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Article 1.

The Washington Post

President Obama's foreign policy paradox

Robert Kagan

Whether one likes President Obama's conduct of foreign policy or not, the common assumption is that the administration is at least giving the American people the foreign policy they want. The majority of Americans have opposed any meaningful U.S. role in Syria, have wanted to lessen U.S. involvement in the Middle East generally, are eager to see the "tide of war" recede and would like to focus on "nation-building at home." Until now, the president generally has catered to and encouraged this public mood, so one presumes that he has succeeded, if nothing else, in gaining the public's approval.

Yet, surprisingly, he hasn't. The president's approval ratings on foreign policy are dismal. According to the most recent CBS News poll, only 36 percent of Americans approve of the job Obama is doing on foreign policy, while 49 percent disapprove.

This was consistent with other polls over the past year. A November poll by the Pew Research Center showed 34 percent approval on foreign policy vs. 56 percent disapproval. The CBS poll showed a higher percentage of Americans approving of Obama's economic policies (39 percent) and a higher percentage approving his handling of health care (41 percent). Foreign policy is the most unpopular thing Obama is doing right now. And lest one think that foreign policy is never a winner, Bill Clinton's foreign policy ratings at roughly the same point in his second term were quite good — 57 percent approval; 34 percent disapproval — and Ronald Reagan's rating was more than 50 percent at a similar point in his presidency. That leaves Obama in the company of George W. Bush — not the first-term Bush whose ratings were consistently high but the second-term Bush mired in the worst phase of the Iraq war.

Nor are Obama's numbers on foreign policy simply being dragged down by his overall job approval ratings. The public is capable of drawing distinctions. When George H.W. Bush's overall approval ratings were tanking in the last year of his presidency, his ratings on economic policy led the downward trend, but his foreign policy ratings stayed above 50 percent. According to the CBS poll, Obama's overall approval rating is 40 percent, four points higher than his foreign policy rating.

So we return to the paradox: President Obama is supposedly conducting a foreign policy in tune with popular opinion, yet his foreign policy is not popular. What's the explanation? I await further investigation by pollsters, but until then I offer one hypothesis:

A majority of Americans may not want to intervene in Syria, do

anything serious about Iran or care what happens in Afghanistan, Iraq, Egypt or Ukraine. They may prefer a minimalist foreign policy in which the United States no longer plays a leading role in the world and leaves others to deal with their own miserable problems. They may want a more narrowly self-interested American policy. In short, they may want what Obama so far has been giving them. But they're not proud of it, and they're not grateful to him for giving them what they want.

For many decades Americans thought of their nation as special. They were the self-proclaimed "leader of the free world," the "indispensable nation," the No. 1 superpower. It was a source of pride. Now, pundits and prognosticators are telling them that those days are over, that it is time for the United States to seek more modest goals commensurate with its declining power. And they have a president committed to this task. He has shown little nostalgia for the days of U.S. leadership and at times seems to conceive it as his job to deal with the "reality" of decline.

Perhaps this is what they want from him. But it is not something they will thank him for. To follow a leader to triumph inspires loyalty, gratitude and affection. Following a leader in retreat inspires no such emotions.

Presidents are not always rewarded for doing what the public says it wants. Sometimes they are rewarded for doing just the opposite. Bill Clinton enjoyed higher approval ratings after intervening in Bosnia and Kosovo, even though majorities of Americans had opposed both interventions before he launched them. Who knows what the public might have thought of Obama had he gone through with his planned attack on Syria last August? As Col. Henry Stimson observed, until a president

leads, he can't expect the people to "voluntarily take the initiative in letting him know whether or not they would follow him if he did take the lead." Obama's speech in Europe Wednesday shows that he may understand that the time has come to offer leadership. Whether or not he does in his remaining time in office, perhaps his would-be successors can take note.

Robert Kagan is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. He writes a monthly foreign affairs column for The Post.

[Article 2.](#)

The Christian Science Monitor

Europe beware: Isolating Russia will turn it into Hitler's Germany

[Jacques Attali](#)

March 25, 2014 -- Sometimes, I ask myself whether it is possible to be right, though it means dismissing everybody else's opinion. Or must one surrender to the idea that unanimity should prevail? In light of what is happening at the moment in Ukraine, I feel reinforced in my initial intuition: It is crazy for the West to turn the Crimean problem into an opportunity for confrontation with Russia.

To embark on such a path is not in Europe's interest. On the contrary, we should be doing everything possible to ensure that our important eastern neighbor is integrated with Europe and not isolated from it.

Future historians will find it rather hard to understand why we have embarked on an escalation with Russia that has potentially terrifying consequences in order to oppose a majority vote from a Russian-speaking province, part of Russia for centuries, attached in 1954 to another province of the Soviet Union on the whim of the secretary general of the Communist Party at the time, Nikita Khrushchev. Moreover, this was an inclusion never fully acknowledged by the majority of the Crimean population, who have always wanted to maintain their autonomy vis-à-vis the government in Kiev, as further affirmed by the Ukrainian constitution of 1992.

