity to undermine enemies of the United States in both Damascus and

Tehran. But President Obama has treated the bloody turmoil, first and foremost, as an opportunity to strengthen the idea that America should subject itself to the United Nations Security Council.

In the 16 months since the revolt began, the Obama administration has neither promoted humanitarian "safe zones" on Syria's Turkish border, nor provided arms to the rebels. It has not helped establish a no-fly zone, nor has it supported NATO military strikes against Assad's forces.

At first, Mr. Obama vainly called for Assad to behave humanely. Eventually, he vainly exhorted Assad to relinquish power.

All the while, Mr. Obama has looked to the U.N. for answers. The latest: Secretary of State Hillary Clinton worked with the five permanent Security Council members and U.N. envoy Kofi Annan on a June 30 accord calling for Syrians to devise a political transition for their own country—and strangely suggesting that Assad's regime may cooperate in the effort.

The accord's vacuity is a sign of the support Assad enjoys from Russia and China, each of which has a veto on the Security Council. Obama administration officials complain about that support, but Russian President Vladimir Putin shrugs them off.

Why is Russia able to shield Assad, harm the Syrian people, and frustrate U.S. diplomacy? Because Mr. Obama has made the Security Council the focus of U.S. policy on Syria. This was not inevitable, nor was it necessary.

Asked why they have not done more against the Syrian despot, Obama administration officials talk resignedly about the need

for multinational approval. "We need to have a clear legal basis for any action we take," Defense Secretary Leon Panetta testified to the Senate in March. "Our goal would be to seek international permission." U.S. Ambassador to NATO Ivo Daalder told a British audience in May that NATO lacked "clear regional support" and "a sound legal basis" to act in Syria. The legal justification, he noted, would "most likely" have to be a Security Council resolution.

This legalism is both bad law and bad policy. The Security Council is not a judicial forum. The U.N. Charter gives the Security Council the power to make "decisions" (special resolutions that U.N. countries are committed "to accept and carry out"), but it is precisely such mandatory resolutions that are subject to veto by any of the five permanent Security Council members. The council can be a source of useful diplomatic support and of legislative-type authority, but the charter does not say that council approval is a prerequisite in all cases for a country's military or other action abroad. Especially murky is how the charter should govern humanitarian interventions.

History shows that the Security Council is no touchstone of international legality. President John Kennedy "quarantined" Cuba during the 1962 missile crisis without any permission from the Security Council. Likewise without such permission, President Bill Clinton helped lead NATO's bombing campaign to defend Serbian Muslims in Serbia's Kosovo region from oppression by their own government. Mr. Obama has not sought Security Council authority for his drone-strike campaign against al Qaeda in Pakistan, Yemen and elsewhere.

When officials of the United States or any other country believe they have compelling humanitarian or national-security interests to do something, they do it. When an American president thinks U.S. interests require action, he may reasonably seek political support from the U.N. But it is absurd to make a fetish of Security Council permission, especially if the problem in need of remedy is caused by a close friend of Russia or China and involves the kind of violent, anti-democratic action that Russian and Chinese officials themselves often perpetrate.

Syria's misery is a window into Mr. Obama's strategic mind. However much he regrets the bloodletting there, he considers Syria less important than bolstering the Security Council as a means of constraining American power.

The same was true last year when Moammar Gadhafi was attacking Libyan cities and coming close to the complete annihilation of the rebels. Mr. Obama would not intervene until the Arab League and the Security Council called for action.

By refusing to act on Syria, the president is missing an opportunity to advance U.S. security interests in the Middle East, while benefiting Iran, the principal sponsor of the Assad regime. And by suggesting that America lacks international legal authority to act, he is undermining U.S. sovereignty. Presidents have traditionally striven to bolster America's sovereignty and freedom of action, but Mr. Obama evidently sides with the global legalists who see national sovereignty as a problem to be overcome, not a principle to be cherished.

Mr. Feith, a senior fellow at Hudson Institute, served as under

secretary of defense for policy from 2001 to 2005.

Article 3.

