

Foreign Policy United-States

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Body

General Relations

The terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, on the United States (U.S.) perhaps best embodied the increasing impracticality of the isolationism established in 1776 by the country's founding fathers. At the inception of national independence, United States leaders endorsed a policy of non-involvement in world affairs. Isolationism, while not without adherents, became an increasingly untenable policy in an industrialized world, knit ever more tightly together by faster communications and transportation and international business.

By the turn of the 20th century, the United States was an acknowledged world power. After World War II, the United States assumed major responsibility in creating the United Nations and initiated the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. In the post-World War II era, active engagement in international affairs, largely motivated by the determination to counter communist movements supported or inspired by the Soviet Union and China, did much to define United States identity. The dissolution of the Soviet Union left the United States as the world's sole definitive military superpower, while the United States maintains its position as the world's largest economy.

The end of the Cold War forced a sweeping reorientation of United States foreign policy, the ultimate configuration of which is difficult to project in detail, aside from the observation that the present period is one of long-term transition.

Today, the United States seeks to ensure Russia and the other former Soviet republics experience a stable process of democratization and economic advancement; to expand trade ties around the world; to maintain warm relations with European allies, which include new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe previously in the Soviet sphere of influence; and to guard against terrorist acts from splinter groups or extremist states. Stronger hemispheric relations are also inevitable in a time when regional blocs are ever-increasing, as exemplified by economic free trade as well as geopolitical policy-making.

The decision to go to war in 2003 with Iraq under the Bush doctrine of "pre-emption," terribly strained relations with much of the global community. It has also raised questions about the policy of unilateralism. By 2005 and well into 2006, revelations about possible Central Intelligence Agency clandestine prisons or "black sites" in Europe, the publication of graphic photographs depicting the alleged torture and abuse of prisoners at the Abu Ghraib jail in

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Iraq, as well as ongoing controversies regarding the detainment, treatment and rights of terror suspects, have collectively served to strenuously strain United States relations with many countries across the globe.

Barack Obama's election on November 4, 2008 as the 44th president of the United States augurs a sea change in foreign policy.

To that end, Obama has advocated a more integrationist and internationalist stance on foreign policy matters. Obama has also advocated engagement and dialogue with other nation states -- both friends and foes -- in the interests of global stability. As well, Obama has consistently said that his administration would end the war in Iraq and fortify efforts to stamp out al-Qaida in Afghanistan. Importantly, Obama has championed a return to international jurisprudence, such as acting in accordance with the Geneva Conventions, and regaining America's "moral stature" on the international stage.

See below for more details about a new foreign policy under the Obama administration.

Important Themes in United States Foreign Relations

Global Interconnections

A relentless rise in the world's interconnectedness will surely be a hallmark of the 21st century. Networks are growing through extension of business contacts, political movements toward self-determination that embrace or spurn democratic rule, increasing travel and instant communications and escalating impact on the natural environment and biospheric life-support system. Facing this change, the United States will likely be compelled in some fashion to heighten its engagement with the developing nations of the "global South," a term for the less-developed, poorer countries of the world, predominantly though not exclusively in the southern part of the Northern Hemisphere and in the Southern Hemisphere. Such engagement could be prompted by many factors and a wide range of concerns.

Inherent to the United States vision of globalization is the promotion of trade, in step with efforts to establish generally recognized trade norms. The challenge of international political relations spans a thorny cluster of issues, including prospects for democratization and political development in small, poor or conflict-ridden countries around the world, calls for international peacekeeping forces to prevent or defuse regional conflicts and the need to devise appropriate and effective measures to reduce the threat of international terrorism. Also critical is the need for health monitoring and improvement programs, including ones designed to curb the spread of AIDS and other pathogens both within and across national boundaries. Finally, the coming century is certain to witness the emergence of unprecedented large-scale environmental problems, notably the projected difficulties associated with the effects of global warming and other aspects of climate change.

Transnational Policy on the Environment

In March 2001, the Bush administration announced it would not attempt to limit United States (U.S.) carbon dioxide emissions, a suspected cause of global warming, nor would it continue the efforts of the previous Clinton administration to secure U.S. Senate ratification of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, the first international agreement to address the problem of global warming. The former Vice President under Clinton, Al Gore, had personally signed on to the agreement during the tenure of the Clinton-Gore administration, and had been a vocal advocate for environmental responsibility and international cooperation on global warming.

At present, the current United States government's official position is to regard global warming as a potential problem, with further research needed to verify its existence and seriousness. If measures to remediate it ultimately prove needed, the United States may seek rules and practices deemed less injurious to traditional energy

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generation and customary economic growth than those now proposed. Put simply, the Bush administration has been steadfast in its view that environmental policies, such as Kyoto, will harm American business, and are unnecessary in the first place, since in their view, global warming is yet to be determined as a real threat. This position has been regarded as irreconcilable with the stances taken by much of the global community.

The new Obama administration embraces the science of global climate change as well as the need for strong action to combat its deleterious effects. Policy changes are thusly anticipated.

International Trade

Cultivation of international trade has characterized both Republican and Democratic presidential administrations in the United States. The changeover from Bill Clinton to George W. Bush, by most analyses, ushers in a continued priority with international trade. Recent pieces of legislation approved by the Bush administration, which are aimed at protecting certain local industries, however, have not been well-received by the international community.

The new Obama administration, beset by economic troubles at home, has tried to strike a balance between protecting American workers and embracing the global economy.

Arms Proliferation and Associated Accords

Proliferation of nuclear armaments and other weapons of mass destruction and efforts to control it are an enduring concern. However, the perspective on this issue has shifted considerably from a decades-long United States (U.S.)-Soviet bipolar confrontation to a multipolar array of contending or potentially contending nationalisms. Compounding the complexity of the situation is the possibility that weapons of mass destruction might be wielded not by a nation-state but by small radical groups.

Dating back to the 1960s, the United States and the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R. or Soviet Union) regularly held arms control talks, which led to an initial breakthrough agreement with the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty in 1972. Other accords followed, and the total number of nuclear warheads now possessed by the United States, Russia and other former Soviet republics is in fact lower than it was in 1980, although it still exceeds 30,000. The United States and Russia have voiced their mutual intention to continue the arms negotiations begun during the Soviet era. One working proposal, announced in 1993, was to hold a new round of strategic arms reductions talks aimed at achieving a further reduction in each side's nuclear arsenal to 3,500 warheads.

However, as in the 1980s, when the U.S.S.R. strongly opposed a U.S.-proposed program called the Strategic Defense Initiative to develop a space-based anti-missile system, the current arms control climate is clouded by widespread international objections to U.S. consideration by the Bush administration of a limited anti-missile system termed National Missile Defense. Creating this system would effectively void the existing Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty currently in existence. Earlier, the U.S. Senate opted against ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in October 1999.

Since the time of the Bush administration, movement has been made to scrap the existing anti-ballistic missile treaty in place with Russia. Relations with Russia have, at times, been strained as a result of this policy initiative.

The new Obama administration augurs a thawing of relations with Russia, marked by a decision for both countries to work together to reduce their nuclear arsenals and work cooperatively on global security.

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American Military Deployments Across the Globe

A period of disengagement followed the Vietnam War, which was actually never a formally declared war though it comprised the longest-term deployment of U.S. troops in foreign combat. Eventually, the United States reasserted its prerogative to deploy conventional forces in locations around the world to forestall or stop acts by other governments deemed lawless and to advance U.S. national interests.

Actions were taken in Grenada and Panama in the 1980s, and in Somalia and Haiti (where U.S. forces served as peacekeepers, with no combat taking place) in the 1990s. Eclipsing these varied involvements, however, were the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf mobilization to reverse Iraq's occupation of Kuwait, in which the United States mustered and led a multinational alliance of Middle Eastern and European nations, and major operations in the Balkan region of Europe conducted with U.N. authorization under NATO auspices.

The Balkans involvement began with air patrols and strikes against Bosnian Serb positions in 1993 and 1994, respectively. The United States played a leading role in negotiating a truce in the Bosnian fighting, achieved by the Dayton Accords of late 1995. American troops participated in the multinational peacekeeping force stationed in Bosnia. In 1999, a U.N.-authorized, NATO-led alliance very similar to the one in Bosnia again exerted military force to halt Serbian reprisals against ethnic Albanians in the Serbian province of Kosovo.

The United States has about 4,400 troops stationed in Bosnia, serving in a multinational mission to restore civil order, a functioning government, and normal public services in that country. The United States also has about 7,000 military personnel in Kosovo, making its contingent the second-largest behind France in the K-For military presence that has been maintained in that location since former Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic relinquished his military hold over the province in the face of NATO air strikes. Altogether, K-For numbers about 40,000 troops, with slightly over 35,000 from NATO countries and the remainder from other nations.

As an indication of the Bush administration's shift to limit international peacekeeping, the United States announced in March 2001 that nearly 1,000 U.S. troops in Bosnia would not be replaced at the end of their rotation. Deployments of troops in Afghanistan and Iraq since 2001 to the present have changed -- and in the opinions of some experts, strained -- the country's military resources due to military efforts in both countries.

The Obama administration has announced a withdrawal timetable from Iraq and the ramping up of military efforts in Afghanistan.

International Aid and Assistance

The United States (U.S.) remains involved in international aid and assistance programs, albeit to a limited degree. Although the United States, through programs such as the Agency for International Development and the Peace Corps, operates a large variety of humanitarian and technical assistance programs with nearly a global scope, foreign aid represents only a fraction of one percent of the national budget, compared to figures up to the range of a few percent posted by European countries and Japan. Much of the U.S. effort to foster world economic development is made in conjunction with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. The creation of these institutions was spearheaded by the United States, and the country is their main funder, although development monies disbursed to poor countries through the IMF and World Bank are contributed by all major industrialized nations in close proportion to the size of their respective economies. In regard to proportionate contributions, the United States is often criticized for not offering a greater amount of financial aid.

Terrorism

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As Americans joined in 2001 to rebound from the worst terrorist attack ever on United States (U.S.) soil, the government immediately launched an investigation, and the central focus was notorious Osama bin Laden, leader of the Islamic fundamentalist Al-Qaida organization.

Bin Laden was born in 1957, the 17th of 52 children born to Muhammad Awad bin Laden, a Saudi construction magnate and multimillionaire. Bin Laden's mother, one of his father's four wives, was either Syrian or Palestinian, depending on which accounts one believes. The senior bin Laden had immigrated to Saudi Arabia from nearby Yemen. When Osama was 10, his father died in a helicopter accident, leaving the boy a portion of the family's significant fortune. At 17, he married a cousin and began attending King Abdul Aziz University in Jidda, where he studied under Abdullah Azzam, a Palestinian and devout Muslim.

In 1979, bin Laden headed to Afghanistan to help the resistance fighters, called the mujahedeen, combat the Soviet invasion of the country. Azzam, bin Laden's former teacher, founded an organization to help finance the resistance; bin Laden became its chief financier. The rebel organization would eventually become Al-Qaida, "the base" in Arabic. Ten years later, when the Soviets had been driven out of Afghanistan, bin Laden returned to Saudi Arabia to work for his family's construction company. He continued to use Al-Qaida to raise funds for veterans of the Afghan war.

When the United States stationed troops in Saudi Arabia in 1990, following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait that eventually led to the Gulf War, bin Laden became outraged his Islamic homeland would accept support from what he considered heretics. He began writing manifestos against the Saudi government. Within a year, bin Laden was expelled from Saudi Arabia for his anti-government protests. The country eventually revoked his citizenship, and his family disowned him as well. Bin Laden set up shop in Sudan..

In February 1993, a bomb exploded at the base of the World Trade Center, killing six people and injuring hundreds. Six Muslim radicals - suspected by U.S. officials of being linked to bin Laden - were eventually convicted of the bombing. Later that year, in October, 18 American soldiers in Somalia on a humanitarian mission were killed in an ambush. The U.S. quickly pulled troops out of Somalia, leading bin Laden to call the Americans "paper tigers" and admit some of his group were involved in the killings.

By 1996, the United States convinced the Sudanese government to expel bin Laden. The murderous radical moved with his three wives and 10 children to Afghanistan, where it is thought he added a fourth wife. Bin Laden declared a holy war, or "jihad," on the American government and people; the U.S. government indicted him on charges related to the 1993 ambush in Somalia.

In 1998, bin Laden told Muslims they should kill Americans, including civilians, wherever they can be found. On August 7, truck bombs exploded at two American embassies in Africa, killing 224 people. By November, the U.S. government had enough information to indict bin Laden on the attacks. Then-President Bill Clinton ordered cruise missile attacks against suspected terrorist training camps in Afghanistan.

Police thwarted a plotted bomb attack on Los Angeles International Airport during millennium celebrations. Later in 2000, Algerian Ahmed Ressam pleaded guilty and admitted he had been trained in urban warfare and explosives at one of bin Laden's Afghanistan camps. Although bin Laden had been keeping a low profile, he surfaced in early 2001 at his son's wedding in Khandahar, Afghanistan. Shortly thereafter, in May, four of his alleged associates were convicted and sentenced to life in prison for the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Africa. Bin had denied involvement in the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, but an aide quoted him as saying the attacks were "punishment from Allah" on the United States.

