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The National Interest

Diplomacy Redux: Kerry's Opportunity, Obama's Test

[Lincoln P. Bloomfield Jr.](#)

November 5, 2013 -- Since he succeeded Hillary Clinton last February as the country's sixty-eighth secretary of state, John Kerry has quickly built on relationships forged with foreign leaders during his Senate years to position diplomacy as the principal tool in addressing some of the most

consequential international security challenges currently facing the United States.

It is a big change. While Mrs. Clinton earned plaudits for her tireless travels, the sixty-seventh secretary will be remembered more for talking about diplomacy's importance than for actually using it to great effect. By contrast Mr. Kerry's legacy as Secretary of State is already sure to be defined by the success or failure of major U.S. diplomatic initiatives to secure compromises from parties to the Middle East's most deep-rooted conflicts.

Three simultaneous negotiations now offer the prospect of achieving strategically important objectives: one to produce an Israeli-Palestinian two-state solution; another to rid Syria of its chemical-weapons arsenal; and the third to achieve an accord with Iran under which Tehran would forego developing nuclear weapons.

If Diplomacy Succeeds

The opportunity is hard to overstate. Officially ending sixty-five years of Palestinian grievance while according Israel universally-recognized borders—issues which, whatever one's views, have soured Arab attitudes toward the US and complicated US-Israel relations for generations—would fulfill the declared but unmet policy aspiration of every American president since Truman. Eliminating a large chemical-weapons arsenal that has been used repeatedly despite international prohibitions would restore the crucial deterrent effect of the Chemical Weapons Convention, undermined by the Syrian regime's lethal chemical munitions attacks on its own civilian neighborhoods.

Above all, reliably halting Iran's nuclear weapons quest without resort to military force would not only make good on the 'reddest' of President Obama's much-remarked 'red lines,' it would forestall a Persian-Arab nuclear arms race astride the oil-rich Persian Gulf, a scenario made all the more combustible by Sunni-Shia sectarian strife and Israel's unpredictable response to proliferating nuclear threats in its midst.

President Obama has much riding on the outcome of these negotiations. Not only has he staked the credibility of his office on redressing the nuclear and chemical weapons threats posed by Iran and Syria, respectively, but he has courted increased strategic risk in precipitously withdrawing forces from Iraq and (soon) Afghanistan and exhibiting only

perfunctory concern over large defense sector cutbacks imposed by sequestration. Achieving significant security benefits through negotiation, while not necessarily compensating for these risks, would enhance U.S. influence at a time when [many in the world are questioning America's political and economic vitality](#) and its appetite for continued global leadership.

One could envision the President, with Middle East successes in hand, making high diplomacy a more meaningful dimension of the Asia “pivot,” seeking to defuse escalating tensions between China and its neighbors by mediating conflicting territorial claims—as Secretary Kerry proposed in his recent Asia travels—and probing North Korea’s Kim Jong-Un for more reliable undertakings than his father and grandfather ever produced. Recognition is widespread that the U.S. has over-relied on ‘hard power’ in recent years, and civilian policy tools—not having demonstrated comparable potency since perhaps the 1995 Dayton Agreement that ended hostilities in Bosnia—have lost stature and credibility compared to the military. Congressional funding has reflected the belief that DoD, alone among cabinet departments, has the wherewithal to generate game-changing impact on security challenges overseas. A demonstration that geopolitical dealmaking is not a lost art in Washington would be salutary on many levels.

Is the US Up to the Challenge?

To say that success could bring great benefits is not to predict it. Two impediments that Secretary Kerry has—justifiably, in the author’s view—chosen to disregard are, first, the perennial penchant of White House advisors to shield the President from political exposure to high-profile endeavors carrying the risk of failure, and second, the potential that congressional partisanship—ignoring the old ‘water’s edge’ boundary—could impede US negotiators’ ability to deliver on a major agreement. The stakes in all three of these arenas justify taking political risk, but as in military endeavors, clarity about the long-term stakes for all concerned parties, and the breadth of planning in support of negotiations, directly affect the prospects for success or failure. Here is where doubts arise about the Administration’s readiness to deliver on the promise of the diplomatic tracks it has so vigorously embraced.

While each of these negotiations is underway without undue controversy, questions are already arising in the Syria and Iran tracks as to whether the US may be aiming too low, preemptively limiting its objectives to what it believes could be agreed upon most easily, quickly and with the least resistance from interested parties, including Congress.

The benefits of narrowly crafted agreements resulting in the dismantling of Syria's chemical weapons and a monitored pullback of Iran's nuclear enrichment activities would be deemed by many in the US as preferable to no agreement with a corresponding increased likelihood of resort to military force. For Syria, Russia and Iran, modest concessions would represent a price worth paying if this meant the US would refrain from challenging their larger, more strategic and longer-term objectives in the region.

US negotiators, therefore, could encounter surprisingly little pushback from Syria and Iran, respectively, and have Moscow's support, if the goals pursued are tightly drawn and do not entail much if any political discomfiture for those parties. The one mystery emerging from this diplomatic blitz is the Administration's own view of long-term US national interests in the Middle East, and whether the current negotiations are aligned with a coherent strategy to pursue them.

Israeli-Palestinian Talks on Course, but what about the spoiler?

Start with the track that is best-positioned: the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. US negotiator Martin Indyk brings the expertise and the diplomatic and bureaucratic credentials necessary to hold his own in a negotiation where required compromises can be brokered only by maintaining the complete trust of the parties. Ambassador Indyk has assembled a quality team and kept a low media profile—all steps consistent with a productive negotiating approach.

Unfortunately, neither party to the talks—Israeli or Palestinian Authority representatives—has the capacity to address what has in recent years become the greatest (if not the sole) source of insecurity in their midst, namely heavily armed nonstate actors equipped and funded by Iran. The range, accuracy and quantity of rocket and missile threats against population centers in Israel from Hizballah across the Lebanese border and Hamas in Gaza have steadily increased.

Any confusion about Israel's overriding security preoccupation should have been dispelled by Prime Minister Netanyahu's October 1 address to the UN General Assembly. While pledging his readiness to make "an historic compromise with our Palestinian neighbors," Mr. Netanyahu spent the majority of his speech articulating a detailed warning about the dangers posed by Iran's fundamentalist regime. Notwithstanding Ambassador Indyk's wide policy mandate, it very likely does not extend to US policy on Iran.