The Guardian (London)

Egypt: The battle for civilian rule

Editorial

July 16, 2012 -- A battle royal is taking place inside Egypt. The Islamist leader, Mohamed Morsi, is finding out that it's one thing to win a presidential election, but quite another to act as president once elected. Clawing back the powers usurped by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (Scaf) in two decrees issued before and after the presidential poll is proving to be as tense an operation as the revolution 18 months ago which ousted Hosni Mubarak.

Last week Dr Morsi ordered parliament to reconvene, overturning a ruling by the supreme court dissolving it. The court re-affirmed its ruling and parliament met for five minutes before adjourning, pending an appeal to a lower court. This week's drama will centre on the constituent assembly, the body that will write the next constitution. Scaf has already warned that it is poised to replace it if it "encounters an obstacle" preventing it from completing its work. That may duly arrive tomorrow, when the administrative court reviews lawsuits filed against its formation, a move that could be counted by a fresh presidential decree setting it up again.

Enter Hillary Clinton. On Saturday the visiting US secretary of state declared that the US supported the "full transition to civilian rule with all that entails". She looked forward to the military's return to a purely national security role. Yesterday she told Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi the same thing in person. All of this is welcome, although America's own power to influence what the generals do is limited, despite the money they get from Congress. The second factor constraining her is the knowledge of how divided Egypt's non-military elites are about the power the president is striving to acquire for the institutions, such as parliament, which the Muslim Brotherhood dominated. Like it or not, by striking back at Scaf, the president is also targeting the judiciary, whose top judges are as divided as everyone else is about the legality of the president's decrees.

In this battle, everything gets thrown up in the air: the parliament and the power to legislate; the constituent assembly and the power to write the next constitution; and the constitutional court and the principle of the rule of law. The more the president rules by decree - and one faction in the Brotherhood argues that he should issue a constitutional decree of his own, annulling the content of the decree Scaf issued within hours of the closing of the presidential polls - the more he risks alienating his future political partners in the broad-tent political coalition he intends to set up both under him as president, and under the prime minister he intends to nominate.

He has to tread a fine line between rolling back the powers of the generals (who failed in a free democratic election to get their candidate elected, but who continue to interfere in the transition to civilian rule) and keeping his future secular and Christian partners in the government on side. Otherwise they will turn

around and say that the Brotherhood is doing no more and no less than grabbing all power for itself. As the political tension rises, it gets harder for the newly elected president to argue that he is not acquiring power for its own sake but redistributing it. One way to legitimise a new constitutional transitional order, as set out in a decree, would be to put it to a referendum. This has already been tried once, in March last year, and the result was not to the liking of the generals.

The revolution has to maintain its unity and the generals have also to see the writing on the wall. Rather than issuing dark statements about not allowing "a certain group" - ie, the Muslim Brotherhood - to dominate the country, as it did last night, Scaf should now take a strategic decision. It has incentive enough to stage an honourable retreat and keep its reputation as national guardians intact. No one is proposing to deprive it of the defence ministry or indeed of its extensive business empire. Scaf should see this as a moment to withdraw, not to launch another campaign that it cannot, in the long run, win.

Article 4.

A The Atlantic

Case for Not Fearing Islamism

Robert Wright

Jul 12 2012 -- Everywhere in Turkey, it seems, are signs that the

nation is getting more religious. There are more head scarves in Istanbul than there used to be, and you see them at universities, where they used to be banned. People even leave work for Friday prayers--and secular bosses who 20 years ago would have been indignant about this now stoically accept it. This is the new Turkey.

But, actually, Turkey is in important ways getting less religious, according to Kerim Balci, editor of the bimonthly Turkish Review. The percentage of Turks who profess religious faith is declining, he says. Perhaps more important: Balci says that militant Islamic sentiment has waned.

Balci asserts a paradox that secular westerners may find reassuring: the very forces that have created more public expressions of faith, and have made religion a more prominent part of Turkish politics, are reducing support for the idea that Islamic law should rule the country; as Islam has gotten more prominent, Islamism has lost strength.