Crimea and Russia chose to use the chaos born of the arrival in Kiev of a strongly anti-Russian government to reunite. Why does it bother us? Why should the Crimean population be denied the will to choose their destiny against the view of the country of which they are a member? After all, aren't we preparing to allow the Scots to vote on exactly the same issue in Great Britain? Don't the Catalans intend to do likewise in Spain? Will there be protests against "the taking away of the territory of Great Britain" if the Scots choose independence?

And what will happen if Moldova, Belarus, or the Russian-speaking part of Kazakhstan ask to become attached to Russia? We will interfere? On what grounds? In the name of stability of the idea of nationhood? What about Czechoslovakia splitting up into the Czech Republic and Slovakia? Didn't we support it

when provinces broke away in Yugoslavia? Iraqi Kurdistan? Gaza? Would anyone object if Quebec chose independence? What would happen if Wallonia were to asked to join France?

Clearly, when a minority does not feel protected against the excesses of a majority, it has the right to regain ownership of its destiny. It is the duty of the majority to allow this.

Then what are we doing? What do we have to fear from Crimea returning to Russia? That Russia calls the Russian-speaking part of the Baltic states part of Russia and thus a prime target for annexation? Come on! These countries are in the European Union and in NATO! Therefore, they have nothing to fear.

All this brings to mind old history. The West actually believes it will not make the same mistake that was made with the annexation of the Sudetenland in 1938 by Adolf Hitler under the pretext that in this region of Czechoslovakia the majority of the inhabitants were of German race.

Remorse certainly is quite praiseworthy. But it is too late to rewrite history.

The situation before us today is not analogous to 1938, but rather to 1919.

If there is something to remember, it is what the attempts to humiliate and isolate Germany after the First World War led to: the Germany of the Weimar Republic and the tragic Treaty of Versailles that led to Hitler's rise to power.

Aside from the creation of the European Bank for Development and Reconstruction in 1991, and the G-8 in 1992 – both at the initiative of France – nothing has been done since the collapse

of the Soviet Union to bring Russia closer to Europe and join a common area of the rule of law. If Russia has never been candidate for membership in the European Union, one does not have to be a genius to see that if an offer had been made, or at least a proposition to join European Free Trade Association or what was left of it, it would have been accepted, to the greatest benefit of Western Europe.

Today's ongoing confrontation will get us nowhere at best. At worst, it will invite a repeat of history when a series of absurd events resulted in the outbreak of world war.

Therefore, the planned summit between the European Union and Russia should not have been canceled. Russia should not be excluded from the G-8. We should not be trading tit-for-tat sanctions.

Instead, everything needs to be done to persuade the Russians that they have everything to gain by coming closer to the European Union. By offering them to build a vast single constitutional and legal area, where the Crimean issue would become insignificant. And to get started, we should propose to Ukraine – provided it remains what it is – a bridge between the two Europes, for each other's greatest benefit.

Jacques Attali is a former advisor to French President Francois Mitterrand and was founding president of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

CNN

Why the Saudis unfriended the U.S.

Peter Bergen

March 26, 2014 -- The world's most powerful democracy and the world's most absolute monarchy have long been close, if unlikely, allies.

They are bound together by common interests -- the free flow of oil and, more recently, fighting al Qaeda.

That alliance was first sealed between President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Saudi King Adul Aziz on February 14, 1945, when they met on the deck of the USS Quincy as the American warship cruised in the Suez Canal.

FDR and his advisors knew that oil, of which Saudi Arabia was well endowed, was a key component of America's economy. Indeed, Standard Oil of California had signed a farsighted deal a decade earlier giving it exclusive production rights in Saudi Arabia.

Thomas Lippman, who has written authoritatively on U.S.-Saudi relations, writes that as result of the meeting on the Quincy, the American president gave the Saudi king a DC-3 airplane that was specially outfitted with a rotating throne that allowed the king always to face the holy site of Mecca while he was in the air.

For his part, King Abdul Aziz so enjoyed his meals as the president's guest on board the Quincy that he surprised his host with an unusual demand: he wanted to take the Quincy's cook for himself. FDR was able to diplomatically ward off this request. (The concept that human beings are not personal property came to the Saudi kingdom relatively late; slavery was only abolished there in 1962.)

For more than six decades after that important meeting on the Quincy the Saudi-American relationship has largely worked well for both countries. Saudi Arabia is the world's largest oil producer and sits on around a fifth of the world's proven oil reserves and therefore it can set oil prices by increasing or lowering oil production. Generally it has done so in ways that respect American interests.

When the Saudis really needed the States following Saddam Hussein's 1990 invasion of their neighbor Kuwait, the United States sent a half a million troops to the Gulf to expel Saddam's forces.

