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Article 1.  
NYT

## **I Made the Robot Do It**

[Thomas L. Friedman](#)

August 25, 2012 -- WHEN you hear the insane notion of “legitimate rape” being aired by a Republican congressman — a member of the House science committee no less — it makes you wonder some days how we became the world’s richest, most powerful country, and, more important, how we’re going to stay there. The short answer is that, thank God, there’s still a bunch of people across America — innovators and entrepreneurs —

who just didn't get the word. They didn't get the word that Germany will eat our breakfast or that China will eat our lunch. They didn't get the word that we're in a recession and heading for a fiscal cliff. They're not interested in politics at all. Instead, they just go out and invent stuff and fix stuff and collaborate on stuff. They are our saving grace, and whenever I need a pick-me-up, I drop in on one of them.

I did just that last week, visiting the design workshop of Rethink Robotics, near Boston's airport, where I did something I've never done before: I programmed a robot to perform the simple task of moving widgets from one place to another. Yup, I trained the robot's arms using a very friendly screen interface and memory built into its mechanical limbs. And therein lie the seeds of a potential revolution. Rethink's goal is simple: that its cheap, easy-to-use, safe robot will be to industrial robots what the personal computer was to the mainframe computer, or the iPhone was to the traditional phone. That is, it will bring robots to the small business and even home and enable people to write apps for them the way they do with PCs and iPhones — to make your robot conduct an orchestra, clean the house or, most important, do multiple tasks for small manufacturers, who could not afford big traditional robots, thus speeding innovation and enabling more manufacturing in America.

“If you see pictures of robots welding or painting” in a factory, “you will not see humans nearby because it is not safe” being around swinging robot arms, explains Rethink's founder, Rodney Brooks, the Australian-born former director of the M.I.T. Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Laboratory and the co-founder of iRobot, which invented the Roomba vacuum-cleaning robot. Traditional industrial robots are fixed and not flexible, and they take a long time — and a skilled engineer — to program them to do one repeatable task.

“Our robot is low-cost, easily programmable, not fixed and not dangerous,” says Brooks. “We were in a small plastics company the other day, and the owner said he is using the robot for two hours to do one task and then rolling it over to do another. With our robots, you teach them about the specific task you want done, and when you are done with that, you program another one.” And if your hand gets in the way, the robot just stops.

The Rethink design team includes Bruce Blumberg, the product manager of the Apple LaserWriter — as well as 75 other experts from Russia, Georgia, Venezuela, Egypt, Australia, India, Israel, Portugal, Britain, Sri Lanka, the United States and China. “It is all made in America,” says Brooks, but by “the best talent” gathered “from around the world.”

This is the company of the future. Forget about “outsourcing.” In today’s hyperconnected world, there is no “in” and no “out.” There’s only “good, better and best,” and if you don’t assemble the best team you can from everywhere, your competitor will.

The Rethink robot will be unveiled in weeks. I was just given a sneak peek — on the condition that I did not mention its “disruptive” price point and some other unique features.

“Just as the PC did not replace workers but empowered them to do many new things,” argues Brooks, the same will happen with the Rethink robot. “Companies will become even more competitive, and we will be able to keep more jobs here. ... The minute you say ‘robots’ people say: ‘It’s going to take away jobs. But that is not true. It doesn’t take away jobs. It will change how you do them,’ the way the PC did not get rid of secretaries but changed what they did.

Actually, the robots will eliminate jobs, just as the PC did, but they will be lower-skilled ones. And the robots will also create new jobs or enlarge existing ones, but they will be jobs that require more skills. I watched a Rethink robot being tested at the Nypro plastics factory in Clinton, Mass. A single worker was operating a big molding machine that occasionally spewed out too many widgets, which forced the system to overload. The robot was brought in to handle overflow, while the same single worker still operated the machine. “We want the robot to be the extension of the worker, not the replacement of the worker,” said Michael McGee, Nypro’s director of technology.