And to some extent the logic of Balci's argument is generic. It suggests that across the Muslim world, there may be less reason than commonly assumed for westerners to worry about the prospect of Islamists--whether the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or other Islamists elsewhere--gaining power. Balci is himself representative of the new Turkey. I had to schedule my late-June interview with him--at the Istanbul headquarters of Zaman Media Group, which publishes the Turkish Review as well as one of Istanbul's main newspapers--to accomodate his daily mid-afternoon prayer. For that matter, Zaman Media more broadly is representative of the new Turkey. It is staffed heavily by people who, like Balci, are part of the religious movement Hizmet,

sometimes called the Gulen movement after its American-based leader, Fethullah Gulen. The Gulen movement, and Zaman Media, have been largely and consequentially supportive of Prime Minister Recep Erdogan's ruling party, the AKP, whose base includes lots of religious conservatives. So maybe Balci's analysis should be taken with a grain of salt. Certainly it's not surprising that he would advance a benign view of the religious conservatism he's part of. But I ran the sociological core of his analysis by other Turks, including critics of AKP and the Gulen movement, and it doesn't seem to be eccentric. At any rate, it's a coherent and plausible account (and dovetails with some recent scholarly analysis). Turkey is of course famous for being a secular Muslim country--an identity that goes back to early twentieth-century Turkish leader Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's forceful campaign to westernize the country after the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. But the campaign was less successful than it seemed. Though the cosmopolitan elites who ran Turkey after Ataturk were largely secular, out in the villages traditional religious practice persisted. And over the past few decades there has been a huge migration of Turks, including lots of religious ones, from villages to cities. So the main story behind increasingly conspicuous head scarves, says Balci, isn't newly covered heads but rather the movement of covered heads from villages to cities. The story is of course a little more complicated than that. One Turk told me that, with the Erdogan government running things, a businessperson has a better shot at getting a government contract if he or she shows signs of devoutness, and for a woman that means wearing a head scarf. And, in any event, as head scarves become a more common sight in cities, some inconspicuously devout women have presumably come out of the closet. Still, the big question,

from the perspective of many westerners, is whether the newly visible displays of devoutness, whatever their sources, signal a growth in support for Islamism. According to Balci, the answer is no. He says the Islamist impulse was once stronger in Turkey, and has waned in part because wearing a head scarf in upscale parts of Istanbul is no longer considered odd --and because Turkey now has a prime minister whose wife wears a head scarf. "Islamism is an us-versus-them ideology," a "reactionary ideology that belongs to opposition," he says. The more Islam is embraced within the corridors of power, the more Islamism "loses its energy and attractiveness." Balci's argument rests on a kind of "two-wave" model of Turkey's rural-urban migration. In the early years, many migrants from Turkey's villages settled in urban enclaves full of other uneducated migrant job seekers. Leaving the village hadn't radically elevated their standard of living, but it allowed them to see first-hand the affluent, secular class they weren't part of. It was the resulting milieu of resentment, says Balci, that gave strength to early Islamist political movements, including the Welfare Party, the party Erdogan once belonged to. (Back in the late 1990s, Erdogan was thrown in jail for publically reciting a poem that read, in part, "the mosques are our barracks, believers are our soldiers and the minarets are our arms.") But increasingly, the migrants--or offspring of first-generation migrants--entered the middle and even upper class, sometimes with degrees from Turkey's expanding system of higher education. This economic empowerment of religious Turks started draining the energy from Islamism, according to Balci.

This emergence of a more affluent, less disgruntled, class of highly religious Turks in turn paved the way for a political party

that would be conservatively religious but not outright Islamist. In 2001, Erdogan seized the moment, forming a new party, the Justice and Development Party, or AKP. The AKP, according to Balci, contrasted with its Islamist precursors in two key respects: it was highly internationalist, and specifically sought closer integration with the West via European Union membership; and it was more vocally supportive of the rights of religious minorities, such as Alawites and Christians. Still, though more cosmopolitan than the Welfare Party, the AKP retained enough of an Islamic flavor to make religious Turks feel they were no longer shut out of power. (It supported, for example, relaxing the ban on head scarves on college campuses.) And this fact in turn made a resurgence of Islamism less likely, says Balci: "There won't be a second generation of Islamists in Turkey's history."