Al-Qaida is reported to have operatives in at least 34 countries, making the war against terrorism different from any other war the world has experienced. Bin Laden is estimated to have about \$300 million in personal financial assets with which he funds his network and as many as 3,000 Islamic militant operatives.

To understand the situation in Afghanistan, it is necessary to know about the two warring factions. The Northern Alliance is the military wing of Afghanistan's pre-Taliban government. It is still recognized by most countries and by the United Nations; it is believed to receive financial support from Iran and Russia, both of which are opposed to the Taliban. The Alliance controls less than 10 percent of Afghanistan, mostly in the northern part, as the name suggests. Its ranks are small - estimated between 10,000 and 12,000 troops - and its equipment ancient: Soviet-era tanks, fighter jets and helicopter gunships. The leader of the Northern Alliance, Ahmed Shah Massoud, was assassinated Sept. 9, 2001, two days before the terrorist attacks on the United States. Massoud had been a commander in the 10-year war against Soviet occupation. Following his death, Gen. Mohammed Fahim, intelligence chief for the Alliance, took over as temporary defense chief.

On the other side of the spectrum is the Taliban, a group of Islamic fundamentalist extremists, the majority of whom come from Afghanistan's Pashtun ethnic group. The Taliban, which in English means "students of Islam," formed in the early 1990s, shortly after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. It recruited students from the Koranic schools within Afghanistan as well as from the Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan, the only country to recognize the Taliban as leaders. By 1997, the Taliban had gained control over most of Afghanistan.

Among the most extreme measures of the sect: Taliban leaders forbid educating women and frequently execute, amputate or stone to death "criminals" in public. Although it is difficult for Westerners to understand how such a militant group came to power, it behooves one to remember that Afghanistan was in utter chaos after the Soviet war; the Taliban, for all its faults, brought relative calm to the country. To some, it sounds like the justification of Mussolini's behavior by saying he "made the trains run on time." A common analogy is that the Taliban is to Islam what the Ku Klux Klan is to Christianity - violently extremist. Although Osama bin Laden is not considered part of the Taliban, the organization has been sheltering him since the U.S. investigation into the Sept. 11 attacks began - not surprisingly, since the Taliban's creator and supreme or spiritual leader is bin Laden's son-in-law, Mullah Mohammed Omar, who recently married one of bin Laden's daughters. Omar founded the Taliban with the goal of transforming Afghanistan into the purest Islamic state in the world.

On September 13, the Taliban issued a statement saying they would hand over bin Laden as soon as the Americans presented evidence he was behind the events of September 11. On Monday, September 17, a Pakistani delegation delivered President Bush's response ordering the Taliban to turn over bin Laden or face a U.S.-led attack.

Three days later, Afghanistan's Grand Islamic Council, comprised of about 600 clerics known as "ulema" issued the following edict:

"The ulema of Afghanistan voice their sadness over deaths in America and hope that America does not attack Afghanistan, exerts complete patience and accuracy and investigates the issue in its totality. The ulema of Afghanistan demand of America that the United Nations and the Organization of Islamic Conference investigate independently and precisely the recent events to clarify the reality and prevent harassment of innocent people. The U.N. and the OIC deliberate over the utterances of America's president who has said that this war will be a crusade. This news has hurt the feelings of Muslims and has posed a major threat to the world. In order to avoid the current tumult and also similar suspicion in the future, the high council of the honorable ulema recommends to the Islamic Emirate to persuade Osama bin Laden to leave Afghanistan whenever possible ... and chose another place for himself. If in the light of the above-mentioned decisions, America does not agree and attacks Afghanistan, then, in the light of the sacred Shariah [law] the following verdict is presented: All books of our religious persuasion say that if infidels attack the soil of a Muslim country, jihad (holy war) becomes an order for the Muslims of that country ... If infidels invade an Islamic country and that country does not have the ability to defend itself, jihad becomes an obligation on all Muslims. If at the time of America's attack, any Muslim, whether an Afghan or non-Afghan, cooperates with infidels, becomes an accomplice or a spy, that person is also punishable with death like the foreign invaders."

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The same day, President Bush delivered a multipronged ultimatum to the Taliban: "Deliver to U.S. authorities all the leaders of Al-Qaida that hide in your land. Release all foreign nationals including American citizens you have unjustly imprisoned. Protect all journalists, diplomats and aid workers in your country. Close immediately and permanently every terrorist training camp in Afghanistan and hand over every terrorist and every person in their support structure to appropriate authorities. Give the US full access to terrorist training camps so we make sure they are no longer operating." These demands, he assured the Taliban and the world, were non-negotiable.

By the beginning of October, the United States and the United Kingdom were finalizing their evidence against bin Laden. President Bush had successfully arranged for the freezing of assets in 50 suspected terrorists' bank accounts, totaling \$6 million. More than 400 people had been arrested and another 150 sought in 25 different countries. Britain announced it had frozen \$90 million in assets attached to the Taliban.

On Sunday, October 7, Bush announced attacks had begun on Al-Qaida's training camps in Afghanistan. Forty countries, most notably the United Kingdom, supported the attacks called Operation Enduring Freedom with varying degrees of contributions. Bush reiterated the attacks were "carefully targeted" to "cut the military capability of the Taliban regime." He added, "by destroying camps and disrupting communications, we will make it more difficult for the terror network to train new recruits and coordinate their evil plans."

Bush warned the attacks in Afghanistan were only phase one. "Today we focus on Afghanistan, but the battle is broader. Every nation has a choice to make. In this conflict, there is no neutral ground. If any government sponsors the outlaws and killers of innocence, they have become outlaws and murderers themselves ... And they will take that lonely path at their own peril."

To confirm the allied attacks were against the Taliban and not against Islamic or Afghan people, the president revealed that, simultaneously with the assaults, allied planes would be dropping food, medicine and supplies to the starving people of Afghanistan.

Although Afghanistan was freed from the Taliban and a new interim government installed, several strategic experts note that as of 2005 and well into 2006, Afghanistan has fallen back into warlordism. Violence has been on the rise and long-term stability has been highly compromised. Extended United States' involvement in this country has been ongoing yet many say that the level of engagement is not sufficient to assure peace and security.

In August 2007, Afghan President Hamid Karzai was in the United States to meet with President George W. Bush. The meeting was regarded as a "strategy session" regarding the resurgent Taliban and al-Qaida in Afghanistan. To that end, the United States pledged \$10 billion in funds aimed at strengthening Afghan security forces and also compelling positive results. But on the other side of the equation, the Afghan leader wanted to discuss the rising number of civilians dying as a result of military operations by coalition forces. As well, Karzai was expected to ask Bush to place pressure on Pakistan to intensify its efforts to curb cross-border extremist fighters. In the background of these two sets of objectives has been the issue of Iran. Whereas the United States has expressed anxiety about Iran possible involvement in the supply of weapons to the Taliban, Afghanistan has cast Iraq as an ally in its causes. To that end, Karzai was reported to have characterized Iran as "a supporter of Afghanistan, in the peace process that we have and the fight against terror."

Meanwhile in 2006, former President Bill Clinton said on Fox News that he had done far more in his years in office to try to catch and kill Osama bin Laden -- the person at the core of the Sept. 11, 2001 terror attacks -- as compared with the Bush administration.

The Obama administration, which took office in 2009, has reconcentrated efforts against extremists in Afghanistan as well as the wider region including Pakistan.

"Axis of Evil"

On the matter of the "war on terrorism," in a national address, Bush identified Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as an "axis of evil" that had to be dealt with. Although each of these three nations cited dispute any accusations suggesting they are involved in terrorist activities, there was domestic support for an attack against Iraq and the removal of Saddam Hussein from office.

Most officials concurred, however, that war on two fronts -- both Afghanistan and Iraq -- was not feasible, while international allies cautioned against any aggression directed at Iraq. Iran and North Korea were rarely mentioned in foreign relations discussions, even though they were featured as parts of the evil triad. But since Iran has begun a new nuclear program and North Korea restarted its nuclear reactor, these two countries have emerged on the global landscape.

Recently, relations with those two countries have been driven by the matter of nuclear proliferation. The United States has for several years participated in multilateral talks on North Korea's nuclear program, however, only in 2006 has something been realized from those discussions. Since then, however, efforts have largely stalled, as discussed elsewhere in this Country Review.

The United States' attempts to place sanctions on Iran for its nuclear work has also seen largely unsuccessful results with most of the international community unwilling to take an immediate hardline approach with another Middle Eastern country so soon after Iraq. Please see below for further details.

Some analysts have argued that the nuclear drive by Iran and North Korea, as well as the failed attempts to deal with the nuclear programs in those countries, have been a direct result of their unfortunate inclusion in Bush's "axis of evil." That said, the early period of the Obama administration has not seen an improvement in the climate of relations, and nuclear development continues to be on the agenda for both countries, to the grave consternation of the United States.

War in Iraq

In regard to Iraq, any movement on the matter was stalled due to complications regarding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Most Arab governments made it clear to the Bush administration that they would not support any aggression against Iraq, or more particularly, its leadership, until the issue of Palestinian sovereignty was dealt with. Moreover, most European and Westernized countries, which support the general war on terrorism, were less enthused about aggression against Iraq. Although some voices in the United States advocated a "go it alone" attitude in the case of Iraq, others suggested that global cooperation would be a preferential path.

Nevertheless, the United States went to war with Iraq in 2003 without a new United Nations resolution, in a loose coalition with a few other countries. Iraq is now under United States "occupation" and will remain as such for the foreseeable future. A new United Nations Security Council Resolution was passed to allow assistance from other countries.

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The failure to find the alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction -- the primary impetus for invading Iraq -- as well as the policy of unilateral pre-emption have created divisions across the global spectrum. Whereas the Bush administration has insisted that action in Iraq was part of the global war on terrorism, and even as Vice President Cheney has expressly stated that there was a direct connection between the terrorist attacks in 2001 and the Iraq regime, detractors have said that the two are unrelated. Indeed, a commission convened in regard to the events of September 11, 2001 stated that there was no explicit relationship between the terrorist group al-Qaida and the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. This finding has served only to further divisions leaving the issue of Iraq, now under occupation by United States-led forces (even though nominal sovereignty exists), as one of the most controversial in modern history.

Please see "Political Conditions of Country Review: United States" for more information about the Iraq War and the Bush administration's policy on Iraq to date. See below and the "Political Conditions" for policy shifts taken by the Obama administration.

The Middle East Conflict

A somewhat more distanced policy has emerged concerning the Middle East, a long-troubled region in which United States (U.S.) diplomatic involvement has been pervasive and in which deteriorating political conditions and escalating violence have been the pattern in late 2000 and early 2001. Bush administration spokespersons and the president himself have implicitly criticized the marathon Israeli-Palestinian negotiating sessions repeatedly arranged by former President Clinton as overreaching attempts to impose a solution on the conflict. Such an attempted imposition, according to the current administration, paid too little heed to actual conditions. The U.S. government signaled it would refrain from detailed participation in Middle East negotiations, since in the administration's view, the parties in conflict can neither reach agreement at this time nor viably uphold any agreement.

A significant shift occurred in the early months of 2002, however, as the conflict in the region exploded and domestic and international pressure mounted for further U.S. involvement. Indeed, even domestically, criticism mounted in regard to the Bush administration's marked lack of involvement in resolving the crisis. In the face of critical comments on the matter, the Bush administration has reluctantly found itself playing a more integral role, and trying to strike a difficult balance between Israeli and Palestinian interests and causes. As such, increased engagement has not been smooth or imbued by congruity. In fact, the Bush administration was also criticized for espousing a rather incoherent message to both Israel and Palestine.

In general, the perceived incoherence may well be attributable to opposed factions within Bush's own cabinet. It is well-known that former Secretary of State Colin Powell takes a more integrative and engaged approach to global issues, preferring coalitions and international consultancy. In contrast, former National Security Advisor and current Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, along with Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and other individuals such as Paul Wolfowitz, are known for their more hawkish and "go it alone" stances to international matters. Some analysts surmised that as the situation in the Middle East cooled, Bush and his foreign policy team would have time to coordinate a more cohesive approach, not only in regard to the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, but also related regional matters, such as a possible attack on Iraq. Such an outcome was not to come to pass.

The establishment of the "roadmap to peace" initiated by the Bush administration in 2003 started off with cautious optimism but by the latter part of 2003 was in dire jeopardy. In 2005, the decision by Israel to withdraw from the West Bank and Gaza contributed to a cooling of violence, however, it also has rendered United States participation in the peace process to be marginal, at best. The 2006 war between Israel and Lebanon-based Hezbollah demonstrated the profound lack of influence by the United States in this arena, while its attention remained focused on Iraq.

The Obama administration, which took office in 2009, has made clear that it intends to work toward establishing sustainable peace in the Middle East. To that end, the United States has expressed strong support for a two-state solution, as discussed below.