This is the march of progress. It eliminates bad jobs, empowers good jobs, but always demands more skill and creativity and always enables fewer people to do more things. We went through the same megashift when our agricultural economy was replaced by the industrial economy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Therefore, what this election should be about is how we spawn thousands of Rethinks that create new industries,

new jobs and productivity tools. Alas, it isn't. So I'm just grateful these folks here in Boston didn't get the word.

Article 2.

World Politics Review

## **The Realist Prism: Tracing the Roots of the Arab Spring**

[Nikolas Gvosdev](#)

24 Aug 2012 -- For the past year and a half, the Arab Spring has convulsed the Middle East. It has resulted in the overthrow of four leaders who only two years before seemed destined to rule for life, plunged another country into a fratricidal civil war and placed even long-established monarchies under renewed political and economic stress. What triggered this tsunami of political upheaval? And is it localized to the Arab world, or could it spread? It is no secret that authorities in Beijing and Moscow are playing close attention, attempting to ferret out any indications that a prerevolutionary situation may be building up in their own societies.

Many have cited new social media technology as a key driver of the revolutions. But these devices and the software that powers them are tools. Certainly, [they helped to facilitate the uprisings](#) -- allowing people to circumvent traditional filters used to control information and to be able to organize without having to always physical assemble -- but their mere presence was not the cause. For those in the West enamored with the prospect of Facebook revolutions, airdropping iPhones is not a democracy promotion strategy on the cheap.

Others pointed to the role of Al Jazeera in focusing attention on the uprisings; its coverage of the revolution in Tunisia, it is argued, helped to "seed" the Arab Spring in other countries of the region. A proximate cause, to be sure -- but it is also important to keep in mind that Al Jazeera has been broadcasting since 1996.

Indeed, political unrest has long simmered in the Arab world, sometimes even flaring up into open revolt, without producing the convulsions we

have witnessed. Why should the Benghazi revolt have turned out any differently from other failed rebellions against Moammar Gadhafi that originated in eastern Libya over the years? Why didn't the Tahrir Square protests fizzle like earlier so-called Facebook protests that had taken place in Egypt?

Several things have changed, and it is important to look beyond the headlines to examine other root factors.

To begin with, in countries like Egypt and Libya, there were growing disputes about political succession prior to the outbreak of protests. Former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's efforts to install his son Gamal as his heir apparent aroused significant opposition from different quarters in the Egyptian power structure, especially the military. In Libya, factions had been developing around Saif al-Islam and Mutassim Gadhafi, rivals to succeed their father as leader of Libya -- and in turn, the elder Gadhafi played these factions off against each other. Elites throughout the region have been fracturing as long-established regimes begin to falter, and it was those divisions among elites that gave revolutionary uprisings a chance for success in 2011 that they had not enjoyed in previous years. Some of the defectors from Gadhafi's regime to the interim government had been associated with the more liberalizing groups that were previously associated with Saif al-Islam -- including Musa Kusa, the former foreign minister and head of Libya's external intelligence organization, who broke with the government after it decided to use armed force to repress protesters. The regimes that had fallen were not monolithic nor, at the end, were they particularly united.

Rising corruption also played a role. There comes a point at which the expected rapaciousness of a leader and his entourage reaches the breaking point. When times are good, some degree of corruption can be overlooked. But the economic crisis of the last several years did not spare these countries, especially not Egypt and Tunisia. Crony capitalism blocked opportunities for members of the middle class. As Leila Bouazizi, the sister of Mohammed Bouazizi, the Tunisian fruit vendor whose December 2010 self-immolation triggered the Arab Spring, [commented](#), "Those with no connections and no money for bribes are humiliated and insulted and not allowed to live." In addition, all sectors of society, but particularly the poor, have been hard hit by major increases in the price of

basic staples. Indeed, many have concluded [that it was the astronomical rise in food prices](#) over the last several years -- not simply the prevalence of mobile phones -- that provided the impetus for protests in Egypt, Tunisia and other areas.

The economic crisis also changed the calculations of a growing number of young, educated people who do not see any opportunity for advancement. In particular, young educated people, who felt they had nothing more to lose, were willing not simply to protest but to sustain their opposition to the old regimes in the face of initial repression conducted by the security forces. They did not choose to go home after the first incidents of violence.