Syria—Understandable Reluctance but Troubling Missteps

The Syria crisis—admittedly a dauntingly violent and complicated conflict where American interests are less than obvious to the public—has revealed the Administration to have a penchant for reacting to rather than shaping events. Much has been said about the sudden lurches in the President's approach. He postured to use force and then paused, belatedly submitting the issue for congressional authorization, only to pull back in the face of insufficient support.

Secretary Kerry's seemingly spontaneous response to a London press query about conditions under which the US might refrain from attacking Syria prompted a stunningly quick Russian initiative to negotiate the removal of Syria's chemical weapons, challenging Washington to take 'yes' for an answer—which it did. While officials tout President Obama's effective threat of force in compelling Syria to forfeit its chemical weapons, the UN Security Council resolution adopted with US support would require a second resolution before punitive action under Chapter VII is authorized—a precedent the George W. Bush administration famously resisted on Iraq. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Secretary Kerry so readily welcomed Russia's offer of a negotiated dismantlement of Syria's chemical arsenal precisely because of Mr. Obama's unreadiness to authorize military action. Even assuming that the Syria chemical weapons disarmament process fully succeeds, major questions remain. Yes, Mr. Obama will have recouped a measure of presidential credibility by backing up his declared 'red line' on Syria's use of chemical weapons, albeit months after their use had been confirmed by intelligence. But what of the President's other Syria 'marker'—his August 18, 2011 declaration that "the time has come for President Assad to step aside"? That declaration, although [repeated](#) as recently as October 14 by Secretary Kerry, shows no sign of being pursued,

much less fulfilled, notwithstanding administration pronouncements that the eleven-country “Geneva process” will effect a governmental transition in Damascus.

The Atlantic Council’s Fred Hof has posed a [question](#) that many Syrians are surely asking as well: has the US made Bashar al-Assad “an irreplaceable party to a long-term contract” to fulfill its chemical weapons agreement? President Obama appears as indifferent about whether his demand to rid Syria of its homicidal dictatorship will ever be carried out as he is ardent about having his red line restored on chemical weapons. Having gained this reprieve, President Assad can be forgiven for doubting that the threat of US military force remains a realistic danger to his regime’s survival, or to his armed forces’ freedom of action against the domestic opposition. It is Mr. Assad’s good fortune that, with the military strikes options pulled back from the brink, the Obama national-security team left itself with no other levers of influence at hand to contain the spreading Syria crisis.

When President Obama initially solicited options to exert leverage on Syria in this crisis, his national-security staff turned straight to the Pentagon, which dutifully generated kinetic strike packages and target sets. Nowhere did that process [reflect the Administration’s forward-looking doctrinal approach to international-security challenges](#) ying success to the integration of “all of the tools of American power” in a whole-of-government operation. The President also ignored the counsel of his top military advisor, General Martin Dempsey, who had publicly cautioned that in Syria “you need a strategy to tie military options with other instruments of power.”

It is a rare spectacle to find the Arab League Foreign Ministers formally [calling](#) for war crimes prosecutions against a fellow Arab leader and his inner circle, yet even more striking that US government—which sports a full Office of Global Criminal Justice led by an Ambassador-at-Large, solely for this purpose—apparently has not seen fit to lead on this issue or even consider the threat of war crimes prosecution as a potential tool of leverage on Mr. Assad’s regime.

While Hezbollah and Iran’s Revolutionary Guards have invested heavily in television and other media outlets as a means of shaping public opinion to their advantage, the administration apparently sees no opportunity in the

Arab world's information domain to expose the cynical and illegitimate misdeeds of those directly responsible for this crisis. And while President Obama's June decision to arm and train the Syrian opposition has translated into what the Washington Post [describes](#) as a "minuscule" clandestine program, Moscow and Tehran continue a robust flow of heavy arms, fighters and funds into Syria to sustain the Assad regime. In sum, Washington shows no evidence of mustering either military or nonmilitary tools of influence that would offer a credible prospect of rescuing what remains of Syria's largely defenseless population from the ravages of Bashar al-Assad's conventional forces. With well over 110,000 killed and an estimated seven million displaced, one third of them overflowing refugee camps in neighboring countries, one finds no inclination within the Administration to invoke—as it had in Libya—the humanitarian intervention doctrine known as Responsibility to Protect. Indeed, the US-Russia-Syria chemical weapons disarmament project has become, pace the Nobel Committee, the ethical antithesis of Responsibility to Protect, veritably a License to Ignore.

These policy foibles obscure the larger strategic landscape at play in Syria's conflict. Russia's opportunism in seizing upon Secretary Kerry's press remark to offer full partnership in eliminating Syrian chemical weapons was clearly motivated less by the fear of civilian casualties from "one stiff breeze" of toxic vapors than by its interest in keeping the Assad regime in power. Having no other major clients for its arms-export industry since the fall of Muammar Qadhafi, no other port of access for its navy in the Levant, and an affinity for a secular regime—however brutal—that bills itself as a bulwark against Sunni Arab religious extremism, Russia has deftly kept America from getting in the way of its core interests in the region.

If the Administration sees advantage in giving Moscow a pass over its weapons being used by the Syrian military to lay waste to populated cities and towns, its passivity toward Iran's regional activities demands explanation. Iran and its proxy force Hezbollah have massively supported the Assad regime, revealing an historically rare condition of vulnerability to prospective regime change in Damascus.

Hezbollah, which has the blood of US Marines on its hands and has become so heavily armed that it sustained hostilities with Israel for several

days in 2006, is now politically exposed back home in Lebanon and throughout the Arab world for fighting and killing fellow Muslims in a neighboring Arab country on behalf of a secular dictatorship. Its operations, today as thirty years ago, are wholly dependent on continued support from Tehran.

The Iranian cleric leading an organization charged with countering the “soft war” against the fundamentalist regime in Tehran, Hojjat al-Islam Mehdi Taeb, [explained](#) the vital importance of Syria to the survival of the mullahs’ regime, in remarks to student loyalists in February:

***“Syria is the 35th province [of Iran] and a strategic province for us. If the enemy attacks us and wants to appropriate either Syria or Khuzestan [in southern Iran], the priority is that we keep Syria....If we keep Syria, we can get Khuzestan back too, but if we lose Syria we cannot keep Tehran.”**

As with the Israel-Palestinian negotiations, a proper US understanding of Syria’s crisis must factor in an Iranian role animated by nothing short of a belief that preserving the Assad regime is an imperative, linked to the fundamentalists’ own survival in power in Tehran. And yet, the Obama Administration appears strangely indifferent to the parlous circumstances of perhaps the most anti-American regime in the world for the past 35 years, and uninterested in the leverage on Iran now potentially within Washington’s grasp after decades of enduring terrorist, nuclear and missile threats from Tehran’s security services.