Meanwhile, United States support for Israel remains strong and the United States has repeatedly exercised its veto power in the United Nations Security Council to prevent passage of resolutions condemning Israel for impeding freedom of movement for Palestinians and their economy. The United States is Israel's paramount military supplier and donor of military aid. Since the late 1970s, it has counterbalanced this flow by also supplying large amounts of military aid to Egypt and by increasing arms sales to other allies in the Middle East, notably Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Israel and Egypt are, respectively, the largest and second-largest recipients of United States foreign aid when both military and civilian sectors are included.

In July 2009, United States Vice-President Joe Biden said in an interview with ABC News that has the Obama administration would not stop Israel from striking Iranian nuclear facilities. Biden said that the United States would not "dictate to another sovereign nation what they can and cannot do." Biden also said that President Barack Obama's overture of engagement with Iran remained on the table. That offer for talks would end at the close of 2009. Meanwhile, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has suggested that his country would deal with the nuclear threat posed by Iran, if the government in Tehran was unwilling to enter negotiations. For its part, Iran has said that it would guarantee a strong response if its facilities were attacked by Israel.

Regional Relations

Canada

The United States' relationship with Canada, its neighbor to the north, is perhaps the closest and most extensive between any two countries. More than \$US1 billion in daily trade crosses the countries' shared border, the longest open border in the world. Movement of people between the United States and Canada is at the rate of about 100 million individual crossings each year. The two countries are also each other's principal foreign investors.

Since the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA, entered into force in 1994, merchandise trade among the United States, Canada and Mexico has approximately doubled. The majority of U.S.-Canada trade takes place perfectly smoothly, though bilateral trade disputes, mainly over agricultural goods and forest products, sporadically arise. Usually, these issues are resolved through bilateral consultative forums or referral to the World Trade Organization or NAFTA dispute-resolution panels. The highest-value entry in the U.S.-Canada trade ledger is for vehicles and parts. Energy products - oil and, increasingly, natural gas - represent another important category of Canadian exports to the United States. In fact, the United States purchases more energy from Canada than from any other single nation, including more than two trillion cubic feet of natural gas yearly, 12 percent of its natural gas requirement.

Fear of possible disruptions of 2000 millennium celebrations, underscored by the December 1999 arrest of an Algerian national found with explosives in Washington state after crossing the border from Canada, heightened concerns about cross-border security and anti-terrorism cooperation. The United States and Canada have since launched a cooperative endeavor called the Border Vision Initiative to scrutinize trans-border movement more closely. The program authorized U.S. customs agents to pre-clear U.S.-bound passengers from Canadian airports and also launched a so-called smart card pilot project in which Canadians who regularly travel to the United States for employment or commerce are to be issued special passes with a magnetized electronic strip resembling a credit card. The cards will facilitate more convenient passage for their holders but also enable officials to monitor

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crossings exactly. Despite this emphasis on tighter security, the U.S.-Canada border is far more a link than a barrier, bearing witness to a long history of friendship and openness between the two countries.

The United States maintains more detailed and far-reaching defense arrangements with Canada than with any other country. The Permanent Joint Board on Defense, established in 1940, provides policy-level consultation on defense matters. The United States and Canada share NATO mutual security commitments. In addition, Canadian and U.S. military forces have cooperated since 1958 on continental air defense within the framework of the North American Aerospace Defense Command. Although Canada views its relationship with its southern neighbor as crucial to a wide range of interests, it also occasionally pursues policies at odds with the United States. This is particularly true of Canada's refusal to endorse the U.S. embargo on trade, travel and investment in Cuba.

Canada and the United States signed an upgraded aviation agreement in 1995, and air traffic between the two countries has since increased substantially. They jointly operate the St. Lawrence Seaway, connecting the Great Lakes to the Atlantic Ocean.

The two countries also work closely to resolve cross-border environmental issues, an area of increasing importance in the bilateral relationship. A principal instrument of this cooperation is the International Joint Commission, or IJC, established under the 1909 Boundary Waters Treaty. The Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement of 1972 marked another milestone in the joint effort to control cross-border water pollution. The two governments consult semiannually on trans-boundary air pollution. Under steps resulting from the 1991 Air Quality Agreement, both countries have significantly remediated acid rain levels.

Canada and the United States also have resolved several major issues involving fisheries. By common agreement, the two countries submitted a Gulf of Maine boundary dispute to the International Court of Justice in 1981 and both accepted the court's 1984 ruling demarcating the territorial sea boundary. In 1990, the United States and Canada signed a bilateral Fisheries Enforcement Agreement that has served to deter illegal fishing activity and reduce the risk of injury during fisheries enforcement incidents. The successful signing of the Pacific Salmon Treaty in 1985, however, has been tempered by difficulties in negotiating multiyear extensions of its constituent fisheries regimes.

While Canada supported United States military efforts in Afghanistan following the terrorist attacks of 2001, Canada was an opponent of the United States' decision to invade Iraq. In 2005, the Liberal government of Canada's policy was maintained as regards Iraq. In 2006, the election of the Conservative government in Canada was expected to result in a more cooperative relationship between the two countries. That Conservative government was re-elected in 2008 only a month ahead of Barack Obama's election as the new president of the United States. It was yet to be seen if the incoming Obama administration would signal a shift of foreign policy as regards Canada.

Mexico

Mexico emerged from more than seven decades of one-party rule by the Institutional Revolutionary Party, when Vicente Fox of the National Action Party was elected president in July 2000. Observers universally lauded the vote as the freest and fairest in the nation's history. When Fox was inaugurated at the beginning of December, the outcome of the United States' controversial presidential election was still being disputed. Thus, in an odd twist, the neighboring countries' new chief executives entered office in a sort of role reversal with regard to their respective electoral groundings. President Fox was a personal friend of incoming United States (U.S.) President George W. Bush, who as Texas governor administered the state with the longest boundary adjoining Mexico and who declined to endorse anti-immigrant positions taken by other political leaders in the Republican Party.

Mexico, along with Canada and the United States, joined NAFTA at its 1994 inception. It has experienced a bumpier integration into the free trade regime, though, than the two other countries. A 1994-1995 financial crisis

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necessitated a severe devaluation of the Mexican peso, and the Mexican populace have not yet fully recovered their previous buying power. NAFTA-related disputes crop up recurrently in regard to cross-border environmental issues, mostly connected to factories called "maquiladoras" that have opened along the Mexican side of the U.S.-Mexico border. These plants, in many cases U.S.-owned, generally import and assemble components and re-export finished consumer goods, for instance, portable radios and other light electronics. The presence of the factories has encouraged the explosive growth of semi-improvised communities of laborers from the maquiladora plants that lack proper infrastructure and are blamed for pollution such as raw sewage that affects both sides of the border.

In addition, the factories themselves are cited by environmentalists for failing to comply with Mexico's comparatively lenient limits on air pollutants and toxic waste. The degree to which international trade programs can or should move countries closer to generalized standards of environmental regulation and labor practices stands as one of the most hotly debated issues of the new century. Although workers in the border-town Mexican maquilas often earn as little as the equivalent of \$10 per day, this sum is more than double the prevalent daily wage in rural southern Mexico - on the days when scarce paid work is even available.

One of the more heated current controversies related to NAFTA involves attempts by U.S. truck drivers to keep Mexican trucks from traveling freely across the United States. At present, regulations require Mexican truckers to transfer their loads to domestic carriers within a circumscribed area just across the border, on its face a violation of the free-trade agreement, which ostensibly regards production and commerce originating in any of the three NAFTA countries as fully equivalent to the analogous production and commerce from either of the other two. In this dispute, the Teamsters Union and U.S.-based independent owner-operators oppose open entry for the Mexican trucks, citing concerns these vehicles may not meet U.S. safety standards. Another consideration is apprehension that open access for considerably lower-paid Mexican drivers could dampen the pay scale for U.S. truckers and perhaps eliminate a portion of U.S.-based hauling jobs outright. U.S. trucking firms, as distinguished from truck drivers, are more amenable to opening U.S. roads to Mexican trucks, in part because the mandated load transfers generate substantial congestion and delays.

When President Fox met with President Bush on Feb. 16, 2001, he noted Mexico's desire for its trucks to be admitted throughout the United States and said the issue should be straightforward to resolve in Mexico's favor under terms of NAFTA. President Fox said only trucks meeting U.S. safety standards should be admitted and such an agreement would also open new opportunities for U.S.-based trucks hauling to Mexico.

Since 1981, management of a broad array of issues between the two countries has been formalized in the U.S.-Mexico Bi-National Commission, composed of selected U.S. Cabinet members and their Mexican counterparts. The commission holds annual plenary meetings, and subgroups meet at other times to discuss numerous subjects, including trade and investment opportunities, financial cooperation, consular issues and migration, legal affairs and anti-narcotics cooperation, cultural relations, education, energy, border affairs, environmental and natural resources, labor, agriculture, health, housing and urban development, transportation, fisheries, tourism, science and technology.

The overriding strains on the generally friendly relationship between the United States and Mexico arise from flows of illegal immigrants and illicit drugs. Mexico points out that demand for both the low-cost labor that the immigrants provide and for the drugs originates in the United States. President Fox, during his brief tenure in office so far, has emphasized he considers the people from Mexico or of Mexican heritage living in the United States, whether legally or illegally, an asset for both countries that merits respect. He has said he would like to see border policy transformed into an open system in which Mexicans can seek work in the United States without loss of citizenship status and without fear of deportation. This utopian prospect is not realizable in the foreseeable future.

However, some easing of border restrictions may eventually happen, perhaps in the form of an ample quota of work permits for Mexicans seeking employment in the United States or possibly through another amnesty program similar to one implemented in 1986, when illegal Mexican immigrants who could show they had lived and worked for several years continuously in the United States were allowed to become legal U.S. residents.

In 1996, the United States and Mexico established a High-Level Contact Group on narcotics control. Other agreements and policy statements on U.S.-Mexico counter-narcotics cooperation followed. The U.S. Congress has codified a practice requiring annual certification of a country's compliance with U.S. standards in its actions against drug trafficking for it to continue normal business dealings with the United States and to be eligible for U.S. aid. Mexico regards the certification process as a debasing infringement of sovereignty, as do other Latin American countries affected by the policy. The only time decertification with its stipulated sanctions was ever used was against Colombia in 1996. While members of the U.S. Congress have criticized Mexico quite vociferously for making insufficient progress in stemming the narcotics trade, the decertification mechanism has not been invoked in its case, a demurral probably based on the observation that drug runners benefited at least as much as anyone else the one time such a move was tried. President Fox, like his predecessors, has pledged Mexico's full resolve to investigate and prosecute those trafficking in illicit drugs but acknowledged lack of resources and corruption making the effort difficult.

Cooperation between the United States and Mexico along their 2,000-mile common border includes state and local problem-solving mechanisms, transportation planning and institutions to address resource and environmental issues. In 1993, the Border Liaison Mechanism, or BLM, was established. Eight BLMs, chaired by U.S. and Mexican consuls, now operate in border-pair cities, each with subgroups on economic and social development, migration and border crossing facilitation and border public safety. In addition, the multi-agency U.S.-Mexico Bi-National Group on Bridges and Border Crossings meets twice yearly to improve the efficiency of existing crossings and coordinate planning for new ones.

Various channels exist for bilateral cooperation on environmental and natural resource issues. Agreements forming the framework in which the two countries work in this area include the 1889 convention that established the International Boundary Commission, reconstituted by the Water Treaty of 1944 as the International Boundary and Water Commission, the 1983 La Paz Agreement and the 1993 North American Agreement on Environmental Cooperation, which created a trinational U.S.-Mexico-Canada commission to address environmental issues under NAFTA auspices.

Many difficult boundary and water issues have been dealt with through the International Boundary and Water Commission, which has an authoritative role in regulating and allocating the water of the Rio Grande River, a much-demanded, indeed oversubscribed resource in a dry region. After border infrastructure and pollution problems came to the fore in the wake of economic activity spurred by NAFTA, joint programs utilizing U.S. financing and sometimes directing U.S. grants to improve wastewater treatment plants, drinking water systems and solid waste disposal facilities on the Mexican side have taken shape. Other environmental pacts signed by Mexico and the United States cover wildlife and migratory birds, national parks, forests and marine and atmospheric resources.

The United States and Mexico maintain full diplomatic and official contact as well as extensive commercial, cultural and educational ties. Annual legal crossings from Mexico to the United States number nearly 290 million. More than 500,000 American citizens live in Mexico, including both professionals and many retirees taking advantage of the favorable cost differential south of the border that enables them to live very comfortably on modest Social Security stipends. More than 2,600 U.S. companies have operations in Mexico, a figure projected to rise steadily. The United States accounts for 60 percent of all foreign direct investment in Mexico. Moreover, as the recently released 2000 U.S. Census demonstrates, Hispanics - though many are not of Mexican heritage - are the fastest-growing ethnic group in the United States. Surely this foretells increasingly close Mexican-U.S. engagement.