This is what makes the current situation in Russia, in the aftermath of the verdict handed down in the Pussy Riot case, so interesting. The two-year sentence seems designed, in part, to send a clear message to Russia's young business class. In recent months, Russia's young entrepreneurs have been favorably inclined toward the opposition protest movements, with some even treating it as almost fashionable. The punk band's jailing is a signal to reconsider that support: Would they want to sacrifice the lifestyle and opportunities that they have grown accustomed to in order to take active measures against the Putin government? But that calculation only works if there is a growing economy that promises opportunity, highlighting a possible trigger for unrest in countries defined by soft authoritarian forms of governance: Any economic slowdown could produce more political unrest.

But even in more democratic systems, there are signs of brittleness. The massive power outages that plunged much of India into darkness, the ongoing labor unrest in South Africa and the growing frustration in various European countries with austerity measures are all symptoms of possible problems that could produce protest movements. One striking factor -- from Russia to the United States -- is the erosion of trust by ordinary people that current governments and politicians are capable of finding solutions. So while the Arab Spring may be unique in that actual governments are being overthrown, it seems part and parcel of a larger global trend -- the "days of shaking" -- that will be confronting regimes both autocratic and democratic all around the world.

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Article 3.

Hürriyet Daily News

## **Turkey's longest war**

Mustafa Akyol

August/25/2012 -- The longer the conflict between the Turkish government and the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) goes on, the less optimistic I am. I not only begin to doubt whether [Turkey](#) can remain unified as a nation over the next few decades, but I also worry that a possible partition could be a very bloody nightmare.

Let's go back in history a bit to understand exactly what we are talking about. Kurds used to be one of the many peoples of the multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire, to which they often showed a strong loyalty. That tradition also lived on during World War I and the subsequent Turkish War of Liberation (1919-22), during which the Kurds fought side by side with the Turks, with a feeling of Muslim solidarity against aggressive "infidels."

With the formation of the Republic of Turkey, however, Kurds felt fooled and betrayed. Unlike the Ottoman Empire, this new state, whose official ideology was based on Turkish secular nationalism, would tolerate no identity other than a Turkish one. It was therefore no accident that a big Kurdish revolt took place in 1925, just two years after the proclamation of the republic. The revolt was crushed with brutality, only to lay ground for the future revolts. In the first 15 years of the republic, the very era of Atatürk's one-man rule, hardly a year went by without conflict in the southeast of the country. The revolt in Dersim in 1937, the last Kurdish revolt of that era, was subdued only by aerial bombing and poison gas. In a sense, the PKK, which initiated the most significant uprising to date against the Turkish government in 1983, was a continuation of this doomed legacy. It had come as a reaction to the military junta regime of 1980-83, which unleashed a reign of terror and restored the crudest forms of forced assimilation. (Kenan Evren, the leader of the coup, famously called the Kurds "mountain Turks.") Nevertheless, the [PKK](#) was, and has

been, also driven by its own ideology, which is a combination of fierce Kurdish nationalism, mirroring that of the most far-right Turks, and an orthodox version of Marxism-Leninism.

This “last Kurdish revolt” proved to be the most resilient one, as it still is alive and kicking. So far, it has led to more than 40,000 casualties — a huge death toll at least ten times greater than that in the conflict in Northern Ireland. The stamina of the [PKK](#) is certainly a result of its large base among Turkey’s Kurds. Yet, a larger number of Kurds despise the PKK, and give their political support to Turkish parties that try to win their hearts and minds, such as the incumbent Justice and Development Party (AKP), which receives more votes among Kurds than do the pro-PKK parties.

All this makes the “Kurdish problem” in [Turkey](#) a very complicated issue with no easy solution. Unlike in Ireland, the separation lines between the two peoples in question (Turks and Kurds) are vague, considering also that there are at least a million mixed families, and with Kurds living all around Turkey, including in Istanbul, which harbors the country’s largest Kurdish population. Besides, while there obviously are Kurds who would happily die for the PKK, there are also those who would rather die than live under the PKK, which is still a “Stalinist” party at its core.