The news that 15 of the 19 9/11 hijackers were Saudis certainly put something of a dent in the U.S.-Saudi alliance, but the George W. Bush administration had close ties to the Saudis and matters were soon smoothed over, particularly after 2003 when al Qaeda began staging attacks on Westerners and oil facilities in the Saudi kingdom, at which point the Saudis launched an effective crackdown on the group.

Controversy stirs anew over Saudi textbooks with Obama set to visit

Yet today, the Saudi-American alliance has never been in worse

shape.

That is why on Friday President Barack Obama will meet with Saudi King Abdullah, one of the sons of King Abdul Aziz, in an attempt to patch things up.

What went wrong? In recent months the normally hyper-discreet Saudis have gone on the record about their dissatisfactions with the Obama administration.

In December, Prince Turki al-Faisal, the former Saudi intelligence chief and ambassador to Washington, took the highly unusual step of publicly criticizing the administration, "We've seen several red lines put forward by the president, which went along and became pinkish as time grew, and eventually ended up completely white...When that kind of assurance comes from a leader of a country like the United States, we expect him to stand by it."

It's inconceivable that Prince Turki, whose brother is the Saudi foreign minister, would make these public comments without approval from the highest levels of the Saudi government.

Why are the Saudis going public with their dissatisfaction with the Obama administration? The laundry list of Saudi complaints most recently is that the United States didn't make good on its "red line" threat to take action against the Bashar al Assad regime in Syria following its use of chemical weapons against its own population.

Syria is a close ally of Saudi Arabia's archrival, Iran, and the Saudis are also growing apprehensive that the United States will not take a firm line on Iran's nuclear program -- which the

Saudis see as an almost-existential threat -- now that the U.S.-Iranian relations have recently thawed.

The Saudi were also puzzled by the fact that the Obama administration seemed willing to let a longtime U.S. ally, Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak, be thrown overboard during the "Arab Spring" of early 2011. What did that say about other longtime U.S. allies in the region?

(Interestingly, these list of gripes look quite similar to those of another powerful player in the Middle East -- Israel.)

Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, the powerful Saudi Minister of Interior, was in Washington last month. According to a senior Saudi official his discussions in Washington ahead of Obama's trip were all about Syria.

Here Washington and Riyadh have a real common interest; preventing the rise of al Qaeda in Syria.

Saudi Arabia made it a crime last month for its citizens to travel to fight in overseas conflicts such as the Syrian civil war. Those Saudis who have gone to fight in Syria often join al-Qaeda-aligned groups.

Some 1,200 Saudis have traveled to Syria, of whom 220 have returned to the kingdom, according to the senior Saudi official. There is great concern in the kingdom about potential "blowback" caused by such militants who have obtained battlefield experience in Syria.

Both the United States and Saudi Arabia have an interest in blocking al Qaeda's growth in Syria and that is certainly a good building block for the discussions that Obama and King

Abdullah will have on Friday.

Peter Bergen is CNN's national security analyst, a director at the New America Foundation and the author of "Manhunt: The Ten-Year Search for bin Laden -- From 9/11 to Abbottabad."

Article 4.

Mosaic

What his actions in Eastern Europe tell us about how Vladimir Putin sees the Middle East

Michael Doran

Does the Ukraine crisis mark the beginning of a new cold war? The answer from President Obama is a firm no. "The United States does not view Europe as a battleground between East and West, nor do we see the situation in Ukraine as a zero-sum game. That's the kind of thinking that should have ended with the cold war," he told a Dutch newspaper. The president is partially correct. Unlike the Soviet Union, Russia has neither the intention nor the capability to challenge the entire European order, and it is certainly not mounting a global revolutionary movement. Nevertheless, it is a revanchist power, and its appetites are much larger than the president cares to admit.

That Russian President Vladimir Putin sees Ukraine as a zero-

sum game seems obvious. Somewhat less apparent is the fact that his revisionist aspirations also extend elsewhere, and most saliently to the Middle East. Obama's first-term effort to "reset" relations with Russia was rooted in the firm conviction that the main cause of Russian-American competition in the Middle East lay in the previous Bush administration's war on terror, which was read by the Russian leader as a pretext for a global power grab. Bush's freedom agenda, with its support for democratic reform inside Russia, only confirmed Putin's worst suspicions. Alienating Putin, the Obama White House believed, had been a strategic blunder, depriving the United States of a potentially valuable partner. Putin, whatever his faults, was a realist: someone who could cut a deal in situations—like those in the Middle East—where Russia and America shared many interests. Once Putin fully grasped our sincerity, demonstrated by our ending the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Russian fears of American aggressiveness would dissipate and Russian-American cooperation would blossom. Unfortunately, getting through to Putin proved harder and took longer than expected—though not for want of trying. Famously, during the 2012 American presidential campaign, an open microphone caught Obama making his pitch. "This is my last election. After my election I have more flexibility," he told then-Russian President Dimitry Medvedev. "I understand," Medvedev answered. "I will transmit this information to Vladimir."