In 2005, one of the most contentious issues related to bilateral relations concerns the illegal immigration of Mexicans across the border into the United States. It has continued to be a politically-charged issue. In 2006, the immigration issue was also a significant concern with many conservative politicians in the United States foregrounding the matter in the mid-term elections. In 2007, the issue continued to occur in the political purview. Ironically, Republican President Bush and the Democrats shared some common ideas for carving legislation that

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would include both enforcement of the border, as well as a guest worker program, and the possibility of offering undocumented foreign workers a path to legal status. Such a plan was in direct contravention to Republicans' preference for a strong enforcement regime, which would criminalize undocumented workers.

Bush and the Democrats never made any progress on the issue of immigration reform in the final year of the Republican president's administration.

By 2008, Barack Obama had been elected the new president of the United States and made clear that immigration reform that embraced both border control and humane treatment of illegal immigrants would be part of the policy changes to be implemented.

In 2009, United States (U.S.) and Mexican officials agreed to work together to fight the drug cartels said to be responsible for a spate of brutal violence in Mexico close to the border with the United States. That brutal violence was taking on crisis proportions. United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had earlier acknowledged that her country was providing the market for the illegal sale of drugs, as well as the weapons used to carry out the violence by rival drug cartels. Since then, U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano and U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder met with their counterparts, Interior Minister Fernando Gomez-Mont, Mexican Attorney General Eduardo Medina-Mora, as well as Public Safety Secretary Genaro Garcia Luna. The officials said they would soon name a group to develop strategies for stopping the cross-border flow of weapons and drugs. The two sides also hoped to advance an agreement that could potentially be signed when U.S. President Barack Obama visits Mexican President Felipe Calderon at the end of April 2009.

Cuba

The United States' most antagonistic hemispheric relationship is with the communist government of Cuba led by Fidel Castro. The history of tensions between the two countries has been highlighted by episodes including: the Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961, an abortive attempt to oust Castro; the October 1962 confrontation with the Soviet Union over nuclear missiles based in Cuba; United States (U.S.) displeasure at Cuba's use of its military forces, sometimes in large numbers, to assist leftist revolutions in Africa and Latin America; and, in response to one such Cuban venture on the small Caribbean island of Grenada, a U.S. invasion in 1983 to remove a Cuban-backed junta. After property in Cuba owned by U.S. citizens was expropriated after the revolution, the United States began imposing economic sanctions. It severed diplomatic relations with Cuba in January 1961, and the comprehensive economic embargo still in place dates from 1962. In the mid-1970s, however, the United States and Cuba agreed to resume diplomatic contact at the sub-ambassadorial level. The United States and Cuba maintain interest sections under the auspices of Switzerland's embassies in Havana and Washington, respectively.

In October 1992, the United States enacted the Cuban Democracy Act (CDA), codifying portions of the embargo while counterbalancing these with certain provisions stated to extend support of the Cuban people, including improved telecommunications and the sale of medicines. The CDA bars most U.S. corporations, their subsidiaries, and U.S. subsidiaries of foreign corporations from trade with Cuba and excludes any vessel that stops in Cuba from entering U.S. ports for 180 days, while providing for humanitarian donations by U.S. non-governmental organizations to Cuba.

Migration from Cuba to the United States, encouraged by the large Cuban exile community in south Florida and intermittently tacitly promoted by U.S. policy, is another source of tension between the two nations. The so-called Mariel boatlift in April 1980 resulted in about 125,000 Cubans reaching U.S. shores. Since the early 1990s and formally codified when the President Clinton signed the Cuban Adjustment Act in 1996, U.S. policy on unauthorized emigration from Cuba is to admit those who succeed in reaching the United States but to intercept Cubans trying to

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reach the United States when detected at sea and return them to Cuba. Cuba agrees not to take punitive action against such returnees, a commitment verified through the U.S. interest section in Havana. Persons picked up at sea by the U.S. Coast Guard who can demonstrate they would face political prosecution if repatriated to Cuba are resettled in a third country. Moreover, the United States and Cuba have established a yearly quota of about 20,000 for legal immigration from the island. This number is such a small fraction of the Cubans who wish to emigrate that there is a years-long waiting list of applications.

In 1994, regular immigration talks were initiated between the United States and Cuba, prompted by another mass exodus of Cubans that summer. The two governments agreed in September 1994 to direct Cuban migration into safe, legal, and orderly channels. Under a May 1995 agreement, the United States began returning Cubans interdicted at sea or entering the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo Bay.

U.S.-Cuban relations worsened in 1996, occasioned by Cuban suppression of an umbrella human rights group on the island called "Concilio Cubano," followed by the shooting down of two civilian aircraft in international airspace near Cuba. The planes were operated by the Miami-based Cuban exile organization Brothers to the Rescue. Four members of the group—three U.S. citizens and one legal permanent resident—were killed in this attack by Cuban MiG fighter jets. Directly after this incident, President Clinton ordered punitive measures against Cuba, including suspension of charter flights. He announced that he sought to reach agreement with the U.S. Congress on already-pending legislation that would codify a harder anti-Castro policy. On March 12, 1996, President Clinton signed this legislation, an enactment generally called the Helms-Burton Act and formally entitled the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity (or "Libertad") Act. Its main provisions are:

Title I codifies and tightens enforcement of the U.S. embargo.

Title II states U.S. policy toward a transition or democratic government in Cuba—a legislative elaboration of the policy position frequently expressed by the U.S. that the United States is fully committed to support of the Cuban people, as distinguished from the Cuban government.

Title III creates a cause of action and authorizes U.S. nationals with claims to confiscated property in Cuba to file suit in U.S. courts against people "trafficking" in such property. However, President Clinton later suspended this provision's authorization of lawsuits.

Title IV requires the Executive Branch to deny visas to, and exclude from the United States, foreign nationals determined to have confiscated or "trafficked" in confiscated property claimed by an U.S. national. This is the most controversial clause in Helms-Burton, since non-U.S.-based firms are penalized by the U.S. for doing business with Cuba that is perfectly legal under the laws of their own country. The European Union and other nations and international organizations have repeatedly voiced protests against the reach of this measure.

On March 20, 1998, President Clinton announced measures intended to respond to the historic visit of Pope John Paul II to Cuba in January of that year. The measures included: resuming direct humanitarian charter cargo and passenger flights to Cuba; allowing legal remittances by Cuban-Americans and Cuban families living in the United States to their close relatives in Cuba at the level of \$300 per quarter (such remittances were suspended in August 1994 in response to the migration crisis); and simplifying and expediting the issuance of licenses for the sale of medicines and medical supplies to Cuba. Clinton also said he would work with Congress to develop bipartisan legislation on the transfer of food and expansion of humanitarian assistance to the Cuban people.

In the wake of the Elian Gonzalez custody matter (the Cuban child whose mother died while trying to migrate to the United States and whose father in Cuba wanted the child returned to his custody), speculation abounded regarding a shift in policy between Cuba and the United States. Various legislative bills seeking to end or soften the economic embargo and sanctions were drafted, and the pace of lobbying by a number of groups pressing for changes in United States political and economic policy toward Cuba picked up. In late 2000, the U.S. Congress passed a bill

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that formally ended the embargo with respect to sales of food and medicine/medical supplies to Cuba. However, the absence of a financing mechanism whereby the Cuban government can obtain credit for such transactions means that the legislative change has very little practical consequence.

The aftermath of Cuba's downing of the two Brothers to the Rescue aircraft had recent repercussions stemming from a wrongful death lawsuit against Cuba, filed in the United States court system by relatives of the men killed and initially ruled on in 1997, with a decision in favor of the plaintiffs. In October 2000 the United States Congress enacted a measure allowing part of the US\$187.7 million settlement awarded in this case to be drawn from US\$121 million in Cuban assets previously frozen in the United States. In response, Cuba announced a 10 percent surcharge on incoming telephone calls from the United States, and after United States telecommunications carriers refused to comply, citing lack of authorization, direct long-distance phone service between Cuba and the United States was suspended. On President Clinton's last full day in office in January 2001, he issued an executive order releasing a payment of US\$96.7 million from the frozen Cuban funds to the Miami relatives.

In May 2002, former United States President Jimmy Carter traveled to Cuba for a trip scheduled to last for five days. Carter was the first U.S. President to visit the communist Caribbean island since 1959 when Washington cut ties with Havana. Upon his arrival, Carter promised that during his visit, he would focus on issues concerning peace, democracy, human rights and the alleviation of suffering. Indeed, he was scheduled to meet two key Cuban dissidents on the issue of human rights in this regard.

In the midst of accusations by the U.S. Undersecretary of State John Bolton that Cuba would like to develop biological weapons, Castro adamantly denied the claims and permitted full and complete access for Carter at Cuba's biotechnology sites, noting that they have been used to produce only medicine and vaccines. Various voices from within the U.S. government and the Bush administration, however, contend that such facilities are threats to U.S. national security. During his trip, Carter also delivered a historic speech in the form of a live televised address to the people of Cuba via the national (state-controlled) media. Carter's address is unprecedented in the recent history of relations between the U.S. and Cuba since the revolution.

For his part, Carter has charted a far different approach to U.S.-Cuban relations than other U.S. presidents. Specifically, he has been forthright in his opposition against U.S. sanctions on Cuba. During his time in office, he actively pursued a policy of rapprochement between the two countries, overseeing the re-establishment of diplomatic relations, negotiating the release of thousands of political prisoners, and relaxing a ban on travel by US citizens to Cuba.

In contrast, the Bush administration intended to further tighten the economic embargo -- in place since 1961 -- and it also added Cuba to the list of states it accuses of supporting terrorism.

The 2008 election of Barack Obama in the United States as president augured the policy of relaxed restrictions regarding Cuba.

To that end, in April 2009, the Obama administration in the United States decided to ease restrictions on Cuban Americans traveling to or sending remittances to relatives in Cuba. Under the previous Bush administration, Cuban Americans were permitted to travel to Cuba only once every three years and there were strict restrictions on how much money they could spend or send to relatives in Cuba. Since the average salary in Cuba is \$20USD a month, such remittances provide much-needed income for many Cubans.

Another policy adjustment involved allowing telecommunications companies to do business in Cuba. Such access could include fiber-optic cables, which would impact Internet access. It was yet to be seen if the Cuban government

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would allow United States companies to procure licenses to operate in Cuba. However, were such a change to take place, the exchange of information could have manifold effects.

With these changes afoot, members of Congress were now looking toward legislation that would lift the travel ban on all Americans traveling to Cuba.

United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton acknowledged that her country's policy toward Cuba -- based on the notion of isolation -- has failed. To that end, some analysts suggested that the Obama administration's stance of engagement (vis a vis isolation) was being applied across the board, and was also being applied to Cuba. United States President Barack Obama explained that the policy shift was ultimately aimed at bringing greater freedom to Cuba. He said, "There are no better ambassadors for freedom than Cuban Americans." But both President Obama and Secretary Clinton noted that Cuba must make steps toward democracy and improving human rights. Such steps would include freeing political prisoners and cutting fees on remittances sent from Cuban Americans in the United States.

The Obama administration's announcement on Cuban policy was made ahead of the Summit of the Americas in Trinidad. There, at the opening ceremony of the summit, President Obama addressed the United States-Cuban relations saying, "The United States seeks a new beginning with Cuba." It was the most significant opening for bilateral relations in decades.

Cuba, which has been suspended from the Organization of American States (OAS) for decades due to its non-democratic status, became the dominant issue at the summit. Most OAS member states support Cuba's return to the body, regarding its exile from the body to be a throwback to the Cold War era. United States policy toward Cuba has been an enduring sticking point.

Cuban President Raul Castro, who has advanced limited reforms since succeeding Fidel Castro, indicated openness to discussions with the United States, saying that all issues -- including political prisoners and human rights -- were on the table for debate.

On September 14, 2009, United States President Barack Obama extended the 47-year-long trade embargo on Cuba for one year. He said, "I hereby determine that the continuation for one year of the exercise of those authorities with respect to Cuba is in the national interest of the United States." This move to extend the 1917 Trading With the Enemy Act (TWEA) with regard to Cuba was undertaken despite an earlier vow to seek a new beginning in the United States-Cuba relations.

As noted above, at the Fifth Summit of the Americas, held in Trinidad and Tobago earlier in the year, President Obama said that he hoped bilateral relations could move in "a new direction." The extension of the embargo was viewed by some as a contradiction of this promise. That said, President Obama has directed his administration to ease restrictions on travel as well as the transfer of money by Cuban-Americans to Cuba. President Obama also authorized American companies to enter into limited Cuban commercial arenas, such as the telecommunication and satellite television markets. He explained that such a move would help advance freedom and self-determination in Cuba, which would -- by extension -- be in the national interest of the United States.

Venezuela

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United States (U.S.) relations with Venezuela have traditionally been close, with a strong mutual commitment to democracy. Venezuela has been a major supplier of foreign oil to the U.S. market. Key U.S. interests in Venezuela include promotion of U.S. exports and protection of U.S. investment; continuation of the economic reform program; preservation of Venezuela's constitutional democracy; closer counter narcotics cooperation; and continued access to a leading source of petroleum.