In fact, the government has already met most of the Kurdish demands, while the realization of the others (such as public school education in Kurdish or more local governance in the southeast) is not unthinkable. But the PKK’s commitment to violence, and the consequent hawkishness on the Turkish side, poisons everything. Hence right now, as of August 2012, a peaceful solution still seems very far off.

Article 4.

The National Interest

## **Turkey's Syria Conundrum**

[Sinan Ulgen](#)

August 24, 2012 -- Syria used to be the poster child for Ankara’s “zero problems with neighbors” policy. At the peak of their rapprochement, Turkey and Syria were holding joint cabinet meetings and talking about spearheading a common market in the Middle East. Then the Arab wave

of reforms reached Damascus. The relationship turned hostile as the Syrian leadership resisted reforms and engaged in large-scale massacres to subdue the opposition.

With the support of Prime Minister Erdogan, Turkey's foreign minister Davutoglu positioned Ankara in the vanguard of the community of nations seeking regime change in Syria. Thus Ankara gave support to the Syrian National Council and harbored the Free Syrian Army. Even when former UN secretary-general Annan's plan for a political settlement was announced, the Turkish leadership made it clear that there could be no solution with Assad in power.

With this policy of direct confrontation, Ankara not only strove to obtain the moral high ground. It also sought to precipitate the fall of Assad while building a relationship with the future leadership of Syria by heavily investing in the Muslim Brotherhood-dominated Syrian National Council. Today, this policy of forcefully pushing the regime change agenda in Syria is under criticism domestically as some of the risks of a post-Assad world are becoming clearer.

The fear in Turkey is of Syria's disintegration into ethnically and religiously purer ministates, with a Kurdish entity in the north, an Alawite entity in the west and a Sunni entity in the rest. The Kurdish opposition's recent unilateral power grab in northeastern Syria rekindled Turkish concerns about the emergence of an independent Kurdish entity linking the north of Iraq to the north of Syria.

The right policy response to this threat would certainly have been for the Turkish body politic to finally and permanently address Turkey's own Kurdish problem. But the Justice and Development Party (AKP) leadership's prevailing populist tendencies seem to preclude this option despite a well-intentioned effort undertaken before the 2011 elections. The fact that even the highly popular AKP, facing no imminent threat to its rule, backed away from tackling this complex issue does not bode well for the prospects of a lasting settlement.

The failure to solve its own Kurdish problem therefore raises the stakes for Turkey should Syria implode along sectarian lines. As a result (and somewhat paradoxically because it has failed to do so sufficiently at home), Turkey will almost inevitably be pulled in to invest in the future stability and territorial integrity of Syria.

With its long-standing support to the Syrian National Council and the Free Syrian Army, Ankara hopes to have gained the leverage to influence the behavior of the future leadership in the post-Assad era. But now harder choices await Turkish policy makers.

To create the right conditions for the emergence of a political process of reconciliation and reconstruction in Syria, Turkey must shift its position. With Assad on his way out, Ankara should start the practice of conditionality. Its continued support to the Sunni opposition should be conditional on the Sunni leadership taking the lead on midwifing an inclusive, nonhegemonic, multipartite process of political dialogue on the future order in Syria. Also Ankara should seek to reengage with the Alawite minority and support efforts to nurture a new political leadership within this once-powerful minority.

The success of this engagement is critical for a country faced with allegations of exclusively supporting the Sunni camp in Syria alongside Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Only a Turkey that acts in harmony with its secular roots can play the crucial role of helping to build a better future for all Syrians and, by extension, ensuring its own safety and security in this volatile region.

*Sinan Ulgen is the chairman of the Istanbul-based think tank EDAM and a visiting scholar at Carnegie Europe.*

Article 5.