Eventually, Putin did seem to grasp the concept. When Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stepped forward last September with an offer to strip Syria's Bashar al-Assad of his chemical weapons, Obama saw the move as a breakthrough, precisely the kind of mutually beneficial arrangement that the Russian reset was designed to generate. Soon, working together on the

chemical-weapons problem, Secretary of State John Kerry and Lavrov also conspired to launch Geneva II, a peace conference designed to find a diplomatic solution to the Syrian civil war. In the dawning new era, Syria was seen by the White House as a prototype: a model for stabilizing the Middle East and containing its worst pathologies. If successful, it could be applied to other problems in the region—including the Iranian nuclear program, the greatest challenge of all. In his speech at the General Assembly last September, the president was eager to defend his friendship with Putin in just these terms. “[L]et’s remember this is not a zero-sum endeavor,” Obama reminded his critics. “We’re no longer in a cold war.” Today, just six months later, the new model is collapsing before our eyes. The proximate cause is the spillover from the Ukraine crisis. On March 19, Russia’s Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov warned that if the West imposed sanctions over the annexation of Crimea, Russia would retaliate by exacting a much greater price: it would throw its support to Iran in the nuclear talks. “The historic importance of what happened . . . regarding the restoration of historical justice and reunification of Crimea with Russia,” Ryabkov explained, “is incomparable to what we are dealing with in the Iranian issue.”

Even before Ryabkov issued this extortionate threat, there were clear signs that the Kremlin never truly supported the new model of Middle East cooperation. Kerry and Lavrov did convene Geneva II in January, but the conference ended in abject failure thanks to the intransigence of the Assad regime—which after all is Russia’s client. Shortly thereafter, Kerry openly blamed Russia for the Syrian disaster. “Russia needs to be a part of the solution,” he complained, “not contributing so many more

weapons and so much more aid that they are really enabling Assad to double down.”

In the Middle East as in Eastern Europe, then, the reset looks increasingly bankrupt. In fact, being based on two major errors, it never had a chance. The administration’s first error was the failure to appreciate Putin’s either-or perspective on politics, a viewpoint succinctly expressed in Lenin’s famous formula: “who-whom?” Who will dominate whom? In Putin’s view, all accommodations with the United States are tactical maneuvers in a struggle—sometimes overt, sometimes covert—for the upper hand. In the bad old days of the cold war, the overtly malevolent intentions of the Kremlin were hard to misread (although, even then, some American leaders did try to misread them). Today, Russia’s motivations are more complex: a unique mix of Great Russian nationalism, crony capitalism, and autocratic whimsy. This makes it difficult to predict the Kremlin’s behavior. For 364 days of the year, a deal between a Western client and Gazprom, the largest Russian natural-gas supplier, will function like a normal business transaction. On the 365th day, to teach the recipient a lesson about who’s really in charge, Putin will cut the gas flow. Adding to the unpredictability is Putin’s mercurial-seeming personality. Perhaps the single most revealing fact about him is his interest in Sambo, a Russian form of judo whose techniques have been deliberately tailored to the requirements of each state security service. “Judo teaches self-control, the ability to feel the moment, to see the opponent’s strengths and weaknesses,” Putin writes in his official biography [on the Kremlin website](#). “I am sure you will agree that these are essential abilities and skills for any politician.” As a former KGB agent and judo black belt,

Putin is undoubtedly adept at the deceptive move that turns an ordinary handshake into a crippling wristlock, instantly driving the adversary's head to the ground.

Turning a blind eye to such niceties, Western politicians assumed that by enmeshing Putin in a web of diplomatic and economic deals, they would foster in Moscow a sense of shared destiny that would ultimately work to moderate Russian behavior. As the Ukraine crisis demonstrates, the web has indeed created mutual dependencies. But the crisis also reveals that the two sides do not approach dependency in a spirit of reciprocity. When shaking hands on a deal, Putin never fails to assess whether he has positioned himself for a speedy takedown of his partner.

The Sambo approach to diplomacy is particularly suited to the Middle East, where international relations, more often than not, is a zero-sum game dominated by brutal men with guns. This is Putin's natural habitat; as prime minister in 1999, he supported the Russian military's use of ballistic missiles against civilians in Grozny. It is a simple truism that a leader habitually photographed shirtless while performing feats of derring-do will understand the politics of the Middle East better than sophisticated Westerners who believe that the world has evolved beyond crude displays of machismo. Lack of attention to the perfect fit between Putin's mentality and Middle East reality constitutes the second error of the administration's Russian reset. With respect to political alignments, the most influential event in today's Middle East is the Syrian civil war. That the conflict is barbarous is easily gleaned from a slogan of the pro-Assad forces, scrawled on buildings in all major cities: "Assad, or we will burn the country." This demand has divided the entire

region into two groups. On one side stand the allies of America: the Saudis, Turks, and other Sunni Muslim states, all of whom agree that, come what may, Assad must go. On the other side, the Iranians, together with Hizballah, have lined up squarely behind Assad, their partner in the so-called Resistance Alliance.