Underscoring the importance of this bilateral relationship, President Clinton's October 1997 visit launched a "Partnership for the 21st Century" to promote common solutions for energy development, trade and investment, and protection of the environment, as well as a strategic alliance against crime and drug trafficking.

The United States is Venezuela's most important trading partner, representing approximately half of both imports and exports. In turn, Venezuela is the United States' third-largest export market in Latin America, purchasing U.S. machinery, transportation equipment, agricultural commodities and auto parts. Venezuela's opening of its petroleum sector to foreign investment in 1996 created extensive trade and investment opportunities for U.S. companies.

New legislation is expected to open up investment opportunities in natural gas and mining. The Department of State is committed to promoting the interests of U.S. companies in overseas markets.

Venezuela is a minor source country for opium poppy and coca but a major transit country for cocaine and heroin. Money laundering and judicial corruption are major concerns. The United States is working with Venezuela to combat drug trafficking. In 2000, the United States gave \$700,000 for counter narcotics assistance and about \$400,000 for Venezuelan participants in the International Military Education and Training Program. There is no USAID or Peace Corps mission in Venezuela.

Approximately 23,000 U.S. citizens living in Venezuela have registered with the U.S. Embassy, an estimated three-quarters of them residing in the Caracas area. An estimated 12,000 U.S. tourists visit Venezuela annually. About 500 U.S. companies are represented in the country, however, some U.S. companies removed some of their U.S. nationals working in Venezuela after Chavez won election, and again following the 2002 quasi coup d'etat.

Since coming to power, the Bush administration has opposed the close ties shared between the leaders of Cuba and Venezuela. In this regard, the quasi-coup d'etat against Chavez that occurred in the spring of 2002 was rumored to have been sanctioned by the U.S. While there is no conclusive evidence to prove this allegation, its existence suggests that there have been real tensions between the two countries. Indeed, tensions between the Bush-led United States and Chavez' government in Venezuela continue to date. Chavez' left-leaning political stances, as well as his close relationship with Fidel Castro in Cuba (as noted above), are not viewed positively by the Bush administration. Meanwhile, Chavez government does not share the same outlook as the Bush administration on several policy matters.

In the backdrop of this tense situation has been the fact that the United States seems determined to isolate left-leaning Venezuela. Indeed, United States Secretary of State-designate Condoleezza Rice described the Venezuelan government as being a "negative influence" on the western hemisphere. In April 2005, Secretary Rice called for the sale of arms to Venezuela to be monitored. An unidentified Venezuelan official responded by noting that her statement was an untoward intrusion of Venezuelan sovereignty. For his part, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has described the Bush administration in the United States as having imperialist inclinations. He has also claimed periodically that the United States has plotted to oust him. Moreover, he has threatened to stop selling oil to the United States if that country's interference intensifies.

In July 2005, Venezuelan prosecutors convened an investigation into the activities of the United States Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). By August 2005, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez had accused the DEA of using its agents for purposed of spying. The Venezuela leader said, "The DEA was using the fight against drug trafficking as a mask, to support drug trafficking, to carry out intelligence in Venezuela against the government." In response, Chavez said that Venezuela would discontinue its agreement to work with the DEA to deal with narcotics trafficking. However, he said that Venezuela would continue to work with other international groups on the matter.

In August 2005, already-strained relations between Venezuela and the United States were further damaged when religious evangelist, Pat Robertson, called for the assassination of President Hugo Chavez on his religious television broadcast of the "700 Club." Robertson, a Christian fundamentalist and strong supporter of the Bush administration, said, "We have the ability to take him out, and I think the time has come that we exercise that ability."

The United States Department of State distanced itself from Robertson's call for the death of the Venezuelan leader by characterizing his comments as "inappropriate." The department also noted that Roberts' words did not reflect the policy of the United States. Donald Rumsfeld, the Defense Secretary of the United States said that Robertson's words were that of a private citizen. United States President George W. Bush offered no comment.

Of course, critics of the Bush administration charged that even though Robertson might be a private citizen, he is one with a public forum, and one known to be a close ally of the American president. As such, they have said that a clear response from the administration is necessitated at a time when bilateral relations have suffered. In fact, these sentiments were echoed by the Venezuelan government as well. In an address, Bernardo Alvarez, Venezuela's Ambassador to the United States said, "Mr Robertson has been one of this president's staunchest allies. His statement demands the strongest condemnation by the White House."

Only days prior to the conflagration involving Robertson, a Republican Senator of the United States and the Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Arlen Specter, sent a letter to the Department of Defense requesting improved relations with Venezuela, for the purpose of working cooperatively to deal with narcotics trafficking. The Venezuelan government had ceased cooperation with the United States DEA on this issue a month earlier. In his letter, Specter noted, "It may well be helpful to, at least, have a moratorium on adverse comments on Venezuela."

Robertson's remarks served only to reinforce the perception by the Venezuelan government that it is the target of an ongoing campaign of political aggression by Washington, and that it is intended to destabilize the country and ultimately remove Chavez from office.

In response, Chavez' government said it was exploring all possible legal options available. For his part, President Chavez said he did not "even know who that person is" when he was informed about Robertson's remarks. But Venezuelan Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel framed Robertson's words as a "criminal statement" and challenged Washington's response saying that it would put United States anti-terrorism policy to the test. In this regard Rangel said, "It's huge hypocrisy to maintain this discourse against terrorism and at the same time, in the heart of that country there are entirely terrorist statements like those."

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As the fiasco continued to dominate the media, Robertson responded first by saying that his remarks were taken out of context. He also claimed he had never called for the actual assassination of Chavez but simply his ousting from office. Presumably confronted with the record clearly stating that he had indeed used the word assassination in his remarks about Chavez, he subsequently apologized.

The lack of response from the United States White House, however, prompted the Venezuelan government to say that it was still going to seek legal recourse. On Aug. 29, 2005, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez said that if Washington failed to take legal measures against Robertson's "terrorist" proposal (i.e. calling for the assassination of a head of state), then he would take the case to the United Nations and the Organization of American States. Chavez also said Venezuela would not rule out calling for Robertson's extradition to Venezuela to face charges.

A day later, however, the Venezuelan leader took a different approach and said he would welcome improved bilateral ties with the United States. Standing with American civil rights leader, Rev. Jesse Jackson, Chavez said that he sought to improve relations between the two countries and offered inexpensive heating fuel -- at a 40 percent discount -- to impoverished United States residents in anticipation of winter. Chavez also offered food, potable water, fuel, and humanitarian aid to the devastated Gulf Coast residents in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. After being asked by Jackson to resume work with the DEA on narcotics trafficking, Chavez said he would consider it.

For his part, Jackson said the political rhetoric had to stop and noted there was no evidence that Venezuela was a "destabilizing force" in the hemisphere, as suggested by the Bush administration. Earlier, Jackson, a religious pastor himself, condemned Pat Robertson's words.

On Sept. 16, 2005, addressed the United Nations General Assembly. In that address, the Venezuelan leader condemned the neo-imperialism, militarism and unbridled capitalism of the Bush administration in the United States. He also assailed the United States government for failing to protect the impoverished citizens of New Orleans from the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. As well, he accused the United States of taking a contradictory stance on terrorism by failing to condemn the aforementioned calls by Robertson, for Chavez' own assassination. On this issue, Chavez said, "The only place where a person can ask for another head of state to be assassinated is the United States, which is what happened recently with the Reverend Pat Robertson, a very close friend of the White House. He publicly asked for my assassination and he's still walking the streets."

After going past the five-minute limit placed on speakers, he was asked to quickly finish his statement. In response, he turned to Jan Eliasson of Sweden, the president of the General Assembly, and said, "I think the president of the United States spoke for twenty minutes here yesterday. I would ask your indulgence to let me finish my statement."

At the end of his address, he was given the loudest applause of any world leader addressing the summit.

Some observers said that his words apparently captured the collective global resentment toward the policies of the United States under the Bush administration. Others explained Chavez' popularity at the summit by noting that United Nations members tend to rally around certain members when they are faced with attacks. For example, when conservative lawmakers in the United States called for the resignation of general Secretary Kofi Annan, Annan was given a standing ovation as a gesture of support. When United States President Bill Clinton was facing attacks by the Republican opposition over the scandal involving Monica Lewinsky, he also received a standing ovation from the General Assembly.

Meanwhile, in May 2005, Venezuela called for a Cuban-born militant and possible assassin, Luis Posada Carriles, to be extradited from the United States, where he was in custody, to Venezuela. Born in Cuba, Posada Carriles

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became a naturalized citizen of Venezuela and has been linked with several bloody political plots. The Venezuelan government wanted Carriles to stand trial for the bombing of an Air Cubana airliner traveling from Barbados to Cuba in 1976, which left all 76 people on board dead.

But the United States said it would not deport Carriles to a third country, which might very well hand him over to President Fidel Castro in Cuba. In response, President Hugo Chavez assured the United States authorities he would not hand Carriles over to Castro. Still, he warned that if the United States continued its path of intransigence on the matter, diplomatic ties between Caracas and Washington D.C. would have to be reconsidered.

By the close of May 2005, United States officials rejected Venezuela's request to detain and extradite Carriles. The United States Department of State was holding Posada Carriles on suspected immigration violations; it said there was insufficient evidence to arrest and extradite him in accordance with Venezuela's wishes.

In response to the decision by the United States, tens of thousands of Venezuelans demonstrated in the streets of the capital city of Caracas. The protest rally was largely peaceful with demonstrators dancing in the streets, blowing whistles and shouting anti-American slogans. Many Venezuelans believe that the United States' position is rife with double standards, and some accuse United President George W. Bush of hypocrisy for allowing a possible terrorist into its jurisdiction even while he wages a "war on terror."

The case of Posada Carriles has contributed to the devolution of already-strained relations between Venezuela and the United States. The current diplomatic imbroglio over Posada Carriles has not helped the situation. In fact, a new problem emerged to exacerbate the situation when the United States canceled the tourist visa of Venezuelan Supreme Court President, Omar Mora. In response, Venezuela warned it would halt visits by American officials. The United States said an administrative error precipitated the cancellation of Omar Mora's visa. It also noted that the cancellation was not political and that the Venezuelan Supreme Court President could re-apply for a new visa. The Venezuelan government, however, was not assuaged. Venezuelan Vice-President Jose Vicente Rangel characterized the incident as a "slight to Venezuela's dignity." Other Venezuelan officials, including Omar Mora himself, suggested that the cancellation of the visa was linked to Venezuela's calls on the United States to extradite Luis Posada Carriles.

Posada Carriles' immigration hearing was set for June 13th, 2005. There, he renewed his request for political asylum in the United States, and also requested that he be transferred from Texas to custody in Florida, where his family and attorneys were based. On June 21, 2005, the judge refuses Posada Carriles' request to be transferred to Florida and set a date for an immigration hearing before a Homeland Security judge in Texas. In that regard, Posada Carriles was expected to face a Homeland Security judge in the United States on August 29, 2005. Following that hearing, the

Department of Homeland Security judge ruled that he could not be deported due to a possible threat of torture in Venezuela, if was, indeed, sent back to there.

It was reported in the Cuban media that on March 22, 2006, United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) decided that Posada Carriles would continue to be detained because he continued "to present a danger to the community and a flight risk." The ICE also acknowledged that he had "a history of engaging in criminal activity, associating with individuals involved in criminal activity, and participating in violent acts that indicate a disregard for the safety of the general public."

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It was the first major admission on the part of the United States government regarding the potential criminal activities of Posada Carriles. Nevertheless, on April 27, 2006, the New York Times reported that Posada Carriles has applied to become a United States citizen.

In 2006, already-bad bilateral relations with the United States sunk to a new low after both countries expelled one another's diplomats after Caracas accused Washington D.C. of spying. Venezuela also warned that if Washington severed diplomatic ties with Caracas, it would respond by closing all Venezuelan refineries in the United States, effectively disrupting oil supplies, and potential leading to further price increases.

On April 7, 2006, a convoy carrying United States Ambassador William Brownfield was pelted with tomatoes and eggs in the Venezuelan capital city of Caracas. Reports also stated that individuals on motorcycles chased Brownfield's car. Police escorting the convoy did not intervene. It was believed that supporters of President Hugo Chavez may have been responsible.

In September 2006, Chavez addressed the United Nations General Assembly. In his speech he assailed the "imperialist" and hegemonic power of the United States, quoting famed American linguist Noam Chomsky in so doing. His reference to Chomsky apparently sparked renewed interest in the famed linguist's writings and philosophical stances. He also jokingly referred to United States President Bush, who had earlier addressed the assembly, as "the devil." The Bush administration characterized Chavez' statements before the United Nations as "unstatesmanlike." But in an interview with Time magazine, Chavez noted that Bush had also used vitriolic language against him. To this end, Chavez said, "Bush has called me worse things — tyrant, populist dictator, drug trafficker, to name a few. I'm not attacking Bush; I'm simply counter-attacking."

The scenario highlighted continued poor bilateral relations between the two respective administrations.