The willful averting by the Administration of its gaze from these and other core dynamics at play in and around Syria is certain to shape regional perceptions of American power for years to come. Funding copious humanitarian assistance, already \$1.3 billion and counting, for the fleeing victims of Russian-armed Syrian forces or Iranian-armed fighters, worthy as that is, will not indemnify the US against the erosion of its superpower reputation.

Negotiations with Iran—How to Avert War and Build American Influence
American politicians, including President Obama, have been justified in pledging to do whatever it takes to keep Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons. Cold War notions of ‘containment’ may offer no assurance of stability in the volatile Middle East, where in contrast to Kremlin leaders during the Cold War, surviving a nuclear exchange may not be a priority

for many extremist aggressors. As recently as September 30, the State Department [reiterated](#) the official US view that “We’re not going to allow Iran to create a nuclear weapon.”

The carefully engineered June election of Hassan Rouhani as president of Iran, and this regime stalwart’s genial pursuit of détente with the US and normalized foreign relations with others, have challenged Washington to respond with comparable tactical skill and strategic purpose. Some observers—press photographers, at the very least—were disappointed when President Obama’s opportunity to greet President Rouhani personally at the UN in September did not materialize. Mr. Obama’s telephone call to Mr. Rouhani as the latter headed for the airport to return to Iran was a hospitable gesture regardless of one’s policy view of Iran, a privilege US presidents can exercise as a consequence of hosting the United Nations on American soil.

Yet the ensuing press statements by White House aides promoted the disturbing theme that, just as Secretary Kerry had met with Iranian foreign minister Zarif in New York, President Obama had made a connection with his own “counterpart,” talking ‘president to president’ with Hassan Rouhani. President Obama would have been well advised to initiate a call the next morning to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Not only would that have tested the sincerity of Tehran’s apparent warming to the United States, it would have dispelled the damaging misimpression that an unelected religious autocrat holds a superior protocol rank to the president of the United States.

That Mr. Obama, in his September 24 speech to the UN General Assembly and subsequently, cited a fatwa by the Supreme Leader without irony or caveat, as though this carried some recognized legal effect, only underscored the uncertainty about the new Iranian President’s own authority to set national policy on the very matter to be negotiated. US and European diplomats emerged from the initial mid-October nuclear talks in Geneva remarking on the change in Iran’s posture from previous negotiations. Foreign Minister Zarif reportedly engaged in detailed, substantive discussions about the nuclear program, and told the press afterward that “serious give-and-take has taken place.” It is a welcome change, and administration officials are now seized with two entirely predictable tasks: eliciting from the Iranian side a set of commitments that

the US and allies persuasively believe will prevent a future nuclear weapons “breakout,” and offering Iran in return a commitment to deliver an agreed level of sanctions relief.

Lead US negotiator Wendy Sherman, in congressional hearings before the initial Geneva session, assured legislators that the President is pursuing a comprehensive agreement, not interim steps wherein a partial lifting of sanctions could deflate international solidarity to pressure Iran economically before a satisfactory nuclear deal is reached. It is the correct approach. Yet the Administration now, predictably, finds itself caught in a two-front negotiation, needing to overcome deep skepticism and a backdrop of troubled relations not only with Tehran but with Capitol Hill. As Congress plays its customary ‘bad cop’ role in support of a satisfactory nuclear deal by [proposing](#) still tighter sanctions—the one factor Washington experts seem to agree has prompted Tehran’s conciliatory turn—it is unclear how the US negotiators can elicit from Mr. Zarif and his masters a sufficient Iranian compromise that will not look to all the world like a capitulation. And if the US side cannot bring to the table assurances of sanctions relief sufficient to seal an acceptable deal, its predicament may induce paralyzing caution on other policy fronts deemed important to Tehran, lest the collaborative spirit at the nuclear talks be spoiled. All three negotiations underway, regarding Israel-Palestine, Syria, and Iran’s nuclear program, are inescapably attached to larger region-wide dynamics that will frustrate American objectives if not addressed by US foreign policy. President Obama needs a strategy.

American Interests, American Principles, American Influence—an American Strategy

Policy veterans in Washington cannot point to any prior case where economic sanctions have “kicked in” strongly enough to produce the desired result—until now. Sanctions against the regimes led by Slobodan Milosevic, Saddam Hussein and Bashar al-Assad produced scarcity and hardship for the poorest of their citizens but enriched the leadership circle, who exacted higher rents on the basic commodities they alone could smuggle in.

Kudos to the US Treasury Department for locating and constricting the key transactional nodes through which Iran’s economy connects to the world. Yet the tool of economic sanctions against Iran, while more potent than any

previous instance, should be troubling to US policymakers. With the exception of the clerical regime, Iran's 79 million people ought to be the target of American goodwill, not collective punishment for the acts of their dictators. Sustaining the US economy as the world's strongest depends on free trade; a latter-day 'blockade' of any country by the United States should be a rare exception, for policy and moral reasons.

One consequence of the Iran sanctions that mirrors past cases, [as Fareed Zakaria has pointed out](#), is that Iran's Revolutionary Guards "profit from the sanctions because their businesses have become the only path for trade and smuggling."

For these reasons, President Obama should strengthen his negotiating hand with Iran by collaborating with Congress to make clear, not just what further economic pain and isolation will result from Tehran's refusal to accept a verifiable end to its nuclear weapons program, but the relief and rewards that a comprehensive nuclear concession by Iran's leaders will produce. Every citizen of Iran should become aware that the US is offering an end to those sanctions that were created for the purpose of pressuring Iran on the nuclear issue—whether via executive order or legislation. The Congress could also indicate its readiness in principle to support the lifting of UN Security Council sanctions relating to the nuclear issue.

This step would place the onus for compromise back on the Iranian side of the negotiating table, forcing the regime to explain to its people why it would not accept a deal codifying what it has already said is its policy, namely that it does not seek to build nuclear weapons that it wants sanctions relief in order to secure an immediate upsurge in the entire country's standard of living. Assuming Iran can say yes to comprehensive nuclear restraints for comprehensive sanctions relief, the Revolutionary Guards' lucrative smuggling business would be over. More importantly, the terrible choice between war with Iran or a regional nuclear arms race would be averted.

Reciprocating President Rouhani's expressed desire for improved relations, the Congress and administration should even consider fattening Iran's 'prize' for an acceptable nuclear deal with a package of increased student visas, cultural and sporting exchanges and the like. Steps to empower Iranian civil society economically, counter internal censorship and propaganda, and spread goodwill between the two countries' populations

are all consistent with US security interests once the nuclear weapons threat is reliably controlled.