The Globe and Mail

## **The ‘new cold war’ is an information war**

Anne-Marie Slaughter

Aug. 25, 2012 -- An information war has erupted around the world. The battle lines are drawn between governments that regard the free flow of information, and the ability to access it, as a matter of fundamental human rights, and those that regard official control of information as a

fundamental sovereign prerogative. The contest is being waged institutionally in organizations like the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and daily in countries like Syria.

The sociologist Philip N. Howard recently used the term “new cold war” to describe “battles between broadcast media outlets and social-media upstarts, which have very different approaches to news production, ownership and censorship.” Because broadcasting requires significant funding, it is more centralized – and thus much more susceptible to state control. Social media, by contrast, transforms anyone with a mobile phone into a potential roving monitor of government misdeeds. Surveying struggles between broadcast and social media in Russia, Syria and Saudi Arabia, Mr. Howard concludes that, notwithstanding their different media cultures, all three governments strongly back state-controlled broadcasting. These intramedia struggles are interesting and important. The way that information circulates does reflect, as Mr. Howard argues, a conception of how a society/polity should be organized. But an even deeper difference concerns the fundamental issue of who owns information in the first place. In January, 2010, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton proclaimed that the United States “stand[s] for a single Internet where all of humanity has equal access to information and ideas.” She linked that stand not only to the U.S. Constitution’s First Amendment, which protects freedom of expression and freedom of the press, but also to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which holds that all people have the right “to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.” Many governments’ determination to “erect electronic barriers” to block their citizens’ efforts to access the full resources of the Internet, she said, means that “a new information curtain is descending across our world.”

This larger struggle is playing out in many places, including the ITU, which will convene 190 countries in Dubai in December to update an international telecommunications treaty first adopted in 1988. Although many of the treaty’s details are highly technical, involving the routing of telecommunications, various governments have submitted proposals aimed at facilitating government censorship of the Internet. Russian President Vladimir Putin has been open about his desire to use the ITU “to establish international control” over the Internet, thereby superseding

current arrangements, which leave Internet governance in the hands of private groups like the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers and the Internet Engineering Task Force. On the ground, governments are often still primarily focused on blocking information about what they are doing. One of the Syrian government's first moves after it began shooting protesters, for example, was to expel all foreign journalists. Several weeks ago, the government of Tajikistan blocked YouTube and reportedly shut down communications networks in a remote region where government forces were battling an opposition group. These more traditional tactics can now be supplemented with new tools for misinformation. For close followers of the Syrian conflict, tracking key reporters and opposition representatives on Twitter can be a surreal experience. Two weeks ago, Ausama Monajed, a Syrian strategic communications consultant who sends out a steady stream of information and links to opposition activities in Syria, suddenly started sending out pro-government propaganda. The Saudi-owned satellite news channel Al Arabiya has also reported the hacking of its Twitter feed by the "Electronic Syrian Army."

In the many manifestations of the ongoing and growing information war(s), the pro-freedom-of-information forces need a new weapon. A government's banning of journalists or blocking of news and social-media sites that were previously allowed should be regarded as an early warning sign of a crisis meriting international scrutiny. The presumption should be that governments with nothing to hide have nothing to lose by allowing their citizens and internationally recognized media to report on their actions.

To give this presumption teeth, it should be included in international trade and investment agreements. Imagine if the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and regional development banks suspended financing as soon as a government pulled down an information curtain. Suppose foreign investors wrote contracts providing that the expulsion and banning of foreign journalists or widespread blocking of access to international news sources and social media constituted a sign of political risk sufficient to suspend investor obligations.

Americans say that sunlight is the best disinfectant. Citizens' access to information is an essential tool to hold governments accountable.

Government efforts to manipulate or block information should be presumed to be an abuse of power – one intended to mask many other abuses.

*Anne-Marie Slaughter, a former director of policy planning in the U.S. State Department, is professor of politics and international affairs at Princeton University.*

Article 6.