The situation was not helped by the fact that only days later, Venezuelan Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro was detained at New York's John F. Kennedy airport for 90 minutes. Maduro was in the United States to attend the aforementioned United Nations General Assembly meeting but was stopped as he was trying to leave the country. According to various reports, after being detained, Maduro was questioned about his role in an attempted coup d'etat led by Chavez in 1992 by regular airport security. Diplomatic security then entered the fray, presumably to resolve the matter.

According to Maduro, however, the situation was not a simple one and entailed treatment disallowed under international law. Indeed, Maduro asserted that he was both strip-searched and subjected to verbal abuse. In remarks to the media, Maduro said, "We were detained during an hour and a half, threatened by police with being beaten. We hold the United States government responsible." Venezuelan President Chavez observed that Maduro's detention was a provocation of sorts. Officially, Venezuela responded to the incident by filing a formal complaint to both United States authorities and the United Nations.

For its part, United States authorities denied that Maduro had been detained, saying instead that he had simply been asked to comply with a second security screening. However, the United States Department of State later acknowledged the incident and subsequently issued an apology to the Venezuelan foreign minister. A spokesperson for the State Department said, "The state department regrets this incident. The United States government apologized to Foreign Minister Maduro and the Venezuelan government." Regardless, the apology did not alleviate the tensions between the two countries, with Foreign Minister Maduro saying that it was not enough.

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The 2008 election of Barack Obama as president of the United States augured the possibility of a shift in policy towards various countries in Latin America, including Venezuela. To that end, the prospects of dialogue loomed large after the 2009 Summit of the Americas in Trinidad where Obama and Chavez exchanged handshakes. Chavez also informed Secretary of State Hillary Clinton that he would re-establish diplomatic representation in the interests of improved bilateral relations.

That said, it was yet to be seen if such overtures would yield actual results in the long run.

In June 2009, it was announced that the United States and Venezuela were set to restore diplomatic envoys respectively. Venezuelan Foreign Minister

Nicolas Maduro said that his country would send its ambassador back to Washington, several months after the envoy was withdrawn in the midst of a diplomatic imbroglio involving an alleged United States plot against Bolivian President Evo Morales. At the time, Venezuela expelled the United States envoy from Caracas in a move intended to show solidarity with Bolivia. The United States reacted by expelling the Venezuelan ambassador from Washington. Now, with bilateral relations between the two countries far less heated, in some measure as a result of a new Obama administration in the United States, Maduro also noted that "fluid communication" between the two sides was set to resume. Both Maduro and a United States official confirmed that the United States would send its own ambassador back to Caracas.

Organization of American States (OAS)

Special Report: Summit of the Organisation of American States (OAS) in 2005: --

The leaders of 34 nations from across the Americas convened in the Argentine resort town of Mar del Plata from Nov. 3 and 4, 2005, to discuss consolidating free trade across the hemisphere. The talks, however, failed to reach any significant resolution on the matter of creating The United States-backed proposal for a regional free trade zone. The United States was faced with strong opposition from five Latin American countries -- Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, Uruguay, Paraguay - who said that the free trade zone plan could damage their economies. They also cautioned that they wanted to see how various trade-related issues transpired at the upcoming World Trade Organization meeting in Hong Kong. The twenty-nine remaining countries said they would resume talks on a Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) in 2006.

For United States President George W. Bush, the summit was sometimes a rather discomforting event. At one point, he had to listen to his host, Argentine President Nestor Kirchner, publicly attribute his country's economic woes to American-backed economic policies of structural adjustment. In addition to that, he was faced with opposition from Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez, who said Latin America was "standing like a rock" against the idea of the free trade area. Chavez also led a peaceful anti-Bush rally of about 40,000 people at a football stadium in the resort town. During the rally, Chavez characterized as Bush's foreign policy agenda as a neo-imperialist creation. Argentine soccer legend, Diego Maradona, also participated in the rally at the start of the summit. A demonstration by far-left activists later in the day resulted in violent riots. Still, Bush responded with good humor to his less than warm reception. At one point, he noted, "It's not easy to host all these countries. It's particularly not easy to host - perhaps - me."

After leaving Argentina, President Bush traveled to Brazil. There, he promised his Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula Da Silva that he would work on eliminating agricultural subsidies -- a key measure needed in the movement towards free trade around the world. He cautioned, however, that such an effort would also rest upon European willingness to do the same. While in Brazil, Bush took a retaliatory swipe at his nemesis, Chavez, by accusing

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some nations of trying to roll back 20 years of democratic progress. In Brazil, Bush was met once again by protesters screaming insults and burning his effigy.

The final stop on Bush's Latin American trip was Panama. There, he was scheduled to meet with President Martin Torrijos on matters related to regional trade and democracy.

See below for report on the 2009 Summit of the Americas with Obama at the helm of the United States.

Other Significant Relations

Internationally, the United States (U.S.) works through the United Nations and its affiliated agencies to further political stability and social development, and it seeks to promote economic growth and prosperity in conjunction with the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. It is a member of the World Trade Organization, through which it engages in efforts to regularize and liberalize flows of trade on a global scale.

Regionally, the United States attempts to achieve a broad multilateral consensus on hemispheric issues through participation in the Organization of American States (discussed above), though the great majority of member countries have decided to depart from preferred U.S. policy and open normal diplomatic and trade relations with Cuba. Regional trade integration has taken place through the North American Free Trade Agreement and the Caribbean Basin Initiative. The African Growth and Opportunity Act, signed in 2000, expands the U.S. commitment to reducing trade barriers to encompass many countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

The United States maintains about 800 overseas military bases. In fiscal 2000, military personnel stationed outside U.S. borders numbered some 258,000. The largest troop concentrations are in Germany with 69,000, though this level has declined by more than 150,000 in the last decade; the rest of Europe with 44,000, including about 11,400 serving as international peacekeepers in the Balkans; Japan with 40,000; South Korea with 37,000; and Guam and elsewhere in the Pacific, 24,000. Since the end of the Gulf War in 1991, the United States and its ally Great Britain have patrolled the air space over Iraq, enforcing "no-fly zones" in the northern and southern sections of that country and occasionally attacking Iraqi installations that threaten the air patrols or Iraqi aircraft that violate the no-fly zones. Most of these armed encounters have taken place over the parts of Iraq to which the flight proscription applies, but on Feb. 16, 2001, U.S. and British jets struck at installations on the outskirts of the Iraqi capital, Baghdad.

Two other focus areas of U.S. foreign policy engagement having key significance merit further discussion. One is the nuanced and evolving American relation to Europe, where the United States has some of its oldest and strongest allies. But the political dynamics of the European continent are in flux after the Cold War, while the economic integration of European nations, propelled by the creation of a large single-currency zone, highlights the fact that in the world of business and finance, the United States and Europe are competitors. The other key focus area, at the opposite end of the Eurasian land mass, is a former and potential adversary, a trade partner of rapidly ascendant importance and an emerging economic giant: the world's most populous country, China.

Europe

Both the United States (U.S.) military alliance with Western Europe, which since 1999 extends into Central Europe, and the manifold, somewhat fractious economic and trade dealings between the world's two largest industrialized nodes are pivot points for the course of future events. The United States initiated the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or NATO, in 1949 to deter Soviet expansion in Europe after the U.S.S.R had absorbed East-Central Europe into its sphere of influence following World War II. In 1999, NATO expanded to include three former Warsaw Pact countries - Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. This move had potentially unsettling implications for European and American relations with Russia as it put states that were formerly in the Soviet orbit

into the Western alliance explicitly created to oppose the Soviet Union. Moreover, support by U.S. officials and others exists for a future expansion of NATO to add the Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, countries that were not just in the Soviet sphere of influence but part of the Soviet Union itself. Others in NATO, notably some members of the German government, have voiced opposition or at least ambivalence in regard to this proposal.

In a grand strategic sense, NATO's security mission, originally plainly defined in terms of a military counterweight to the Russian-led Soviet Union, must somehow be refined to accommodate the new Russia. Yet, to the geopolitical construct broadly referred to as the West, just what character this "new Russia" will assume in coming years remains inscrutable. At the same time, how politically stable, economically strong industrial democracies engage Russia can hardly fail to have some effect on what sort of Russia emerges. Potential shades of this engagement fall along a spectrum from inimical treatment to aloofness to an as-yet fictional premise that Russia is essentially no different from the nations engaging it.

However, the war-torn condition of the Balkans driven by still-unresolved conflicts that broke out in the early 1990s when the old Yugoslavia disintegrated in a sense supplants the question of long-term NATO policy on Russia with a more immediate, ongoing challenge. After a period of international passivity while fighting raged in Croatia and then Bosnia, the United States took the lead in gaining a European consensus to use force to choke off vicious ethnic reprisals. The intervention did not meet textbook criteria of effectiveness: The worst massacre, in Srebrenica, Bosnia, in 1995, took place practically under the noses of international troops in a declared safe haven, and leading indicted war criminals are still at large. International action, nonetheless, almost certainly forestalled an even worse outcome.

The Balkan situation reflects a European manifestation of a pattern of political fragmentation that is widely and increasingly encountered in many regions of the world. If this observation dovetails into an argument on behalf of the responsibility for "nation-building," that argument is one that policymakers in the United States and other Western powers, more typically than not, seem loath to hear. History offers scant instances, if any, when an entity's acquisition of the accoutrements and recognition of nationhood proceeded smoothly and efficaciously.

Political developments through several recent decades include recurrent instances of attempted nation-building - various U.S. leaders persisted in describing their country's Vietnam involvement in these terms, for example - but the attempts failed. (The successful transformation of former Soviet satellites into modern European countries marks the rebirth of nations with a millennium or so of cultural identity and some form of political one.) This discouraging record leaves theorists and thoughtful policy professionals groping, utterly without consensus, for an explanation. Do the repeated failures reflect lack of political will, insufficiently sustained effort and commitment of resources at a level sorely inadequate to the task? Or is any mission of so-called nation-building inherently a windmill-tilting effort to accomplish the impossible?

U.S. commercial relations with Europe are also at a crossroads. In January 1999, 11 of the 15 member countries of the European Union, or EU, launched the euro-denominated single-currency zone, comprising an economic area with a slightly greater population than that of the United States and a combined gross domestic product of more than three-quarters of American GDP. The currency changeover is designed both to reduce transaction costs and delays within the European economic bloc and to offer international investors another option, besides the U.S. dollar and Japanese yen, to hold as a trusted reserve currency.

Both the euro zone and the EU as a whole are further engaged in dismantling trade, financial and regulatory barriers so as to streamline and invigorate their internal economic performance and to challenge the pre-eminent U.S. position on international markets. While the United States and European countries have a long history of sporadic trade disputes, they have shown a tendency lately toward increasing disagreement on trade practices. Two of the most acrimonious issues now on the table concern European subsidies to former Caribbean and African colonies that negate the price advantage that Central American bananas grown by U.S. corporations would otherwise have; and European refusal to purchase beef from hormone-treated cattle raised in the United States. In the beef case, the World Trade Organization upheld the U.S. position that the refusal constituted an unfair trade

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practice and authorized the imposition of rotating retaliatory tariffs on European luxury goods, including fancy cheeses and chocolates, imported into the United States. For its part, the EU has submitted complaints to the WTO concerning alleged American subsidization of various industries, among them farm products, metals and aircraft.

Since September 11, 2001, the United States' relationship with various European countries, most notably, the United Kingdom, has been strong, presumably due to shared interests in fighting terrorism and preserving global security. After the war with Iraq in 2003, however, relations with several European countries -- traditional allies such as France and Germany -- have been strained due to those countries' objections to the war.

In late 2005, United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was in Europe for meetings with leaders and her counterparts in countries including Germany, Romania, Ukraine and Belgium. Secretary Rice first arrived in the German city of Berlin for talks with newly-installed German Chancellor Angela Merkel. The original intent of the trip to Europe was oriented toward improving bilateral ties, which were largely strained as a result of the invasion of Iraq and the subsequent ongoing war. Although the new German Chancellor had a similar objective in mind, Merkel also expressed concern about the conduct of the war on terror.

Partially driving Merkel's agenda were the media reports about a German citizen, Khaled el-Masri, who was detained in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and then transported to a prison in Afghanistan where he was jailed for several months. According to media reports, el-Masri had been detained on the suspicion that he had a false passport and because he had the same name as a known militant extremist. The United States government said the passport turned out to be genuine and that el-Masri was released from the Afghan prison when Washington decided that it no longer had reason to keep him in detention. A senior Bush administration official refused to answer a question posed by a journalist about whether or not Washington ever had evidence to hold el-Masri in the first place. The situation was not helped by revelations in the media that the United States had asked Germany to keep the matter quiet.

In Germany, Chancellor Merkel said in a joint press conference with Rice that the United States admitted it had made a mistake in the case Khaled el-Masri. In this regard, Merkel said, "I'm pleased to say that we spoke about the individual case, which was accepted by the United States as a mistake." But later as Rice traveled from Germany to her next European stop in Romania, senior United States officials denied that Rice had admitted a United States mistake over el-Masri. Instead, the aforementioned senior administration official said the United States government had simply informed Germany about el-Masri's detainment and subsequent release. Indeed, the official went so far as to refer to Merkel in saying, "We are not quite sure what was in her head."