What President Obama should avoid, however, is encumbering the nuclear negotiation with other issues complicating US-Iran relations. “We are not seeking regime change,” Mr. Obama declared at the UN in September. This statement cleverly spoke to two audiences—the clerics in Tehran whose singular priority is remaining in power; and the president’s domestic political allies who associate ‘regime change’ with neoconservative attitudes favored in the previous administration.

A more appropriate formulation in the President’s speech would have made clear that if his Administration does not seek regime change, it carries no particular brief to maintain this regime in power either. The principle of popular sovereignty should be at the heart of US policy, and given the storied history of US meddling in Iranian politics, Iranian leaders would be hard-pressed to complain if an American president said that the Iranian people should have the ultimate say in how they are governed.

The fact is that Hassan Rouhani and the Iranian Foreign Ministry do not represent the Islamic Republic on some major issues relevant to negotiations in the Middle East. The commander of the elite Qods Force atop the Revolutionary Guards organization, Qassem Suleimani, is leading the effort in Syria to train and resupply Lebanese Hezbollah fighters in defense of the Assad regime—a vital interest to the Tehran regime, as noted. Suleimani also appears to run the “Iraq” account for Tehran, coordinating with Prime Minister Maliki in support of extralegal killings of defenseless Iranian dissidents inside Iraq by a special unit of Iraqi forces attached to the Prime Minister’s office.

The paramilitary campaigns supported by Iran’s Revolutionary Guards in Syria and Iraq are not unconnected to American interests. In Iraq, five armed attacks since mid-2009 by Iraqi military units, or by Iranian-supplied militias passing through their lines, against more than 3,000 unarmed Iranian dissidents place the United States in breach of its obligations under the Fourth Geneva Convention. A promise of protection, formally given by the US to every one of these individuals in 2004, remains an American duty today because the Iraqi government has repeatedly violated its 2009 commitment to provide protection for these

people, engaging instead in lethal attacks against them in coordination with Tehran.

The US understandably wants a robust and lasting security assistance relationship with Iraq's armed forces after so much sacrifice by American forces in Iraq. Yet it is compromised by its failure to live up to not only international humanitarian law, but Section 3 of the Arms Export Control Act prohibiting arms transfers to militaries that misuse them, and the so-called Leahy Human Rights laws prohibiting training for any military units implicated in gross human rights violations.

The latest assault, the September 1 execution of 52 defenseless Iranian exiles by Iraqi special forces using handcuffs and silencers, and the abduction of seven others who are still missing, occurred five days after Qassem Suleimani met with Prime Minister Maliki and his aides to plan the operation, according to the exiled group, the MEK. The massacre went largely unreported in the American media, the story overshadowed by the September 2 announcement in Tehran of President Rouhani's plans to travel to the United States.

America's policy lapses in both Syria and Iraq, the portfolio directly overseen by Qassim Suleimani on Iran's behalf, come as well at the expense of Iran's regional strategic rival: the Sunni Arab world and Saudi Arabia in particular. [Writes veteran international correspondent Arnaud de Borchgrave](#), "The longer the fighting in Syria, the more the situation in Iraq deteriorates and the closer Iran's military 'mullahocracy' comes to dominating the entire region."

The Administration's recent move restricting Egypt's military assistance pipeline—a cornerstone of the Israel-Egypt peace treaty that has kept Israel's southern flank quiet for 34 years—only adds to the insecurity felt by America's longstanding Arab allies as well as Israel.

President Obama must separate these wider complications of US-Iran relations from the nuclear negotiations, but without disregarding them. Although Mr. Obama expressed the hope at the UN that a nuclear agreement with Iran can "help serve as a foundation for a broader peace," it should be clear that Tehran's Revolutionary Guards have every intention to continue prosecuting their campaigns, working through extremist non-state actors, to destabilize rival societies to the west.

Until the day comes when no more Iranian arms, money, explosives and training are flowing to client militias, Ambassador Indyk is going to need to point to a regional American security posture that Israelis and Palestinians can believe in should they be otherwise prepared to bring forth an historic final-status settlement. If at the same time Egypt's military is casting about for alternative strategic partnerships, Mr. Indyk's task will be that much more daunting.

The US has every right, and every interest, in pursuing its own interests throughout the Middle East. If success in effecting a transition in Syria to a more acceptable successor government is taken as a setback in Tehran, that should not deter Washington. Nor should the US hesitate any longer to impose a principled, legally correct line with Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki in order that US-Iraq military relations will not be further tainted by dishonor or moral compromise. Should the Obama team see fit to reaffirm its commitment to the security of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Arab states, and to Egypt's military, this rebuilding of confidence with the Sunni Arab world should neither surprise Iran nor perturb the nuclear negotiations. 'Peace through strength' has always entailed much more than combat power alone.

Conclusion—Discrete Deal with Iran, Invest in Syria's Outcome, Restore Regional Confidence, Enable Israeli-Palestinian Settlement

With congressional support, the president should seize the initiative and give his negotiators the requisite leverage to secure, as soon as practicable, a comprehensive but discrete nuclear-for-sanctions agreement with Iran. Isolating that issue will guard against policy paralysis in other areas deemed to be sensitive for Iran, and empower the Administration to go to work repairing its frayed standing in the Arab world.

The dismantlement of Syria's chemical arsenal will be of little benefit if, thanks to US inaction, Hezbollah emerges strengthened and emboldened, Syria's Kurds break away, and the Sunni majority embraces the only 'help' currently on offer—from radical Sunni religious extremists drawn to the sectarian fight from all over the region. What began as an idealistic 'Arab spring' moment is deteriorating into another potential Afghanistan, placing enormous new security and economic burdens on Jordan, [Lebanon](#) [15], Turkey, Iraq and, by extension, Israel. Rather than [letting](#) [16] extremists maintain the initiative, [the President should challenge his national-security](#)

[team to devise a whole-of-government strategy worthy of the name for Syria](#) [17], one that does not place US forces on Syrian territory or pilots in Syrian airspace.

These regional circumstances will inevitably affect Ambassador Indyk's prospects of success as well. Israel's leaders will be less likely to trust in a settlement with the Palestinians if the surrounding Arab countries are engulfed in crisis. Israeli citizens will find it harder to perceive a peace benefit if they remain in the crosshairs of not only nuclear threats but also ever more deadly mortars, rockets and missiles smuggled to local extremists by Iran's Revolutionary Guards.

