THE DELUSIONS HOLDING AMERICA AND ISRAEL HOSTAGE

Last week the Obama administration was caught off guard by Russia's rapid rise in Syria.

As the Russians began bombing a US-supported militia along the Damascus-Homs highway, Secretary of State John Kerry was meeting with his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, at the UN. Just hours before their meeting Kerry was insisting that Russia's presence in Syria would likely be a positive development.

Reacting to the administration's humiliation, Sen. John McCain said, "This administration has confused our friends, encouraged our enemies, mistaken an excess of caution for prudence and replaced the risks of action with the perils of inaction."

McCain added that Russian President Vladimir Putin had stepped "into the wreckage of this administration's Middle East policy."

The system of centralized regimes that held sway in the Arab world since the breakup of the Ottoman Empire nearly a century ago has unraveled. The shape of the new order has yet to be determined.

The war in Syria and the chaos and instability engulfing the region are part and parcel of the birth pangs of a new regional governing architecture now taking form. Actions taken by regional and global actors today will likely will influence power relations for generations.

Putin understands the opportunity of the moment. He views the decomposition of Syria as an opportunity to rebuild Russia's power and influence in the Middle East – at America's expense.

Russia isn't the only strategic player seeking to exploit the war in Syria and the regional chaos. Turkey and Iran are also working assiduously to take advantage of the current absence of order to advance their long term interests.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is exploiting the rise of Islamic State in Syria and Iraq to fight the Kurds in both countries. Erdogan's goal is twofold: to prevent the establishment of an independent Kurdistan and to disenfranchise the Kurds in Turkey.

As for Iran, Syria is Iran's bulwark against Sunni power in the Arab world and the logistical base for Tehran's Shi'ite foreign legion Hezbollah. Iranian dictator Ali Khamenei is willing to fight to the bitter end to hold as much of Syrian territory as possible.

Broadly speaking, Iran views the breakup of the Arab state system as both a threat and an

opportunity.

The chaos threatens Iran, because it has radicalized the Sunni world. If Sunni forces unite, their numeric advantage against Shi'ite Iran will imperil it.

The power of Sunni numbers is the reason Bashar Assad now controls a mere sixth of Syrian territory. To prevent his fate from befalling them, the Iranians seek to destabilize neighboring regimes and where possible install proxy governments in their stead.

Iran's cultivation of alliances and proxy relationships with Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood and al-Qaida, and its phony war against Islamic State all point to an overarching goal of keeping Sunni forces separated and dependent on Tehran.

The Iranian regime also fears the prospect of being overthrown by its domestic opponents. To counter this threat the regime engages in large-scale and ever escalating repression of its perceived foes.

Iran's nuclear program also plays a key role in the regime's survival strategy. As Khamenei and his underlings see things, nuclear weapons protect the regime in three ways. They deter Iran's external foes. They increase domestic support for the regime by enriching Iran which, no longer under international sanctions, sees its diplomatic and economic prestige massively enhanced due to its nuclear program.

Finally, there is Iran's war with Israel and the US. A nuclear-armed Iran is a direct threat to both countries.

And this, too, is a boon for the mullacracy. From the regime's perspective, fighting Israel and the US serves to neutralize the Sunni threat to the regime. The more Iran is seen as fighting Israel and the US the more legitimate it appears to Sunni jihadists.

This then brings us to the Americans. Like the Russians, the Turks and the Iranians, President Barack Obama and his associates are strategic players. Unlike those powers however, the administration is moved not by raw power calculations but by ideological dictates.

Obama and his advisers are convinced that the instability and radicalization of states and actors throughout the region is the consequence of the actions of past US administrations and those of America's regional allies – first and foremost, Israel and Egypt. The basis for this conviction is Obama's delusional ideological underpinnings.

Because his strategy is based on ideological beliefs rather than power calculations rooted in reality, Obama's position cannot be swayed by evidence, even when evidence shows that his administration's policies endanger US national security.

This brings us to Israel.

Israel has limited power to influence regional events.

It cannot change its neighbors' values or cultures. Israel can however limit its neighbors' ability to harm it and expand its ability to deter would be aggressors by among other things, using its power judiciously to influence now forming power balances between various regional and world actors.

Israel has followed this model in Syria with notable success.

At an early stage of the war our leaders recognized that aside from the Kurds, who have no shared border with us, there are no viable actors in Syria that are not dangerous to Israel. As a result, Israel has no interest in the victory of one group against others.

The only actor in Syria that Israel has felt it necessary to actively rein in is Hezbollah. So it has acted repeatedly to prevent Hezbollah from using its operational presence in Syria as a means for augmenting its offensive capabilities in Lebanon.

The problem with this strategy is that it has ignored the fact that from Hezbollah's perspective, there is no operational difference between Lebanon and Syria.

The war in Syria spread to Lebanon years ago.

Now, with Iranian and Russian assistance, Hezbollah is beginning to develop the industrial capacity to bypass Israel and independently produce advanced weapons inside Lebanon. This rapid industrialization of Hezbollah's military capabilities requires Israel to end its respect for the all-but-destroyed international border and take direct action against Hezbollah's capabilities in Lebanon.

This brings us to Hezbollah's boss, Iran.

For the past several years, the same caution that has led Israel to grant de facto immunity to Hezbollah forces in Lebanon has led to Israel's passivity and deference to the Obama administration in relation to Iran's nuclear program.

With regard to Iran's nuclear installations, the strategy of passivity has largely been forced onto an unwilling political leadership by Israel's military leaders.

For the past several years, the IDF's General Staff has refused to support the government's position on Iran's nuclear program.

Our military leaders have justified their insubordination by arguing that if Israel takes independent action against Iran's nuclear program it will undermine its bilateral relations with the US, which

they consider more important than preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.

Although under the best of circumstances the IDF's position would be unacceptable from the perspective of democratic norms of governance, since the ideologically driven Obama administration took power seven years ago, the military's position has imperiled the country.

So long as Obama – or the ideology that informs his actions – remains in power in Washington, US security guarantees towards Israel will have no credibility.

The IDF's assessment that ties to the US are more important than preventing Iran from becoming a nuclear power will remain incorrect, and dangerously so.

Today is Israel's opportunity to shape the future of the Middle East by not only preventing Iran from becoming a nuclear power, but by preventing a regional nuclear arms race.

The closer Iran comes to emerging as a nuclear power, the more Sunni regimes, including Islamic State, will seek their own nuclear capabilities. It goes without saying that the more regional actors have nuclear weapons, the more dangerous the region becomes for Israel, and indeed for the world as a whole.

Israel must not allow the risks of action to lure us into strategic paralysis that imperils our future.

The more Israel allows other actors to determine the nature of the emerging regional order, the less secure Israel will be. The more willing we are to take calculated risks today the greater our ability will be to influence the future architecture of regional power relations and so minimize threats to our survival in the decades to come.

To do this, Israel must not be held hostage to the delusional thinking of the IDF's General Staff. No more than America should be held hostage to Obama's delusional ideology.

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