Obviously, not all Turks are so sanguine about the new Turkey. After interviewing Balci, I met with Soli Ozel, a Turkish political scientist and newspaper columnist. Ozel roughly affirms Balci's economic analysis. Turkey has in recent decades enjoyed "the democratization of capital accumulation," he says. In part as a consequence, the AKP is now "the agent of an ascending entrepreneurial class, which has prospered phenomenally in the course of the past eight years, from patronage and rent distribution," Ozel has written. At the same time, the AKP has also looked after "the losers in the global integration process" with "a series of populist (and popular) measures," including health care and subsidies for food, housing, and energy.

But, like other Turkish secular liberals I spoke with, Ozel worries about this government's low regard for civil liberties,

typically justified either as part of the fight against Kurdish terrorism or as part of the fight to break the Turkish military's habit of periodically intervening in politics. Under Erdogan, Gulen followers have helped staff prosecutors' offices, and in recent years around 100 journalists have been arrested, as well as union leaders and lots of military officers. (After a Turkish author wrote a book warning about this sort of Gulen influence, prosecutors banned his book and had him arrested, according to Bloomberg News.) Still, Ozel doesn't link this authoritarianism to Islam. Rather, it's because the AKP is "a typical populist party" that it has an "innate tendency to move in an authoritarian direction." And he acknowledges that the current government looks less draconian by comparison with past Turkish governments than by comparison with western European governments.

Even if we assume the best--that Balci's analysis is sound, that the social mobility of devout Turkish Muslims is and will remain conducive to a government that isn't Islamist, and that authoritarian tendencies will ultimately be checked--there are of course questions as to how much of Turkey's experience is translatable to other Muslim countries.

For one thing, the social mobility that Balci credits with blunting the appeal of Islamism doesn't just magically happen, but is the result of policy--including education policy--and of demographic, cultural, and historical factors that will vary from country to country.

Even so, Balci's larger point--that Islamism thrives on resentments fueled by exclusion from both economic and political power--may have broad application. It suggests that

when Islamists come to power, in Egypt or elsewhere, the appeal of Islamism per se--the appeal that helped get them into office--will, all other things being equal, tend to wane.

This in turn will make it all the more important for Islamist parties that want to stay in power to cultivate prosperity--and when that goal clashes with pursuing an Islamist agenda, they may tend to pursue the former at the expense of the latter.

In other words, these parties may be pushed down the path taken by Erdogan and the AKP. Erdogan has embraced capitalism and extensive international trade, which in turn has aligned his interests with regional stability and encouraged him to stay on good terms with nations in western Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Ozel paraphrases the argument of another Turkish scholar, Cihan Tugal, that the AKP's "historical mission has been to make capitalism acceptable to broader segments of the Turkish population and to break Islamist resistance to capitalist integration." To some extent this kind of mission may be one that political reality imposes on Islamist parties once they gain power. If that's true, westerners can calm down a little about the empowerment of Islamists.

There is one other reason not to freak out when Islamists come to power: the freaking out may itself be counterproductive. Balci says Islamism is sustained by a sense of resentment against perceived oppression by the affluent and powerful, and there's no reason the perceived oppressors can't be foreign. Indeed, Iran may be a case in point. There the accession to power by the devoutly religious hasn't extinguished the Islamist impulse--and one reason may be that, though the fall of the Shah meant that Islamists could no longer resent a domestic secular ruling power,

the role of resented oppressor shifted to outside powers, notably including the United States.

Obviously, whether America plays this sort of role for ascendant Islamists--fueling the resentment that nourishes the more militant parts of their base--isn't entirely within America's control. But it's partly within America's control. And one way to exert some control is to greet the rise of Islamist movements with something other than alarm and opposition. Maybe the less alarmed we get, the less alarm will be in order.

Robert Wright is a senior editor at The Atlantic and the author, most recently, of The Evolution of God, a New York Times bestseller and a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.

Article 5.

Wall Street Journal

Russia's Support for Assad Will Backfire

Inna Lazareva

July 12, 2012 -- The common explanation for why Moscow continues to back the Assad regime is that it is acting to protect its security and economic interests. While President Vladimir

Putin may well believe this to be the case, his government's continued support for Bashar Assad represents at best a miscalculation—and at worst an irreversible diplomatic disaster. Russia's choices are set to backfire against its own key assets in the region.