For Putin, Syria has raised two key questions, each a variant of who-whom: (1) who will dominate inside Syria; (2) who will dominate in the region more broadly. It was Foreign Minister Lavrov who two years ago, in a rare slip of the tongue, best explained how Putin saw these questions: “if the current Syrian regime collapses, some countries in the region will want to establish Sunni rule in Syria.” More bluntly, the Kremlin sees itself as the great-power patron not just of the Assad regime but also of Iran and Hizballah—the entire Resistance Alliance. At the time, Moscow’s unvarnished preference for Shiites won little attention in the United States, but it sparked a storm of outrage in the Sunni Arab world, leading one prominent Saudi commentator to dub the foreign minister “Mullah Lavrov.” Not surprisingly, Putin’s position was in perfect keeping with one of the most fundamental rules of strategy, perhaps best expressed by Machiavelli: “A prince is . . . esteemed when he is a true friend and a true enemy, that is, when without any hesitation he discloses himself in support of someone against another.” In the Middle East, Machiavelli’s logic is inescapable, and Putin grasps it intuitively. Not so Obama, who has convinced himself that he can hover above the gritty game on the ground yet somehow still remain an influential player. In Syria, the United States criticizes Assad harshly and says it sympathizes with the opposition. But it releases only dribs and drabs of military aid to opposition forces while simultaneously

qualifying and hedging its diplomatic support. Fretting incessantly about the Sunni jihadist elements fighting the Assad regime, it develops no strategy to combat them; instead, it cozies up to Assad's Russian and Iranian patrons. When the Sunni allies of the United States compare the confusion of American policy with the clarity of Russian strategy, it's no wonder they despair.

Obama is not entirely oblivious of the problem. In a recent interview, the journalist Jeffrey Goldberg asked him bluntly, "So why are the Sunnis so nervous about you?" His answer: "[T]here are shifts that are taking place in the region that have caught a lot of them off-guard. I think change is always scary. I think there was a comfort with a United States that was comfortable with an existing order and the existing alignments, and was an implacable foe of Iran." This exercise in condescension, while doing nothing to allay and everything to aggravate the fears of America's allies, offers a glimpse into the mindset that generated the reset, a mindset that dreamed of a concert arrangement whereby both Russia and America would place a greater value on comity with each other than either would put on its relations with allies.

To be sure, Putin will gladly sign on to American-sponsored initiatives like Geneva II. But he will insist on guiding them in directions that, regardless of their stated intentions, serve the interests of his clients. If the Obama administration has yet to admit or adjust to this reality, that is partly because the Russians do not wave a flag identifying themselves as the great-power patrons of Iran, Syria, and Hizballah. Nor does Putin back Tehran and Damascus to the hilt as the Soviet Union backed its clients in the cold war.

It is thus more accurate to say that Russia in an alignment, not an alliance, with Iran and Syria. Depending upon competing priorities and the vicissitudes of world politics, Putin will tack this way today, that way tomorrow. In the end, however, he will never sell out Tehran and Damascus in order to win compliments in Washington; if forced to choose, he will always side with the former against the latter, and will certainly leave them in no doubt that Russia is their most dependable friend in the United Nations Security Council.

It is this fact that makes Russia a revisionist power in the Middle East and the permanent adversary of the United States.

What, then, about the Iranian nuclear question? Hasn't Russia consistently called for preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon? Didn't it vote in favor of six Security Council resolutions against Tehran? Hasn't it signed on to the economic sanctions? Surely all of these actions support the Obama administration's contention that Russia, in certain contexts, is a valuable partner.

Indeed, Putin has a strong track record of supporting some actions designed to prevent an Iranian bomb; in an ideal world, he would probably prefer an Iran devoid of such weapons. But he also has a strong track record of building the Iranian nuclear program and of providing security assistance to the Iranian military. Whatever his preferences in an ideal world, in the here and now his goal is less to stop Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon than to garner as much power and influence for Russia as he can. He is supportive enough of the United States and its key European partners to maintain credibility with them. On the key issue of stopping Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon, he

is never so supportive as to be taken for granted.

How this cynical game works was revealed in Deputy Foreign Minister Ryabkov's extortionate threat mentioned earlier. It has placed Obama on the horns of a severe dilemma. If, on the one hand, the president simply acquiesces in Putin's power play in Ukraine, he will embolden not just Russia but also Iran, Syria, and Hizballah by demonstrating that, just as in Syria, he retreats when challenged. If, on the other hand, he marshals a robust Western response, he could well provoke the threatened Russian countermeasures of increased support for Iran.

No matter which course the president follows, the Ukraine crisis has damaged the prestige of the United States in the Middle East. America's Arab friends in the region, who are on the front line against Iran, Syria, and Hizballah, already feel the pinch, and are deeply uncertain about how to respond. Unlike the Resistance Alliance, they are not accustomed to cooperating on their own. As Karl Marx notoriously said of peasants, America's Arab allies are like potatoes. When U.S. leadership provides a sack, they take on a single form and become hefty in weight. In its absence, they are a loose assortment of small, isolated units.