With so much invested and so much at stake in the Middle East, it is never too late to step up efforts to advance American interests. The credibility of presidential red lines matters, but only by exercising leadership in taming the dangers clouding the region's future will the US preserve its influence and reputation, which are foundations of American power.

Secretary Kerry's big bet on Middle East diplomacy can pay big dividends if backed by a forceful presidential commitment, a coherent strategic vision, integrated lines of policy, and an active array of interagency tools of influence. The keys to success or failure now rest largely in President Obama's hands.

Ambassador Bloomfield is a former US Special Envoy, Assistant Secretary of State for Political Military Affairs and Deputy Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs. He is Chairman of the Stimson Center.

[Article 2.](#)

Bloomberg

Israel Pushed Iran to the Table, Says Hagel

Jeffrey Goldberg

Nov 4, 2013 -- Last week, Secretary of State John Kerry, the Obama administration's most fervent supporter of nuclear negotiations with Iran, [said in a speech](#) that the U.S. would "not succumb to those fear tactics and forces that suggest" it is wrong to even test Iran's willingness to make nuclear concessions.

This statement, made at an event sponsored by the [Ploughshares Fund](#), a group that opposes nuclear proliferation but which sometimes seems overly relaxed about the danger of a nuclear Iran, was generally understood to have been a brushback pitch thrown at Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has been arguing that the American administration, and its European allies, are walking into a trap of Iran's devising.

In this latest phase of the Iran drama, the differences between Netanyahu and U.S. President Barack Obama (which I [wrote about here](#)) are mainly concealed from view, but we're now seeing some small fissures. I've been curious to know what others in the Obama administration think about Netanyahu's current stance (a stance he shares with many in the U.S. Senate, by the way), so on a visit to the Pentagon late last week, one of the first questions I put to the secretary of defense, Chuck Hagel, was this: Is Netanyahu, in fact, using scare tactics in order to torpedo Iran negotiations?

"I think Prime Minister Netanyahu is legitimately concerned, as any prime minister of Israel has been, about the future security needs of their country," Hagel said. Netanyahu, he continued, "has got a history of being very clear on where he is on this."

Hagel, now in his ninth month leading the Pentagon, argued that Netanyahu's threats of military action against Iranian nuclear sites, combined with the pressure of sanctions, may have actually encouraged Iran to take negotiations seriously.

"It's true that sanctions -- not just U.S. sanctions but UN sanctions, multilateral sanctions -- have done tremendous economic damage," Hagel said. "Even many of Iran's leaders have acknowledged that. And I think that Iran is responding to the constant pressure from Israel, knowing that Israel believes them to be an existential threat. I think all of this, combined, probably brought the Iranians to where we are today. Whether the Iranians will carry forth on that, we'll see."

Hagel made sure to absolve Netanyahu of the charge that he's intent on subverting the nuclear talks. "I don't think he's intentionally trying to derail negotiations," he said.

We were talking at a small table in Hagel's E-Ring office. A portrait of Winston Churchill, who coincidentally is Netanyahu's hero (but [not Obama's](#)), hangs on the wall. To those who haven't paid much attention to

Hagel since his confirmation hearings, his sympathetic reading of Netanyahu's position might come as a surprise. After all, Hagel had come under [sustained attack](#) by the conservative wing of the pro-Israel camp as a danger to the Jewish state, portrayed as someone who is soft on Iran and naïve about the Palestinians and their intentions.

These accusations are now mainly forgotten. Hagel has worked assiduously to ensure that Israel maintains its so-called qualitative military edge over its foes; he has developed close working ties with Israel's defense minister and its top generals; and Jewish groups, once wary, have embraced him. Last week, he spoke to a national meeting of the Anti-Defamation League, and publicly confirmed that the Pentagon has fast-tracked the delivery of six V-22 Osprey tilt-rotor airplanes to Israel. "They're going to the head of the line," he said. These are aircraft that could be used to stealthily insert commandos into such hostile and distant locales as ... Iran. Still, Israel isn't getting all it wants from the U.S. -- specifically, the sort of munitions that could blast through the reinforced roofs of Iranian nuclear facilities.

"I suspect the Israelis would like an inventory of everything, but certain things we do keep as proprietary, and they know that," Hagel said. "On the standoff weapons piece, that's right on track -- the Israelis are signed off on that," he said, referring to weapons that can be fired at targets from far distances.

In a 75-minute conversation, Hagel gave me his version of the Middle East crisis tour. Talking with him, I found, was not like talking to Donald Rumsfeld. Interviewing Rumsfeld at this table was like interviewing a razor blade; one wrong move and you'd get cut. Hagel, on the other hand, is tranquil, conversational, and very, very discursive. I found it difficult, at certain moments in the conversation, to make out any obvious themes in the Obama administration's approach to the region. This might not be Hagel's fault, of course. The administration's current approach is, to borrow from Churchill, a kind of themeless pudding.

Circumstances have conspired to curse Hagel with a challenging diplomatic portfolio, even as he is forced to spend much of his time wrestling the Pentagon budget to the ground. It is well known that he is the main point of American contact for General Abdelfatah al-Seesi, the leader of the Egyptian military junta; the two men have spoken more than 25

times since the July coup-like event that deposed the elected president, the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Mursi. But Hagel has also been holding the hands of other Arab leaders of the (relatively speaking) moderate camp, who are uniformly worried that the U.S. is withdrawing from the Middle East. These figures include Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, and the most important defense figure in the United Arab Emirates. MBZ, as he is known, is one of the many Arab leaders who fear (as Israel's leaders do) that any vacuum created by the departure of the U.S. from the Middle East will be filled by Iran.

In my next post, I'll discuss Hagel's argument that, despite the creation of a "new world order" in which power is rapidly diffusing, there is no plausible substitute for the U.S., and also why, despite his obvious pro-Israel record as defense secretary, he is still married to a set of ideas about Middle East peace that may no longer be operative.

Jeffrey Goldberg is a Bloomberg View columnist.

[Article 3.](#)

NYT

Mr. Kerry Fumbles in Egypt

[The Editorial Board](#)

November 4, 2013 -- Secretary of State John Kerry's [trip to Egypt](#), included in his Middle East itinerary at the last minute, served only to add to the confusion over the Obama administration's policy toward this critically important Arab nation. Mr. Kerry was the highest-ranking American official to visit Cairo since Mohamed Morsi, the country's first democratically elected president, was deposed in July. Mr. Kerry seemed to go further than necessary or prudent to make common cause with the authoritarian generals who led the coup and are now running the country. The trip was ill advised for several reasons, starting with its timing. Mr. Kerry arrived one day before [Mr. Morsi was to go on trial](#) for murder in a politically motivated case (now postponed until Jan. 8) that had the whole country on edge. Mr. Morsi has been held incommunicado and charged, along with other defendants allied with the Muslim Brotherhood, with

inciting violence in the deaths of about a dozen people in clashes last December outside the presidential palace after he took near-dictatorial powers.

