



OBAMA IS NO METTERNICH

By Mackubin Thomas Owens



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The United States is on the verge of giving up its influence in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. The most obvious indication of this abdication of power and influence is the flawed—nay disastrous—nuclear agreement with Iran, or at least of the nuclear agreement that, as of this writing, appears to be in prospect. But it is also confirmed by the de facto acquiescence on the part of the United States in Iranian violations of freedom of navigation, a cornerstone of American foreign policy for decades.

Concessions the United States has made to secure a final deal with Iran have made a mockery of U.S. commitment to nuclear nonproliferation. For one thing, Iran claims that sanctions will be lifted immediately while the Obama Administration says they will be phased out slowly. In addition, we have accepted a very high number of centrifuges (5,000 as well as a research and development program in place), failed to include missiles in the agreement, and acquiesced in Iranian limitations on permissible inspections, including Iran's refusal to allow access to facilities where most experts believe that the Iranians have carried out weaponization activities.

By accepting an Iranian enrichment program at all, the United States and its allies have signaled to other countries that there is no real cost to becoming a nuclear proliferator. If Iran can violate the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in order to become a nuclear threshold state, why can't others follow suite? The ironic consequence of the U.S.-Iran nuclear deal is that it may very well unleash a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. The Saudis said as much on the eve of a high level meeting with President Obama in May of this year.

The Iranians have also begun to test the United States at sea. In April, Iranian patrol boats seized a Marshall Islands-flagged container ship transiting the Strait of Hormuz. The United States responded by employing U.S. Navy combatants to accompany U.S. and British-flagged cargo ships in the Persian Gulf. But only a day after these missions had been suspended, Iran thumbed its nose at American power by firing warning shot against a Singapore-flagged cargo ship, which subsequently took refuge in a UAE port.

Of course these are only the latest Iranian provocations. From the Islamic Republic's support of Assad of Syria, Hezbollah, and Hamas, to its sponsorship of Houthi rebels in Yemen, Iran has made it clear that it seeks regional hegemony in the Middle East. It is not astounding that Iran seeks regional hegemony. What is astounding to most serious analysts is the degree to which the Obama Administration has acquiesced in this Iranian quest.

Michael Doran of the Hudson Institute and Colin Dueck of George Mason University (and FPRI) have both suggested that this acquiescence is not as strange as it seems. Doran contends that Obama has actively sought a "grand bargain" with Tehran

based on two key assumptions: “that Tehran and Washington [are] natural allies, and that Washington itself [has been] the primary cause of the enmity between the two. If only the United States were to adopt a less belligerent posture, so the thinking went, Iran would reciprocate.”

These two assumptions, Doran argues, are central to the Obama Administration’s strategic thinking about the role of the United States in the world, and especially in the Middle East. As a matter of ideology as much as strategy, he continues, Obama believes that integrating Iran into the international diplomatic and economic system is a much more effective method of moderating its aggressive behavior than applying more pressure.

Dueck fundamentally agrees but places Obama’s action in a broader international context. In his book, *The Obama Doctrine*, he identifies the pillars of Obama’s approach to the world as retrenchment and accommodation. The former means reducing U.S. involvement in the world, particularly in the Middle East, while also decreasing the strength of the U.S. military, thereby eliminating the temptation to resort to military force, which he believes, has been responsible for many of the world’s ills. The latter means “engaging” America’s adversaries peacefully, in the hope of making them less hostile. In the case of Iran, as well as Russia and China, he has failed miserably.

For both Doran and Dueck, Obama possesses an ideological aversion to American power and, therefore, pushes for a strategy that constrains American power rather than expands it. But one who wishes to act as Metternich did in managing the relative decline of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the middle of the nineteenth century must actually possess the skill of a Metternich. Unfortunately, for the peace and prosperity of not only the Middle East in particular but also the world in general, Obama is no Metternich.