The ally who most immediately feels the fallout is Israel. On March 17, Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon described, with unusual bluntness, the consequences of what he called the "febleness" of American foreign policy. The Obama administration's weakness, he argued, was undermining the position not just of Israel but also of America's Sunni allies. "The moderate Sunni camp in the area expected the United States to support it, and to be firm, like Russia's support for the Shiite axis," Yaalon lamented.

Yaalon spoke no less despairingly of Obama's ability to make good on his pledge to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. "[A]t some stage," he observed, "the United States entered into negotiations with them, and unhappily, when it comes to negotiating at a Persian bazaar, the Iranians were better." On the matter of Iran, Yaalon concluded, inevitably, "we have to behave as though we have nobody to look out for us but ourselves."

Whether Israel actually has the political will and military capability to launch an independent strike against Iran is anybody's guess. But two facts are undeniable. First, Putin's muscular foreign policy and Washington's timorous response have increased the pressure on Israel to strike independently. Second, Obama has lost influence over the Israelis—just as he lost influence over his Arab allies when he refused to back them on Syria.

Adrift in Machiavelli's no man's land, neither a true friend nor a true enemy, Washington is left with the worst of both worlds, treated by its adversaries with contempt, charged by its friends with abandonment and betrayal. President Obama was correct to say at the UN that the U.S. and Russia are no longer locked in a cold war. But it was a strategic delusion to assume that Putin's handshake was an offer of partnership. It was instead the opening gambit in a new style of global competition—one that, in the Middle East, Russia and its clients are winning and the United States, despite huge natural advantages, is losing.

Michael Doran, a senior fellow of the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, is a former deputy

assistant secretary of defense and a former senior director of the National Security Council in the George W. Bush administration. He is finishing a book on Eisenhower and the Middle East.

Article 5.

Foreign Policy

Five ways to tell the Middle East peace process is in big trouble

Aaron David Miller

March 26, 2014 -- I am still betting that U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry will be able to come up with some fix that will get Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu over the April 29 deadline for a framework accord and into the great beyond of yet more negotiations. But I must say, the signs don't look good for meaningful progress, let alone breakthroughs. Having been around the block on this issue more than a few times, I detect an all-too-familiar whiff of desperation in the air. And the signs of distress seem to abound, particularly as Kerry unexpectedly flew off to see Abbas in Amman, Jordan, on March 26, after having just seen him in Washington last week. Here are the top five reasons you know the peace process is in trouble:

1. Jonathan Pollard's name comes up.

This is a peace process perennial. And when it sprouts up, look

out. In 1998, in an effort to reach an interim agreement between Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister pushed what has become a standard request since 1985 -- release Jonathan Pollard. From Israel's point of view -- and as illogical and objectionable as it may sound to an American -- the imprisoned spy who was convicted for spying on the United States is like a soldier left on the battlefield. Israel is obligated to get him back. The presumption is that releasing him would afford this prime minister a political coup at home and make it easier to permit him to swallow some peace-related issue. At the 1998 Wye River summit, CIA Director George Tenet threatened to resign when President Bill Clinton seemed inclined to consider the request. Current CIA Director John Brennan may well have the same reaction. Nothing demonstrates how far afield we've come and how shaky this peace process is when you start mixing Pollard apples with peace process oranges. It's a sure sign that the focus has shifted to the wrong set of issues driven by the wrong set of motives.

2. Releasing Palestinian prisoners becomes the key to the process.

This is another issue that has served over the years as a confidence destroyer rather than a confidence enhancer. And it demonstrates the level of mistrust and suspicion that exists between the two sides. The deal that was apparently cut nine months ago -- Israel would release 104 prisoners in phases, and the Palestinians would defer their campaign to take the statehood issue to the United Nations -- was always a devil's bargain. The Palestinians believe Israel shouldn't be imprisoning their people to begin with, while Israel believes Palestinians shouldn't be going to the U.N. in the first place. So it's not as if

these deliverables are terribly meaningful confidence builders. Indeed, on the issue of prisoners they are guaranteed to raise tensions, not lower them. Every release -- accompanied as it is by jubilation on one side, grief and anger on the other -- only divides the two camps. And it places both Netanyahu and Abbas in a much tougher position. Indeed, the chief Palestinian negotiator, Saeb Erekat, made clear when he was in Washington that Palestinian credibility is now on the line. If Israel doesn't go ahead with the release this week or next, how can Palestinians believe that the Israelis will make good on delivering any of the core issues? Meanwhile, Israelis insist that there was nothing automatic about the deal. Unless negotiations were progressing, they weren't obligated to release prisoners. Bottom line: If this process were working the way it should, the focus wouldn't be on prisoners or Pollard, but on the substance of a deal on borders, Jerusalem, etc.