Whatever validity the charges contain, there is little doubt that the case is part of an attempt by the military to crush the Muslim Brotherhood and other opponents. It is also hypocritical, since crackdowns engineered by the generals themselves have killed hundreds of people and led to the arrests and imprisonment of thousands more.

Mr. Kerry also misfired on the tone and content of his talks with Gen. Abdul-Fattah el-Sisi, the country's strongman and ringleader of the coup. The Morsi trial never came up. And they undercut whatever cautionary message President Obama had hoped to send last month when he suspended the delivery of major weapons systems to Egypt and withheld \$260 million in aid. "It is not a punishment," Mr. Kerry said.

He appeared to accept the notion that the generals and the civilian government they installed are on a path to real democracy. "The road map is being carried out to the best of our perception," he said cryptically, referring to plans for a referendum on an amended Constitution and promises to hold parliamentary and presidential elections by next spring. But the Constitution is still a work in progress, and the crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood does not bode well for an inclusive political system. Moreover, General Sisi made no pledge to lift the hated state of emergency when it expires later this month.

The United States and Egypt share many important interests, including peace with Israel, security in Sinai, the free flow of traffic through the Suez Canal and cooperation against terrorism. It is important for both nations to keep trying to work together. But they also need to be clear about their differences, especially on what the word democracy means. Mr. Kerry has muddied the waters.

[Article 4.](#)

The Washington Post

Saudi Arabia's Prince Turki: 'American policy has been wrong'

Lally Weymouth

Nov. 4, 2013 -- The Post's Lally Weymouth spoke this week with Saudi Arabia's Prince Turki, former chief of intelligence and brother of the foreign minister. Excerpts:

Q. Who made the decision to turn down the U.N. Security Council seat?

A. It is always in the end the king [King Abdullah] who makes the decision. But it wasn't a whimsical decision. Nor was it, as some newspapers here have described it, done in a fit of pique. It was a studied and considered decision.

The kingdom conducted a very high-level campaign for the seat, and many people were surprised by the decision to turn it down.

Some governments take decisions that not everybody knows about it. My understanding is that [the decision was based on] the situation in the Security Council, particularly on the Syrian issue, but not just on that. You had also the issue of nuclear non-proliferation . . . and then you have the issue of Palestine, which has been with us since 1947. These three issues culminated in the decision where the kingdom felt that, by not taking the seat, it would make the point to the Security Council that there is a need to fix it.

Do you think the decision was building for a long time? Were President Obama's decision not to act on Syria and the United Nations Security Council's decision to pass a weak resolution on Syria the last straws?

It was based on U.N. Security Council decisions, especially the one on the issue of [Syrian] chemical weapons removal.

The fact that it had no enforcement powers?

Not only that — the fact that even if it had enforcement powers, it would only remove the chemical weapons. But [Syrian President] Bashar al-Assad can continue to kill his people using aircraft, artillery, Scud missiles and other lethal means. This also followed the Chinese and Russian veto of the resolution that would have put in place an interim government composed of all the factions in Syria — that was put in front of the Security Council a year and a half ago by the Arab League.

What do you and your country think is the best outcome in Syria?

The best outcome is to stop the killing.

How?

We had a proposal, put forth by our foreign minister, that you have to level the playing field. And that means Bashar's military superiority has to be checked by giving the opposition the means to defend themselves. You're not talking about sending troops on the ground. Over the past 2½ years, if anti-tank, anti-aircraft defensive weapons had been distributed to the opposition — and not all the opposition, [but] the opposition that is for an inclusive Syria — then they would have been able to checkmate the military superiority of Bashar al-Assad and force him to come to the negotiating table. Unfortunately, that did not happen. Europe and America continued to deny the opposition the means to defend against Bashar's lethal weapons, the Russians and the Iranians continued to supply Bashar with whatever he needed.

So it's up to the U.S. and the Europeans to arm the opposition?

Absolutely. The Europeans put an embargo on arms to Syria. They could see . . . that the embargo wasn't affecting Assad but it was definitely denying his opponents . . . weapons. It took the Europeans 2½ years to change their view and finally say, 'Okay, we can afford to sell these weapons to the opposition.' But none of these countries did. The Americans have not only not sold them, but they have declared they have no intention of providing these weapons to the opposition. So how can you level the playing ground if one side is continually supplied with what it needs by the Russians and the Iranians and the other side is continually denied those things?

Do you think your country will sit by?

My country has been trying to push not just the United States but the Europeans as well.

Do you feel Saudi explanations fall on deaf ears with the Obama administration?

Every day there are more than 50 to 100 people killed in Syria. And the world sits back and watches.

Do you feel President Obama just doesn't get it?

I don't know if he gets it or not. But I think the world community is definitely at fault here. The Russians because they are supporting Bashar and allowing him to do the killing. The Chinese because they have vetoed any measures in the United Nations to prevent him doing that. The Europeans for not supplying the opposition with weapons. The United

States for continually not supplying the opposition with what they need. It's a worldwide apathy — a criminally negligent attitude toward the Syrian people.

So what do you think will happen in Syria?

They are going to continue the killing.

And Assad will stay in power as things stand now?

As things stand now, Bashar al-Assad is under the protection of the Security Council because of the chemical weapons resolution. And [U.S.] Secretary [of State John] Kerry is saying that Bashar al-Assad has to stay in power until the chemical weapons are removed and everybody is saying these weapons aren't going to be removed until next year. So you can imagine the public opinion throughout the Muslim world, seeing this tragedy happening and nobody willing to come forward.

How do you see the situation in Iran?

When President [Hassan] Rouhani was elected, King Abdullah sent him a note of congratulations and expressed the wish for a fruitful relationship with Iran, and Rouhani responded in kind. Since then, he has made several statements about how he would like to see improved relations with Saudi Arabia. Under [former Iranian president Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad, there was a very strained relationship. The king during those years publicly called on Iran not to interfere in Arab affairs. As you can see from Lebanon to Syria, to Iraq to Bahrain, there is a chain of actions taken by Iran to interfere in Arab affairs. . . .