Foreign Policy

## **Is relying on Saudi Arabia in times of war a smart tradition or future folly?**

Amy Jaffe

August 24, 2012 -- As oil prices ticked above \$115 per barrel last week, a White House leak revealed that President Barack Obama may dip into the Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR), the United States' 695 million barrel stockpile of emergency fuel supplies. The leak might have been a signal that Washington wants Gulf countries to take action to lower oil prices. It might also have been an attempt to wring the risk premium out of current prices by reassuring the market that America won't let a potential war with Iran shut off the spigot. The one thing we can say for sure is that the announcement highlights two interrelated problems with U.S. energy policy: that every president since Ronald Reagan has used Saudi Arabia as his de facto SPR and that there exist no clear standards for when to dip onto the actual SPR. Both problems have the potential to bite us -- badly. Over the years, the United States has been surprisingly reluctant to release SPR during times of crisis, preferring instead to let Saudi Arabia handle the problem by simply increasing its production. For decades, in fact, U.S. presidents have been able to count on the Middle Eastern petro giant to pre-release oil in anticipation of times of war. For example, Riyadh flooded the market ahead of the first Gulf War and, though many do not remember, it also put extra oil on the market ahead of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Saudi Arabia even increased its oil production after the 9/11

attacks, which badly strained U.S.-Saudi relations. Likewise, this spring, when the Obama administration was debating whether or not to release the SPR ahead of the tightening of sanctions against Iran, Saudi Arabia helpfully boosted its production above 10 million barrels per day, causing oil prices to fall more than \$10 a barrel and eliminating the need for the White House to make a firm decision.

But relying on Saudi Arabia, while politically convenient, is not without risks. The most obvious is that the Saudis have come under increased pressure -- both internal and external -- as a result of their longstanding oil-for-security alliance with Washington. Iran has warned its fellow Gulf producer not to make up the slack resulting from American and European sanctions, threatening direct retaliation if it does. Saudi Arabia isn't taking any chances. In recent months, it has arrested prominent Shiite dissidents -- always suspected of possible ties to Iran -- and doubled the number of Saudi National Guard forces in the Eastern Province, home to the vast majority its 2 million-plus Shiite citizens as well as the close to 90 percent of its oil production.

Oil markets might have taken solace in Saudi preparedness until rumors surfaced of an assassination attempt aimed at the kingdom's intelligence chief, a move purported to be a revenge killing by Iran for similar assassinations of senior military leaders in Syria. The rumors proved to be [false](#), but like much of the region's murky political intrigue, it moved markets and served as a reminder that a tit-for-tat game of high level assassinations is not out of the realm of possibility. The oil implications of this unpredictability are clear: It will be hard to keep global oil markets calm in the coming weeks and months. Deaths of rulers can change dynamics overnight virtually anywhere in the region, and Israel's defense policy remains an ever-present black swan. Saudi Arabia's own [rumored](#) pursuit of new nuclear-style ballistic missiles from China adds an additional layer of uncertainty about a nuclear arms race in the region. America's ability to fall back on the Saudis is further imperiled by the inherent instability of the kingdom's political and economic system. Saudi Arabia is going to [need](#) more and more oil revenue just to keep its population from growing restive. Riyadh-based Jadwa Investment [predicts](#) that Saudi Arabia will be forced to run budget deficits from 2014 onwards, even at a break-even price forecast of \$90.70 per barrel in 2015.

Other [forecasts](#) are even bleaker in the medium term, estimating the breakeven price at \$110 a barrel in 2015. Either way, the kingdom's thirst for cash is likely to mean that U.S. and Saudi interests diverge. The oil-for-security deal between the two countries has [destabilized](#) the kingdom in the past by igniting support for al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and it could be used again by agents of internal opposition groups. Moreover, the recent pro-democracy upheavals in Egypt, Syria, and above all Bahrain are bound to influence U.S.-Saudi relations over time in ways that are hard to predict.