3. Obama tells Jeffrey Goldberg what he really thinks.

The Obama-Netanyahu relationship has always been something of a soap opera. The U.S. president thinks the prime minister is a con man; the prime minister thinks the president is bloodless when it comes to really understanding Israel's fears. In a functional peace process, Barack Obama would never feel the need -- and on the eve of a meeting with his Israeli counterpart -- to vent his frustrations with Israel's policies and lay down markers of what's likely to happen to Israel if the peace process collapses. That interview, with Bloomberg View columnist Jeffrey Goldberg, really does reflect how Obama feels on matters such as settlement activity, and it strongly suggests that, if Obama had thecojones, he'd slam dunk the Israelis. But he won't or can't for any number of reasons. So the next best option

is to vent indirectly. Whether or not these kinds of tactics work (and most often they don't), they reflect a serious problem in the way the president and the prime minister understand their respective needs. Indeed, the real problem isn't just the lack of trust between Bibi and Abbas; it's the absence of real confidence between Bibi and Obama. From Carter to Begin, Bush to Shamir -- to use the word of choice these days -- all had issues. But they also managed to work together and actually produce something serious.

4. Kerry's doing too much heavy lifting.

Kerry has been relentless in his pursuit of some kind of breakthrough. Is there a doubt in anyone's mind that, without him, there wouldn't even be peace process vapors? But U.S. will is necessary yet not sufficient. After almost nine months, the very real question arises: Whose peace process is this? Do Abbas and Netanyahu own it? If so, are they willing to make the hard choices on the core issues without having to be scolded or chased after by a U.S. secretary of state? If the answer to this question were yes, we wouldn't be following this particular logic chain to a potentially unhappy end. To get an agreement on Jerusalem, security, borders, refugees, and recognition of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people, you need real urgency -- and that's driven by both pain and gain. Right now there's not enough of either.

5. The missing piece isn't even being discussed.

There's only one fight worth having with Israelis and Palestinians. And that's over the terms of a final deal. Forget Pollard, prisoners, even settlements. Making that kind of effort

depends on getting to a point where the gaps on the core issues are capable of being bridged or reaching the conclusion that laying out a U.S. plan on these issues would have a positive impact. Right now, neither are ready for prime time. Whether they will ever be, given the current cast of characters and their priorities -- including Obama's -- is very much an open question. So in the absence of shutting down the whole effort, the administration is trying to keep it alive.

My own view is that the chances of doing that, i.e., getting past the April deadline without a major shutdown, are pretty good. Nobody wants to be fingered with the collapse of the process; nobody wants to face the consequences of being exposed to violence, boycott, or some other calamity; and nobody in Washington wants to admit that a foreign-policy initiative that the administration had made such a priority has failed. So without much direction but full of purpose and an ennobling spirit, to quote F. Scott Fitzgerald, "we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."

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Article 6.

Spiegel

Naftali Bennett: The Man Who Could Stop the Peace Process

Julia Amalia Heyer

26 march, 2014 -- The man who wants to test his power against Prime Minister Benajmin Netanyahu, Israel's popular "King Bibi," works in a surprisingly understated, tube-shaped office with three telephones ringing off the hook. The only thing that stands out is a picture on the wall. Covered in glass, it shows an embroidered figure of a woman wearing an apron dress.

Economics Minister Naftali Bennett, 42, is keen to show that he doesn't hold much regard for the daily grind of political life and that if it weren't for the azure silhouette of his great aunt Zila embroidered in yarn, he might instead still be enjoying his success as an entrepreneur in the coastal city of Raanana. His mother's cousin was Russian and shared the fate of most members of Bennett's family -- who were murdered by Stalin's henchmen because of their Jewish heritage. Her embroidered likeness hanging behind his desk is a daily reminder and incentive for Bennett to make sure it is a fate that his own children never share.

Great Aunt Zila is also part of the reason Bennett, who sees himself as a businessman through and through, has now become a politician. A booming software business in Israel and the United States no longer contented him after a life-changing deployment in the 2006 Lebanon war. At the time, he had just become a first-time father and asked himself, "What is it that

these Hezbollah guys actually want?" In Lebanon, he says he learned "they all still have a single goal in mind -- to kill us."

A Singular Mission

Since then, Bennett has had an almost singular mission. When he describes it, he sounds neither quixotic nor pathetic. His voice instead betrays his deep determination to get the job done. "My task is to keep Judaism alive, to make it stronger and to fight its enemies," the economics minister says, adding that he will dedicate his "life to Israel's survival."

As part of his mission, though, he now risks a major rift within Israel's coalition government. The Israeli daily Haaretz recently wrote that the politician is currently doing more to determine the country's fate than any other.

The former businessman is the head of the nationalist-religious Jewish Home, a party that promotes settlement policies, and one of the most vocal opponents of any development even remotely connected to the "peace process". Since US Secretary of State John Kerry convinced the Israelis and Palestinians to begin negotiating with each other again, Bennett has been sparring with anyone who endorses the talks.