Complicating matters was the fact that on Dec. 6, 2005, the American Civil Liberties Association (ACLU) filed a lawsuit on el-Masri's behalf against various Bush administration officials, including former Central Intelligence Agency director George Tenet on the basis of supposed wrongful imprisonment. The lawsuit text depicted el-Masri's treatment as "constituting prolonged arbitrary detention, torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment." The lawsuit also alleged that the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) released him several months later by unceremoniously dumping him in Albania. From Germany, el-Masri said in a translated statement, "I want to know why they did this to me and how it ever came about. I don't think that I am (the) human being, the man I used to be."

The talks in Germany between Rice and Merkel were also dominated by reports that the CIA transported terror suspects via German territory. Germany said that it had a list of 400 flights that had traversed across its territorial airspace and it required an explanation on the transport activity. There were suspicions that some of these trips might have been associated with the controversial practice of taking terror suspects to clandestine prisons outside the United States for interrogation.

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Indeed, international attention was focused on the matter after the Washington Post reported that Europe was home to some of the United States CIA's "black sites" -- these secret camps used by the United States intelligence agency to interrogate terror suspects. A subsequent report by Washington, D.C.-based Human Rights Watch identified the two specific host countries as Romania and Poland, however, both countries denied the charges.

Before her trip to Europe, Rice acknowledged that terror suspects had been flown to other countries for interrogation but she also said that the Bush administration did not condone the torture of terror suspects. Rice claimed that terror suspects were transported by aircraft to other countries as part of a process called "rendition" and that such action was "a lawful weapon." Still, Rice refused to address charges that the CIA has operated clandestine prisons where terror suspects have been interrogated without regard for international law. Indeed, Tom Malinowski, an official with Human Rights Watch, responded to Secretary Rice's silence on the allegations of secret prisons saying, "Condi Rice can't deny that secret prisons exist because they do. But she can't say where they are because that would embarrass the United States and put the host countries in an impossible position." He also accused Rice of mischaracterizing the actual nature of rendition. To this end, he said, "Secretary Rice made extra-legal rendition sound like just another form of extradition. In fact, it's a form of kidnapping and 'disappearing' someone entirely outside the law."

Officials of the European Commission announced in November 2005 that there would be a comprehensive investigation on this matter. The investigation was to determine the veracity of the charges by the Red Cross and Human Rights Watch since such "black sites" would be a violation of the European convention on human rights and the international convention against torture. If the sites are found, the European Commission has warned that any country hosting them in Europe could be in breach of Article 6 of the Treaty of Nice, which calls on all member states to uphold basic human rights. The voting rights of guilty member states would be duly suspended as a result.

Questions about the United States' conduct of the war on terror, as well as challenges to the lawfulness of its strategies and tactics, were expected to dominate the entirety of Secretary Rice's trip to Europe. Rice has explained United States tactics saying, "If you don't get to them before they commit their crimes, they will commit mass murder. We have an obligation to defend our people and we will use every lawful means to do so." Nevertheless, the international community made it clear that it wanted answers about United States policy on rendition, interrogation of suspects, the treatment of prisoners and its overall stance as regards torture. Indeed, even the United States' key ally in its invasion of Iraq, the United Kingdom, asked for "clarification" on the these issues.

The decision by President George W. Bush to veto anti-torture legislation authored by fellow Republican Senator John McCain, while simultaneously asserting that the United States "does not torture," only served to muddy the waters about what exactly constitutes the Bush administration's policy. Indeed, a plethora of challenges have been levied about the Bush administration's adherence to the conventions and protocols of international jurisprudence, such as the Geneva Convention. See "Political Conditions of Country Review: United States" for further details as regards the Bush administration, torture, the treatment of detainees and the application of prevailing international law.

The year 2007 saw new British Prime Minister Gordon Brown hold official talks with his American counterpart, United States President George W. Bush, for the first time since succeeding Tony Blair. The two heads of government met at Camp David in the United States. At issue was the state of the trans-Atlantic relationship, given Tony Blair's exit from the office of the prime minister, and Brown's entry into that role. Brown signaled goodwill by noting that the world owed the United States a debt of gratitude for its leadership in the global war on terror.

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The election in 2008 of Barack Obama in the United States was reported to have been well-received by many heads of state in Europe. There was anticipation that an Obama administration would augur more close-knit cooperation with Europe on resolving pressing geopolitical issues of the day.

China

An adversarial relationship between the United States (U.S.) and China began when the Chinese Communist Party, led by Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, completed their conquest of mainland China in 1949, driving the pro-American Nationalist government headed by Chiang Kai-shek to the island of Taiwan. Taiwan continued to receive U.S. recognition as the sole Chinese polity until 1979. Fighting between U.S. and Chinese communist forces in the 1950-1953 Korean conflict and mainland China's development of atomic weapons further obstructed prospects for the two countries to normalize relations. However, between 1954 and 1970, the United States and China held 136 ambassadorial-level meetings, and in the late 1960s, trade restrictions and other impediments to bilateral contact were relaxed to a very limited degree.

A dramatic breakthrough in U.S.-Chinese relations came in the early 1970s during the administration of President Richard Nixon. First, in July 1971, Nixon revealed that his national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, had secretly traveled to Beijing to initiate direct contact with the Chinese leadership. Then, in February 1972, President Nixon himself made a trip to China. The two countries announced they held improved bilateral relations to be in their mutual interest and intended to work toward establishing full diplomatic relations. U.S. President Gerald Ford visited China in 1975 and Chinese Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping visited Washington, D.C., at the beginning of 1979; Deng's trip coincided with full normalization of diplomatic ties between the two countries. On March 1, 1979, the United States and China formally established embassies in their reciprocal capitals. Later that year, outstanding private claims were resolved, and a bilateral trade agreement was concluded. Vice President Walter Mondale reciprocated Vice Premier Deng's visit by traveling to China in August 1979. The next year, the two countries signed agreements on maritime affairs, civil aviation and the textile industry as well as a bilateral consular convention.

U.S. recognition of the Chinese government entailed the withdrawal of official government-to-government contacts with Taiwan and the transfer of all official U.S. relations with China from Taipei to the People's Republic of China and its capital, Beijing. The United States thereby affirmed a position first articulated on the occasion of President Nixon's visit, characterized as the "one-China policy." Although Beijing acknowledges the American people will maintain commercial, cultural and other unofficial contacts with the people of Taiwan, the United States accepts the view of the mainland government that Taiwan is a part of China and not a separate country. The Taiwan issue continues to be a source of U.S.-China tensions, however.

In the decade after they normalized relations in 1979, the United States and China participated in hundreds of joint research projects and cooperative programs under the Agreement on Cooperation in Science and Technology, the largest bilateral program. High-level and working-level contacts initiated in 1980 broadened U.S.-China dialogue to cover a wide range of issues encompassing global and regional strategic problems and politico-military questions, including arms control, U.N. and other multilateral organization activity and international narcotics control. Additional bilateral agreements were concluded, notably in the fields of scientific, technological and cultural interchange. Trade between the two nations accelerated.

The expanding relationship that followed normalization was threatened in 1981 by Chinese objections to the level of U.S. arms sales to Taiwan. Secretary of State Alexander Haig visited China in an effort to resolve Chinese questions about the United States' unofficial relations with Taiwan. Eight months of negotiations produced a joint communiqué in which the United States stated an intention to gradually reduce the level of arms sales to Taiwan; for its part, China stated that the effort to achieve a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan question was a fundamental national policy.

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High-level exchanges continued during the 1980s. Vice President Bush visited China in May 1982, and President Reagan and Premier Zhao Ziyang made reciprocal visits in 1984. In July 1985, President Li Xiannian traveled to the United States, the first such visit by a Chinese head of state. Vice President Bush again visited China in October 1985 and opened a consulate in Chengdu, the United States' fourth consular post in China in addition to the U.S. Embassy in Beijing. There were also further exchanges of cabinet-level officials, capped by President Bush's visit to Beijing in February 1989.

The year 1989 was a highly significant one in Chinese political developments as well as in the U.S. relationship with China. By this time, a large and growing number of cultural, educational and professional exchange activities at all levels gave the American and Chinese people broad exposure to each other's value systems, cultural and artistic proclivities, popular styles and modes of entertainment. The vibrancy of this interchange most likely helped to encourage the formation of a student-led pro-democracy movement.

By mid-May, the ferment had grown to the point that an estimated 150,000 students and workers occupied Tiananmen Square in central Beijing; major demonstrations also took place in other parts of China. The Chinese government declared martial law and deployed the military with the intent of breaking up the shows of dissent mushrooming across Beijing, but further spontaneous protests initially induced most of the military convoys to hold passive positions in outlying areas and not move into the central city. However, on June 3 and June 4, the armed forces moved into Tiananmen Square in a violent crackdown. A few thousand protesters were likely killed in the square and elsewhere in Beijing. Reprisals occurred in other regions as well.

The events of Tiananmen disrupted U.S.-China relations, and trade and investment dropped dramatically, although cultural and other exchanges continued to some extent. The U.S. and other governments enacted a number of measures meant to indicate displeasure at the Chinese authorities' suppression of the demonstrators. The U.S. suspended high-level official exchanges and weapons exports and imposed a series of economic sanctions. Chilly relations remained the rule into 1990, when at the G-7 summit in Houston, Texas, Western nations called for renewed political and economic reforms in China, particularly in the area of human rights.

Nonetheless, a pattern of gradual easing ensued. In 1991 and 1992, the Bush administration vetoed congressionally imposed conditions on normal trade status renewal for China, which had been routinely granted on an annual basis prior to Tiananmen. The administration stressed the importance of the U.S. relationship with China and the belief that withholding normal trade status was not the correct way to exert pressure on China and would only result in isolating it. In a similar vein, in 1994 President Clinton decided to de-link the annual trade status review process from China's human rights record. The president noted that human rights concerns remained an essential part of the U.S. engagement with China but within a broader context. While moving toward a fully open trade relationship with China, the United States would continue to urge the Chinese government to foster the rule of law and to allow a more open civil society.

Disagreements stemming from the U.S. relationship with Taiwan continued to intermittently heat up. In 1996, China conducted military exercises, widely considered provocative or intimidating, in waters close to Taiwan. The United States dispatched two aircraft carrier battle groups to the region, signaling it would not passively acquiesce should the mainland Chinese attempt to incorporate Taiwan into their system by force. The tense period related to this incident was relatively brief, and U.S.-China relations improved to the point that Chinese President Jiang Zemin visited the United States in the fall of 1997. Returning Jiang's gesture, President Clinton visited China in June 1998, traveling extensively through the country and directly interacting with the Chinese people via live speeches and a radio show.

Yet the two countries still eye each other warily. The military action in Yugoslavia, which China opposed, seriously disrupted relations when NATO jets mistakenly bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, killing three and injuring dozens of others. At nearly the same time, in mid-1999, the U.S. Congress and American news media devoted considerable attention to allegations, never substantiated, of Chinese espionage at the nuclear weapons laboratory

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in Los Alamos, N.M. The United States has voiced great misgivings in regard to recent and planned Chinese sales of nuclear reactor and missile technology to Pakistan and Iran. China has protested a pending U.S. sale of new high-tech weapons systems to Taiwan and, along with Russia and several European nations, has strongly opposed the United States' proposed National Missile Defense initiative.

On the trade front, China has pursued membership in the World Trade Organization since 1986 and has intensified and made greater progress in this effort in recent years. China has, however, frequently been cited for failing to enforce intellectual property laws and for tolerating or encouraging the production and sale of pirated videos, music and software. China has also been slow to mitigate or eliminate trade barriers that include high tariffs and cumbersome bureaucratic requirements for exporters who seek access to its markets. Another issue that has periodically arisen is the allegation that China uses forced prison labor to make some of its export products. Notwithstanding these concerns, U.S. exporters and investors have been making great inroads into the Chinese market. U.S. direct investment in China covers a wide range of manufacturing sectors, several large hotel projects and offshore oil and gas development in the South China Sea. U.S. companies have established more than 20,000 equity joint ventures, contractual joint ventures and wholly foreign-owned enterprises in China. More than 100 U.S.-based multinationals have projects, some with multiple investments. The biggest single U.S. export deal to China, announced in October 1997, was the sale of 50 Boeing aircraft valued at about \$3 billion.

China's economy has expanded to more than 22 times its size in 1978, although with more than quadruple the U.S. population, China's gross domestic product is still not quite half that of the United States. Still, the growth dynamic favors a rapidly narrowing gap. The U.S. trade deficit with China was \$US49.7 billion in 1997, rising to an estimated \$US85 billion in 2000. China now accounts for a larger portion of the record United States trade deficit than any other country, a result both of soaring Chinese exports to the United States and the comparatively weak recent economic performance of Japan, which previously had the biggest trade surplus with the United States.