The other aspect is the issue of nuclear nonproliferation. Saudi Arabia has always been consistently supportive of the "P5+1" positions at the United Nations against Iran — the sanctions, etc. . . . The kingdom's position is that . . . we need to have a United Nations Security Council statement establishing a zone free of weapons of mass destruction. That statement should also include that the five permanent members will guarantee a nuclear security umbrella for the members of that zone, like America does for Germany and Japan. The other guarantee that they have to provide is that they will sanction anybody in the zone who is seen to be doing something to develop a weapon of mass destruction.

But the problem right now is that Iran is developing a nuclear weapon.

Don't forget there is another country in the area that already has a nuclear weapon, and that is Israel.

Aren't you worried about Iran producing a nuclear weapon?

Of course.

Is Rouhani taking the West for a ride?

It's too early to tell. He's very clever. Being able to engage with Iran is a good thing. But his sweet words need to be translated into action.

Would Saudi Arabia consider becoming a nuclear power?

I suggested two years ago that the [Gulf Cooperation Council] countries should consider seriously all options, including acquiring nuclear weapons if Iran acquires nuclear weapons.

You left out Turkey.

Turkey would develop nuclear capabilities if Iran goes nuclear.

That would really change the region.

It will make it even more radioactive and dangerous. It is a doomsday option.

How do you feel about Secretary Kerry's talks with the Palestinians?

What we hear from the Palestinian negotiators is that the talks are substantive.

Palestine is one of the issues mentioned by Saudi Arabia as a reason for turning down the U.N. Security Council seat, meaning the kingdom feels the U.N. should do what exactly?

The U.N. should implement the resolutions passed by the Security Council — 242 and 338.

And the roadblock standing in the way of implementation is the United States?

The U.S. keeps vetoing whatever follow-up resolutions can be put in place for 242. This was one of the complaints by Saudi Arabia. This veto system allows Russia on one side and the United States on the other to do whatever they like.

Russia created the chemical weapons resolution that has allowed Assad to stay in power.

And they continue to supply him with weapons, and they don't get sanctioned.

In this country, there seems to be a big anti-foreign-entanglement movement.

That is correct, and who can blame you after Iraq and Afghanistan? In Syria, I said from the beginning something should have been done to help

the opposition defend against Bashar al-Assad's lethal weapons. There would not have been need for more involvement than simply supplying the opposition with those defensive weapons.

And today?

My concern is for when this conflict spills over to Lebanon or Jordan or Turkey or Iraq — imagine what resources you will have to deploy to prevent an all-out conflagration.

You see it spilling over to Lebanon and Iraq?

Of course. And Israel. It's not going to remain confined to Syria. Hezbollah is already fighting in Syria. You have al-Qaeda and divisions thereof. There are volunteers from all over the world. That's not going to remain local to Syria if the fighting continues. The priority there is to stop the fighting by any means. But the world is not doing that.

The accusation is that Saudi Arabia has been arming extreme groups.

That is totally unfounded. The kingdom was coordinating with the U.S. and our regional allies to supply the groups that are for an inclusive Syria. Definitely we are not giving weapons to extremists.

But there's not enough aid.

No. America has been very generous with night-vision goggles, with protective gear, with training. But not with arms.

Because they think it will turn into another Afghanistan.

My view is that everybody should know who are the good guys and who are the bad guys. But they continue to say, 'We are afraid these weapons will fall in the wrong hands.'

Do you see Syria splitting up?

I hope it doesn't split up. The Alawites are not confined to Syria. You have Kurds in Turkey, Iran and Iraq. . . . There will be this incentive to reach out to fellow ethnics — and then it will be even harder to contain. Better to stop the fighting now.

Jordan is already dealing with the fallout.

They have already a million refugees from Syria, and Jordan is not a rich country. And Jordan is still supporting Iraqi refugees.

Do you think it was a mistake for the U.S. to support Iraqi Prime Minister [Nouri al-]Maliki?

I am convinced of that. Since he became prime minister, Maliki has pushed aside the Sunnis from any meaningful positions in Iraq. When he came up

for reelection last time, it was an Iranian general, Qassem Suleimani, who came from Tehran to Baghdad to pressure the other Shiite parties in Iraq to join Maliki's coalition. Because of Iran's pressure, Maliki got a majority in the parliament. The irony is that Maliki is supported equally by the United States and Iran. It's as if there are blinders as far as Maliki is concerned. There are more people dying in Iraq today than there were at the height of the insurgency in 2006. He is doing nothing for Iraq. There is no improvement in the security situation or the economy.

Obama said the use of chemical weapons would be a red line and then Syria used chemical weapons, the president brought the issue to Congress, and Russia eventually bailed him out. Does this make the U.S. look weak? Absolutely. Public opinion throughout the area is that the United States is not playing the role it should play.

Do you think Russia is filling the gap in the Middle East?

I don't think Russia will ever fill the gap. [Russia's support of Syria] is costing the Russians the rest of the Muslim world. They are fighting on the wrong side.

How do you see the Egyptian situation?

I think it will continue to be uncertain. They have a road map and have put a timeline on it. They've finished writing the [new] constitution, which will be followed by parliamentary and presidential elections. If they succeed in that road map, that will put some stability in Egypt. I think they have reached out to the Muslim Brotherhood.

Isn't former Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi going on trial?

Yes, but they aim to reach out to the membership of the Muslim Brotherhood rather than the leadership. The Muslim Brotherhood has gone underground and will remain a subversive anti-government opposition in hiding. That's why the situation will remain uncertain.

Do you think part of the kingdom's anger with the United States went back to 2011, when the U.S. allowed former Egyptian president [Hosni] Mubarak to be ousted so quickly?

I think there was some disappointment that the United States did not stand by someone who for 30 years was a very staunch ally of the United States. *People say the moderate opposition in Syria is weak. What's your assessment?*

They haven't been given the means to be strong. Imagine if [opposition leader] Gen. [Salim] Idris had been given the means of defending the Syrian people against the aircraft and tanks Bashar is wielding against them — everybody would be his follower. But he didn't have the means so people turn to whoever can defend them.

They turn to the groups who can get arms, the extremist groups?

They are not all extreme. There are others that are efficient and are more willing to die for the cause. This is the fault of the Europeans and Americans.

Is it too late now?

No, it's not too late. The killing is still continuing. You need to provide the people with arms to defend themselves.

Is there enough of a moderate opposition?

I think there is.

Would you be in favor of military action against Iran?

No, the consequences would be catastrophic. You're not going to stop Iran from developing its nuclear capabilities. Military action would incentivize the Iranian people to develop a nuclear deterrent. If you hit them, they will do their utmost to get one. If you don't, you can still work diplomatically through the zone free of weapons of mass destruction.