If Assad continues to cling to power, Russia will be left with a business partner unable to trade or fulfill contracts. Syria's economy is already in tatters after 16 months of conflict, and some of its trade deals with Russia are likely to be frozen while the civil war rages on.

There will be an even higher economic price to pay vis-à-vis Gulf nations. Saudi Arabia—the world's largest crude-oil exporter, a regional heavyweight, and a potentially lucrative market for Russia—now seems to be locking horns with Moscow over the latter's endorsement of Damascus. The Kingdom, which recently indicated its plans to fund Syria's rebel army, humiliated Russia in March by canceling a scheduled meeting between Moscow and the Gulf Cooperation Council.

But Russia could still lose substantially even if Assad is deposed or chooses to step down. The recent case of Libya is indicative. In 2008, Russia agreed to swap Tripoli's \$4.5 billion debt for privileged trade agreements, brokered under the personal guarantee of Moammar Gadhafi. Since the Libyan dictator's violent demise, some of these contractual obligations have been declared null and void, leaving Russia with little compensation for its financial loss.

Russia's cancelation of \$9.8 billion of Syrian debt in 2005 in exchange for trade contracts could prove equally ill-advised.

What future leader of Syria would be willing to closely cooperate with the country responsible for arming Assad's regime?

There have been rumors of a suspension in Russian arms shipments to Syria until the situation stabilizes. Yet even this would be too little, too late. Russia has stepped up its deliveries of arms to Syria considerably since 2011, and the Syrian defense budget has doubled over the same period. Few would believe that these arms have been merely gathering dust in Syrian army warehouses.

The Kremlin's Middle East policy is also looking self-defeating in the case of Iran. This might not be apparent on first glance. Moscow has been acting as a mediator between Iran and the West, and has introduced several proposals for resolving the nuclear dispute.

But an actual diplomatic resolution could cost Russia dearly. Supporting Iran's theocracy amid its isolation from other major countries offers Russia a valuable foothold in the Iranian energy market, at least in the short term. Moreover, if relations between the West and Iran normalize and the oil embargo is lifted, Moscow stands to lose its dominance as energy supplier to Europe. Its coffers would suffer dearly.

In addition, Iran cannot obtain nuclear weapons without undermining Russia's regional security interests. A Western military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities would strongly threaten to destabilize the neighboring North Caucasus—a vital security consideration for Russia, with its Muslim population of approximately 20 million.

Accordingly, Moscow seems keen to preserve the current stalemate over Tehran's nuclear program. Yet this cannot continue indefinitely. In the absence of a resolution, Russia's role as a mediator will gradually erode in Western eyes. Iran will begin to resent Moscow's "duplicitous" (if lukewarm) support of sanctions against its nuclear program. The relationship is already fragile, exacerbated by Russia's cancelation of the S-300 air-defense-systems contract and its foot-dragging over the completion of the Bushehr nuclear reactor.

Where does all this lead? All governments aspire to align their economic, state and foreign policy interests. What is unique about Moscow's choices in the Middle East is that they seem set to backfire against its regional standing on all three fronts.

None of this will be made easier for Mr. Putin by the continuing deterioration of his domestic support. A recent report by a Russian think tank warns that Moscow's foreign policy may become "less realistic and increasingly indoctrinated" due to the country's internal political, social and economic crisis. The Kremlin's support for discredited dictators such as Gadhafi, Assad and Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is not just disastrous PR. For Russia, betting on the wrong horse may yet result in catastrophe.

Ms. Lazareva is a political analyst and journalist based in London. Her forthcoming report "Russia's policies in Libya, Syria and Iran: A Failure Wrapped in a Mystery Inside an Enigma?" will be published by the Henry Jackson Society this month.

Article 6.

The Financial Times

Welcome to the new world of American energy

Edward Luce

July 15, 2012 -- It is so dry in the Midwest that the trees are bribing the dogs. So goes the joke from the dust bowl era of the 1930s. In the past two weeks, the US has broken a record number of heat records. And in the past 12 months the average temperature has beaten any since US records began – including 1933, the hottest year of that overbaked decade.