For the time being, these risks have been at least temporarily mitigated. Recent leadership successions in the senior ranks of the Saudi security apparatus (defense, interior, and intelligence) and the common interest in containing Iran has brought Saudi oil policy closer in line with White House goals -- at least for now. Saudi oil shipments to the United States have been on the upswing this year -- a [reversal](#) of previous policy that favored sales to China -- and the kingdom, together with Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, has stockpiled oil in ships off the coast of Al-Fujairah, outside the critical shipping chokepoint of the Strait of Hormuz, and added emergency crude oil stocks in China, Japan, South Korea, and Rotterdam. This coordination helped keep oil prices from spiking when Western countries tightened the sanctions regime against Iran's oil industry. The extra Gulf crude was aimed not only to wean Asian and European buyers off Iranian oil but also to give the United States (or even Israel) more economic leeway for a military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities in the event that diplomatic negotiations stalled out. But as more and more Iranian oil comes off the market and the specter of military action intensifies, the impact of these significant moves is wearing off. But if Obama's trial balloon reveals the dangers of treating Saudi Arabia as a de facto emergency stockpile, the absence of concrete standards for releasing the real SPR will also make the president's job harder. There exists no defined mechanism to trigger a release, and each time it seems to make sense, the United States winds up initiating a cumbersome, time-consuming diplomatic process of negotiations with foreign allies and the International Energy Agency (IEA) that often over-politicizes the result. Moreover, the actual process of getting the oil from the reserves to the pump isn't instantaneous. It takes weeks after the announcement of an

SPR sale for the U.S. Department of Energy to collect bids and award sales volumes. Then, the buyers have to schedule oil with nearby pipeline companies, so by the time the oil actually reaches the refineries and is processed into gasoline another several weeks will have passed. Thus, releasing stocks after a major crisis is a losing strategy -- better to plan ahead to shape the marketplace.

There is no question that the United States should get more oil onto the market, not only because prices have been rising but also because the war drums are beating again over Iran. But within the constraints posed by poorly designed energy policies, the president has made it harder for himself by adopting a non-committal approach. The optimum utilization of strategic oil stocks requires broad diplomatic coordination, a transparent policy, and well-articulated procedures. In 1991, that coordination was well advertised months in advance and markets knew what to expect. As a result, the oil-price impact of the Gulf war was small (by today's standards) and short-lived, and its impact on the U.S. and global economy was muted compared with other similar crises.

Where the oil markets are concerned, the president's coy, "see what you can get first" negotiating strategy with Western and Middle East allies might be less than useful. Transparency and planning are what takes volatility out of prices. In days gone by, a photo-op of senior U.S. and Saudi officials shaking hands was enough to convince the markets that oil would be there in a crisis. In the volatile post-Arab Spring world, however, this style of oil diplomacy can no longer be implemented without unexpected political consequences -- suggesting that the United States needs to [shift its thinking](#) about how it manages the SPR and oil crises in general. The time to revise the trigger mechanism for the SPR is now, before we hit a major crisis. Dithering only helps our enemies and puts the global recovery at risk.

That said, there is no wrong answer for when to time an SPR release. Given how long the process takes, an early release now means that markets would be physically well supplied by the time a possible war breaks out, potentially muting the impact on prices then. If the president waits, however, and announces perhaps an even larger release at the time of a crisis, it could have greater psychological power to move prices sharply lower all at once. The only wrong policy is to be indecisive.

Having no policy means that market participants cannot plan whether to build commercial inventory or not. It gives speculators free rein and increases the chance American consumers will pay unnecessary fuel-risk premiums.

The geopolitics of the Middle East has likely changed forever as a result of the Arab Spring, and the United States has neither the resources nor the power to put Humpty Dumpty back together again. We must acknowledge this fact and forge an emergency oil stocks policy that fits 21st-century realities. Not only does Washington need to break its habit of falling back on the Saudis, it needs clearer definitions for the goals and mechanisms of an SPR release. It should also consider requiring U.S. refiners to hold a mandated minimum level of gasoline inventories (as is done in Europe and Japan) to ensure that Americans have immediate supplies of fuel in the event of a major oil disruption from the Middle East. Such domestic fuel stocks proved invaluable to Japan in the aftermath of the Fukushima nuclear crisis last spring. A more transparent and effective strategic stocks policy would not only better protect the U.S. economy in times of oil-market uncertainty, it would also give America more freedom of maneuver in the new Middle East.

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