What about tightening sanctions?

That too.

But Israel won't comply with the weapons-free zone.

So what? If the [permanent five members] of the [U.N. Security Council] put out a statement with the guarantees I mentioned, then let Israel and Iran worry about how to fit in. Why should we care about what Israel wants or doesn't want? We should get them incentivized.

How do you feel about President Obama?

He raised expectations.

And now?

There is great disappointment. Syria is definitely an issue where American policy has been wrong. That's my opinion. That is also the opinion of much of the public in Arab countries. How you fix that is by showing that you can correct it. If Obama supports Kerry on the Palestinian issue and we get an agreement between Israel and Palestine — that will be something for President Obama to take credit for. If he can convince the Iranians to

stop building a nuclear weapon, that will be something he can show the rest of us. The Palestinian issue is the core issue.

But if you solved it today, it would not stop the Iranians from building a bomb.

What it would do is decrease what Iran can do to interfere in Arab affairs because Iran portrays itself as the liberator of the Palestinians and the Syrians. That's where Russia and China and Iran are not just cynical in how they are supporting Assad but downright insidious.

[Article 5.](#)

Wall Street Journal

Making the Most of the U.S. Energy Boom

George P. Shultz and Frederick W. Smith

Nov. 4, 2013 -- In November 1973, members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries implemented an oil embargo against the United States that imperiled the nation's prosperity and international influence. Forty years later, de-linking America's economy and security from high and volatile global oil prices is even more essential to protecting our domestic and international interests. And the U.S. now has the means to achieve true energy security.

The 1973 embargo, which effectively began Nov. 5 with the announcement of a 25% cut in production, occurred at defining moments of our lives. One of us was secretary of the Treasury, and the rise of OPEC and its "oil weapon" profoundly shifted the geopolitical paradigm and drove the U.S. into a severe recession. The other had just turned an idea to improve the airfreight industry into a new company—today's [FedEx](#) Corporation—that was nearly destroyed in its infancy by the spike in fuel prices.

Although America endured and ultimately recovered from the events of 1973, the embargo marked only the beginning of OPEC's manipulation of the global oil market. By tailoring oil production and investment strategies to keep markets tight and fearful, OPEC members have actively worked in the past decade to engineer expensive oil. As a consequence, prices have reached levels that would have seemed impossible even at the height of the oil crises of the 1970s. OPEC annual export revenue has exceeded \$1

trillion in each of the last two years, which ranks among the greatest wealth transfers in human history.

While OPEC members are surely hoping to prolong this dynamic, America's energy revolution—which is taking place on both the supply and demand sides—has the potential to disrupt the status quo to the nation's considerable economic and foreign-policy advantage.

On the supply side, the domestic energy boom has reestablished the U.S. as a production powerhouse. In fact, the increase in U.S. crude oil production during the past five years equates to adding another Kuwait to the global oil system. According to the International Energy Agency, the U.S. will surpass Russia in total liquid fuels production (including biofuels) and become the second largest global producer by the end of the year. The U.S. even could surpass Saudi Arabia to become the leading global producer within the next decade.

At the same time, the rise of oil-displacement technologies is creating an unprecedented opportunity to reduce U.S. oil consumption in the transportation sector. Electricity and natural gas are both cheap and domestically abundant. There are now nearly 20 plug-in electric passenger vehicle models—from nearly every major auto maker—available to U.S. consumers. Hundreds of commercial and municipal fleet operators around the country have integrated natural-gas trucks and buses into their fleets, and dozens of models are available in nearly all fleet applications, from transit to refuse hauling. The nation's fleet of internal-combustion-engine vehicles has made great strides in improved fuel efficiency, and further improvements will be achieved over the next decade.

These changes create the possibility of dramatic improvements to the security of America's oil supply with significant benefits for economic growth and national security. Yet our ability to capture such advantages is not a foregone conclusion.

Fully maximizing the opportunities presented by the American energy revolution will require a concerted national effort that prioritizes investment in the development of advanced energy technologies—such as low-cost advanced batteries for electric vehicles and more-efficient home refueling units for natural gas vehicles—along with continued growth in domestic energy production. The volatility of oil prices, the presence of anticompetitive forces like OPEC, and the political and fiscal risks to

significant and sustained energy-related research and development create an acute need for strong leadership from Washington if we are to capitalize on this moment.

Yet important philosophical differences now divide the major political parties on energy and environmental policies. Pretending such differences do not exist, or dismissing them as petty politics, defies reality and prevents progress on the pressing challenge of oil security.

To move forward, we suggest establishing oil displacement as a national goal. Such a target would advance the goals of robust economic growth, improved environmental protection and effective foreign policy. Best of all, a national consensus on reducing oil dependence should be possible without the resolution of the energy and environmental issues that will continue to be debated for some time.

OPEC's intervention in the global oil market creates price distortions that have cost the American economy trillions of dollars and stymied the very innovation required to develop competing technologies. OPEC operates as a cartel of governments, and the U.S. should not accept this condition as permanent. An American government policy response to counter OPEC's market manipulation would be in support of the free market. Preserving the current system only perpetuates a tax on American consumers imposed by foreign powers.

Meanwhile, replacing oil in the transportation sector by unleashing competition now shackled by OPEC's price manipulation would reduce pollution significantly. Petroleum fuels also account for a larger share of America's energy-related carbon-dioxide emission than any other fuel. For these reasons, the wide-scale adoption of alternative-fuel vehicles powered by natural gas, electricity and other fuels—or a flexible fuel combination—would represent a major environmental achievement.

Finally, as the U.S. confronts an increasingly complex foreign-policy landscape, meaningfully reducing oil dependence would allow the nation to set priorities with far less regard for the consequences of global supply interruptions. For realists and idealists alike, such independence holds tremendous value as the country contends with a fragmenting Middle East, an unstable North Africa, and a contentious Russia, among other challenges.

Since 1973, OPEC's "oil weapon" has dangled ominously over the U.S. While America remains dangerously exposed to changes in the price and supply of oil, our nation has never been better positioned to diminish the clout of cartel participants in the global oil market. We urge the nation's leaders to embrace both the supply revolution now well under way and the emerging demand revolution in oil-displacement technology that, together, promise a more secure and prosperous future.

Mr. Shultz served as Secretary of State, Treasury and Labor, and as director of the Office of Management and Budget, between 1969-89. Mr. Smith is the founder, chairman, president and CEO of FedEx Corporation.