Nor are the weather gods victimising America. According to Nasa, nine of the 10 hottest years globally have occurred since 2000. And so on, from one statistical milestone to another, until we reach a nagging dilemma: evidence of global warming has never been stronger but the public appetite to respond has rarely been weaker. Nowhere are both observations truer than in the US. Yet in few places do the list of alibis stack up so impressively.

To the surprise of many, President Barack Obama in April told Rolling Stone magazine that he would make tackling climate change a second term priority. Were Mr Obama to regain the White House and pick up on that stray promise, he would face three challenges that were either absent or weaker than when he was first elected. The odds of him creating some kind of carbon regime would surely be lower. As the recent wildfires in Colorado and the drought in Texas attest, continued inaction will hit Americans as well as foreigners.

The first, and least foreseen, development since 2008, is that America is rapidly turning from a consumer into a producer nation. On economic grounds, its expanding energy horizons are manna from heaven. When Mr Obama was elected, the US was importing almost two-thirds of its oil. That number is down to below almost half and falling. In 2008, King Coal still dominated US electricity production. Last month natural gas supplanted coal as the largest source of US power supply.

So dramatic are America's finds, analysts talk of the US turning into the world's new Saudi Arabia by 2020, with up to 15m barrels a day of liquid energy production (against the desert kingdom's 11m b/d this year). Most of the credit goes to private sector innovators, who took their cue from the high oil prices in the last decade to devise ways of tapping previously uneconomic underground reserves of "tight oil" and shale gas. And some of it is down to plain luck. Far from reaching its final frontier, America has discovered new ones under the ground.

The second is political. Even without a deep recession and the subsequent weak recovery, America's new energy abundance would have altered the mood. But the combination of the two

has killed off talk of tackling climate change (barring Mr Obama's brief aside to Rolling Stone). In 2008, John McCain, the Republican candidate, had a cap-and-trade plan to curb carbon emissions. In 2012, Mr Romney avoids the subject altogether.

Both positions capture the temper of their times. So too does Mr Obama's altered language. Fate has offered him a windfall. According to IHS Cera, the energy research group, hydraulic fracturing alone has created 600,000 jobs in the US – almost exactly as many employees as have been shed by state and local governments since 2009. Think of how much worse the jobs picture would be without the energy boom.

Last month, Rex Tillerson, chief executive of ExxonMobil, admitted global warming was happening – a big step for the company that has most aggressively argued against it. He added that all we could do was adapt to the changes around us. Thus, unusually, Exxon finds itself bang in line with public opinion. In a Washington Post/Stanford University poll last week, a large majority of Americans said global warming was happening. Equally wide margins were opposed to taking mandatory steps at home, or providing assistance overseas, to try to slow it down. Given the mood, it would be political suicide to propose putting a price on carbon. And it is hard to believe that calculation would change after November. Some of the 2010 Democratic midterm defeat in the House was blamed on passage of the controversial Waxman-Markey cap-and-trade bill, which died in the Senate that year. It is unlikely Mr Obama would risk a consecutive midterm disaster in 2014. The final challenge is logical. Without meaning to, America has cut its carbon emissions by more than 7 per cent since 2007. Europe's

emissions have dropped by almost 10 per cent. Much of this is because of reduced economic activity. But according to a new paper from IHS Cera, more than half comes from the shift from coal to gas. America is undergoing the equivalent to Britain's "dash for gas" after the coal miners' strike of the mid-1980s, which is bringing a large one-off reduction in carbon output. But global emissions keep growing. Americans know this, and grasp that the world economy will roughly double in the next 20 years, which in turn will lead to a surge in emissions (of up to 50 per cent by 2030). Even if Mr Obama conjured a binding carbon ceiling out of thin air in his second term, it is countries such as China and India that will set the global level. Meanwhile, those 5m "green-collar jobs" Mr Obama once promised have been quietly forgotten. Most of America's new jobs are on drilling rigs in places such as North Dakota, New Mexico and Ohio. With November looming, Mr Obama is starting to pick them out as backdrops.