Among those he has taken to task are Prime Minister Netanyahu, whom he accuses of weakness. But he has also targeted a man who used to be an ally, Foreign Minister Avigdor Liberman, who in an unexpected bout of grandiosity, expressly praised Kerry's efforts. Meanwhile, the alliance with Finance Minister Jair Lapid, the former cabinet star and a man Bennett has referred to as his "brother," has also come undone as a result of seemingly irreconcilable views about the peace process.

It is difficult to see how the Israeli political process could become this polarized considering the relative dearth of recent developments.

The talks moderated by Kerry already mark the 10th attempt to negotiate a peaceful coexistence between the Israelis and the Palestinians. And there hasn't been anything that could be described as direct talks since December. Both sides are currently only speaking to Kerry or the chief American negotiator Martin Indyk.

A decision is expected this week on whether even these mini-talks should be discontinued as well. If Israel doesn't release the final group of Palestinian prisoners by this Saturday, the Palestinians say they will withdraw. The release of 104 Palestinians who were arrested prior to 1993's Oslo Accords was a condition for the resumption of negotiations -- a provision Netanyahu agreed to under pressure from the United States.

Bennett, however, is insisting that the prisoners stay behind bars. "We aren't going to allow murderers and terrorists to walk again," he says, speaking in his office. He's also threatening to allow the government to collapse over the issue.

The minister complains that the world is treating Israel unfairly. He says that if the international community continues to raise pressure on his country over the Jewish settlements in the West Bank, over the Palestinian prisoners and over the still to be negotiated withdrawal of Israeli soldiers from a future Palestinian state, he is convinced it will be picking on the wrong side.

'You Can't Occupy Your Own Land'

Bennett doesn't even attempt to cloak his intransigent position in the language of diplomacy. Referring to the Palestinian West Bank by its biblical name, Bennett says "the Jewish heartland, Judea and Samaria," can never be ceded to "the enemies, the Arabs". He says the land has belonged to the Jews for more than 3,000 years and that those who speak of an Israeli occupying force do not understand history. "You can't occupy your own land," Bennett says, with audible contempt for anyone who doesn't share his view.

The party boss and his followers are fundamentally opposed to any kind of agreement with the Palestinians. Bennett says that compromise would be "suicide". His answer to the problem? "We have to remain strong."

Jewish Home is the third strongest party in Israel's government coalition, and whenever Netanyahu offers ideas on a future, peaceful coexistence of two sovereign states that are more concrete than Bennett and his supporters are prepared to handle, it doesn't take long before the prime minister hears the scorn of his former chief of staff.

Although Bennett has since built up a large support base, determined opponents of the peace process can also be found within Netanyahu's Likud party.

Bennett, though, is the first to have succeeded in anchoring nationalist-religious ideology in core government ministries. His views have broad support in a Netanyahu cabinet in which nearly half the ministers live on the other side of the Green Line -- meaning in Palestinian territories.

"I know that my opinion isn't very popular abroad," says

Bennett, but he doesn't want to bend either, given that voter support came as a result of his positions.

Naftali Bennett's advantage is that he has never come across as the kind of rabid politician blinded by ideology who might seem more intent to blow up the Temple Mount together with the Dome of the Rock and the Al Aqsa Mosque than to seek peace. Instead, when you talk to him, he comes across as funny, entertaining and quick-witted.

Bennett Has Time on His Side

He's also well-aware that time is on his side. Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics has calculated that 2013 was a record year for the settlements movement. Foundation stones were laid for more than twice as many Jewish buildings located on Palestinian territory than in 2012.

Of course, there's another man who is partly responsible for that trend -- settlements leader Uri Ariel, whose day job, conveniently, is that of being Israel's Housing Minister. In his capacity as a private citizen, Ariel is known for organizing mass prayer sessions against peace negotiations at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. The Knesset recently added a provision to the constitution at the initiative of Jewish Home stipulating that any future agreement with the Palestinians would have to be approved in a nationwide referendum.

Bennett says that the Jewish people are his greatest allies, and polls back that up. Three-quarters of Israelis surveyed share his view that the Palestinians are "not partners for peace;" 86 percent reject the release of further prisoners. Two-thirds of Israelis still say they believe in a two-state solution, but almost

the same number oppose withdrawal from the West Bank.

For his part, Bennett feels that Israel's current unyielding position is a service to the country he has provided. He may not be running the show, but he is certainly setting the agenda for parts of it. He argues that Netanyahu doesn't have free hand to just anything Kerry wants, because "I've also got a hand on the steering wheel."

As long as he has a say, Bennett insists he will never permit the existence of a Palestinian West Bank under international control -- not through a NATO force and most certainly not through a United Nations contingent. He says history has taught him that Israel and Israel alone must ensure its security. "We've had bad luck anytime we have relied on anyone else," he says.