In September 2000, the United States and China reached agreement on China's entry into the World Trade Organization. The U.S. Congress passed legislation granting China permanent normal trade relations, which would end the requirement that China secure annual approval to conduct normal trade with United States. However, the transition to permanent trade status is conditional on China meeting the full range of conditions for WTO membership. China must still reach agreement with the WTO on various matters, including tariffs, intellectual property protection and labor practices.

In the first few months of 2001, China-U.S. relations went through some difficult times. After President Bush took office in January, he made it clear that he regarded China as a strategic competitor rather than a partner. The Bush administration's China position has been reflected by several China policy concerns by both the executive branch and the U.S. Congress. Some high-ranking officials as well as Congress members have suggested a tougher stance towards China in matters such as human rights issues and arms sales to Taiwan. Among them, the central issue was arms sale to Taiwan by the United States. Under the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, the U.S. policy is to provide Taiwan with adequate defense needs. With China's increasing deployment of missiles allegedly targeted at Taiwan, Taiwan has demanded the United States to sell them sophisticated new weapons including warships equipped with the Aegis battle-management radar system. The Bush administration must decide whether to sell such weapons to Taiwan as it has made it clear to continue to help defend Taiwan in face of China's threat to the island. The U.S. has decided to go ahead with the National Missile Defense (NMD) system or missile defense shield which China regards itself as a target. China has warned the United States not to sell the Aegis to Taiwan which can be linked to the shield. It was out of this concern that Chinese Vice Premier Qian Qichen came to the United States in March to meet President Bush and Secretary of State Colin Powell.

It was at this sensitive time of delicate China-U.S. relations that another incident took place in early April as a U.S. EP-3 surveillance plane collided with a Chinese fighter jet and made an emergency landing on southern Chinese island of Hainan. The collision caused the death of the Chinese pilot and the loss of the fighter jet, and the U.S. spy plane was seriously damaged. After 11 days of political and diplomatic wrangling between the two governments, the 24 U.S. spy plane crew members were released from the Chinese custody. On April 18, a team of U.S. military and

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diplomatic officials went to Beijing for negotiations with the Chinese on the release of the crippled EP-3 as well as on future flights of the U.S. surveillance planes off the Chinese coast. China demanded that the United States end its spy missions along the Chinese coastline. China rejected the U.S. requests to let the EP-3 be repaired and flown back to the United States. China also refused to let a U.S. Navy ship bring back the plane. After months of negotiations, EP-3 was disassembled and returned to the United States on two Russian cargo planes in early July.

Although the spy plane incident was over, it did result in certain negative feelings on both sides. For the Chinese, the incident reminded them of the 1999 U.S. bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade. On the other side, some U.S. Congress members urged sanctions against China over the incident and opposed further free-trade agreements with China. Nevertheless, the governments of the two countries seem to have adopted a more pragmatic approach, emphasizing the importance of maintaining a good relationship. On April 23, President Bush decided not to sell to Taiwan the Arleigh Burke destroyers equipped with Aegis radar system, but approved a package of weapons including four Kidd-class destroyers, submarines and anti-submarine planes. The Bush administration said that the package of the arms sale to Taiwan would address in a "measured" way a regional military balance that had tilted in the People's Republic of China's favor, and that there was nothing for China to fear in this package. Opposing any arms sale to Taiwan, China expressed serious concern in a measured way over the report of the U.S. arms package to Taiwan, but at the same time felt relieved that the package did not include the sophisticated destroyers with the Aegis radar system.

In early July, U.S. President Bush called Chinese President Jiang Zemin to discuss areas of cooperation and disagreement. Bush's call represented the final chapter of the standoff between the two countries by the spy plane incident. In late July, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell visited China. One of his primary reasons for going was to arrange the visit by President Bush in October for the APEC summit. Powell also wanted to smooth over Sino-U.S. ties, which were strained from virtually the beginning of the Bush administration.

While U.S.-China relations grew warmer after the spy plane incident, the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States further united the countries as they worked to fight international terrorism. In October, President Bush went to Shanghai as planned to attend the APEC summit meeting. During the meeting, President Bush and President Jiang had a very friendly talk. Both leaders said that the two countries had a common understanding of the threat posed by international terrorists. President Jiang said that China was willing to work to develop a constructive relationship with the United States. The United States expressed its satisfaction with China's cooperation against terrorism by showing its support at the United Nations and its decision to close its border with Afghanistan.

President Bush visited China again in February 2002 after a rather tense situation: One month before his visit, Chinese intelligence officials disclosed to journalists from the Financial Times and the Washington Post that at least 27 spying devices were discovered hidden in a Boeing 767 airliner built in the United States for President Jiang Zemin. Despite the discovery, China publicly stated that diplomatic relations between the two countries would remain friendly and the summit continued as planned.

Relations between China and the United States were strained over the United Nations Security Council voting regarding Iraq from 2002 to 2003.

Relations were challenged over Taiwan in 2004 over the sale of arms by the United States to Taiwan.

In 2005, relations between mainland China and the United States were again challenged over the issue of Taiwan. Challenges arose in the aftermath of China's announcement about its "anti-secession" law.

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In 2006 and 2007, amidst geopolitical challenges stemming from North Korea to the Middle East, relations between China and the United States have been more collaborative as both work to establish stability. China has been a particularly important figure within the multilateral process involving North Korea.

The year 2006 also marked a visit by Chinese President Hu Jintao to the United States. The Chinese leader's first visit was not with the American head of state but with Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft.

The incoming Obama administration in the United States augured a potential change for relations with China.

President Obama met with Chinese Premier Hu Jintao at the G-20 summit in London in April 2009 and accepted the Chinese leader's invitation to visit China.

Russia

The United States remains committed to maintaining a constructive relationship with Russia in which we seek to expand areas of cooperation and effectively work through differences. The United States continues to support Russia's political and economic transformation and its integration into major international organizations. These steps, in conjunction with achievements in considerably reducing nuclear weapons, have greatly enhanced the security of the United States.

The intensity and frequency of contacts between President Yeltsin and President Clinton, most recently the Moscow Summit in August 1998, are indicative of the strong commitment to working together on a broad range of issues. These include European security, reducing the threat to our countries posed by weapons of mass destruction, and economic cooperation, especially American investment in Russia.

Relations between Putin and the new Bush administration started off to a promising start despite grave differences on issues, such as missile defense. They were strengthened when Russia pledged to join the global war on terror following the terrorist attacks on the United States on 2001.

Relations were increasingly strained in the lead up to the war in Iraq in 2003 and then in the immediate aftermath.

Relations with the United States took center stage again in 2005 when United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited Russia. During her visit, however, she took time to criticize President Vladimir Putin's political weight by suggesting that he had too much personal power. In this regard, Rice expressed concern over the lack of an independent media in Russia, and she also repudiated the accumulation of political power that Putin had gathered since taking office.

Perhaps most important to the Bush administration in the United States, however, was the matter of foreign investors' rights. In this regard, the Bush administration would apparently be watching closely the fraud and tax evasion trial of the founder of the Yukos oil company, Mikhail Khodorkovsky. Some, perhaps even including those within the Bush administration, have been of the mind that the case against Khodorkovsky was manufactured purely to punish him for his political ambitions. Naturally, those in the Kremlin have viewed the situation quite differently. In May 2005, Mikhail Khodorkovsky and an associate were found guilty of six charges, including tax evasion, and was sentenced to nine years in prison. The verdict was watched closely by Washington. Indeed, it was interpreted symbolically as Russia's approach to foreign investment.

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A year later in May 2006, on the heels of sharp criticism by United States Vice President Dick Cheney of Russia's human rights record, the Kommersant business newspaper said that the matter augured the start of a new Cold War. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov offered no comment on the content of Cheney's position, however, he criticized the forum in Lithuania where Cheney spoke. He noted that such meetings were convened for the purpose of uniting a cadre of interest groups against someone. Meanwhile, former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev said that Cheney's speech appeared to be "a provocation and interference in Russia's internal affairs in terms of its content, form and place."

The matter preceded a scheduled meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and United States President George W. Bush at a key industrial summit to be convened in St. Petersburg. At that meeting in July 2006, during a joint press address by Putin and Bush, the American president called on Russia to democratize, and said that he hoped that the country would enjoy the kind of freedom now being enjoyed by Iraq. Putin responded to this statement by asserting that the example of Iraq -- now embroiled in what some were calling a civil war -- was not one he thought Russia should emulate.

In April 2007, Russia responded negatively to plans by the Bush administration in the United States (U.S.) to develop a missile defense system in eastern Europe. Russian President Vladimir Putin decried the notion, indicating that he viewed such a missile system as being more than simply a defense plan. To this end, he said, "This is not just a defense system, this is part of the U.S. nuclear weapons system." President Putin went so far as to warn the U.S. that its plans in this regard would run the risk of mutual destruction, saying, "The threat of causing mutual damage and even destruction increases many times." Making clear its hard-line opposition to the notion of a U.S. missile defense system, President Putin also threatened to withdraw participation in a treaty limiting conventional weaponry in Europe.

NATO responded to Russia's threat to suspend its membership in the 1990 Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) with its own concern. Indeed, NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer made it clear that the treaty was a keystone of security and stability in Europe.

Russia's opposition to the U.S. plan was not shared by other Eastern European countries, such as Poland and the Czech Republic, both of which were eager to offer the U.S. permission to construct missile bases and radars within their borders.

With the United States planning to construct missile defense facilities in Europe, Russia had already expressed its opposition to such a plan. But in early June 2007, ahead of the G-8 summit of key world leaders, Russian President Vladimir Putin warned that his country could be forced to point weapons at Europe for the first time since the end of the Cold War. Russia also announced that it had tested an RS-24 ballistic missile a week prior.

Both moves appeared oriented toward the maintenance of "strategic balance" in the region. To this end, Putin pointed to the fact that the United States had already altered the strategic balance by withdrawing from the anti-ballistic missile treaty in 2002. In an interview published in the Italian newspaper, Corriere Della Sera, he made the Russian position clear by asserting, "If the American nuclear potential grows in European territory, we have to give ourselves new targets in Europe."

The climate of bilateral relations thawed somewhat at the summit when United States President Bush said, "They're [Russians] not a military threat." He also called for the United States to work with Russia in dealing cooperatively on the issue.

Then, Russian President Putin proposed an alternate solution to the missile defense issue when he suggested that both countries utilize the radar system at Gabala in Azerbaijan to develop a shield that would cover Europe. In this plan, incoming missiles from hostile countries could be detected. Putin noted that "This work should be multifaceted with the engagement of the states concerned in Europe." He also added that if his country and this United

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States worked together in an open manner to develop missile defense capabilities, "then we will have no problems."

Bush responded to the proposal by saying that it was an interesting option and noted that he and Putin would engage on a "strategic dialogue" on the subject in a forthcoming visit of his Russian counterpart to the United States. Bush' senior advisor on national security, Stephen Hadley's characterization of the Russian proposal as "a positive development" augured a possible productive resolution to the matter.

On Oct. 12, 2007, missile talks between the United States (U.S.) and Russia ended in failure with no resolution was in sight. U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice described the bilateral talks with Russia saying, "We discussed a range of proposals we hope they will accept." Her Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, said that the proposals required study and in the interim, the U.S. should not work on the missile defense system. But the U.S. rejected Russia's request to put an end to the plan, with Rice asserting that discussions with Poland and the Czech Republic on the deployment of system would go on as anticipated. Responding to the U.S. position, Putin said, "One day you and I may decide that missile defense systems can be deployed on the Moon, but before we get there the possibility of reaching an agreement may be lost because you will have implemented your own plans."

Meanwhile, U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates argued that that the missile defense system was not directed at Russia but at rogue states including Iran and North Korea. However, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that the very idea of the missile defense shield system was based on the false assumption that Iran presented a nuclear threat. Lavrov also criticized the U.S. for hinting at the use of force against Iran, saying that such an approach contravenes against the notion of a negotiated solution to the Iranian problem. Russia also reiterated its position that its own early warning radar systems in Azerbaijan could easily be used by the U.S. But Gates responded that radar was incapable of guiding interceptor missiles.

U.S. intransigence on the matter thus paved the way for Russia to make good on its earlier threat to withdraw its participation in the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, which was aimed at limiting conventional weaponry in Europe. Russia also warned that it could withdraw its participation in the 20-year old Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which limits both U.S. and Russian short and medium range missiles, and resulted in the elimination of thousands of missiles in both countries.

The 2008 election of Barack Obama in the United States was cautiously viewed as an entry point toward improved bilateral relations. Indeed, in a speech delivered to the Council on Foreign Relations in the United States capital of Washington D.C., Russian President Dmitry Medvedev expressed hopes that his country would enjoy improved relations with the United States under an Obama administration. Russian President Medvedev said that United States President-Elect Barack Obama had the potential to rebuild "necessary mutual trust" that had waned during the Bush years. The Russian president also hinted at possible compromise with the United States over the controversial plan for a United States missile shield in Europe. He said, "We have a chance to solve the problem through either agreeing on a global system or, as a minimum, to find a solution on the existing programs, which would suit the Russian Federation."

As discussed below, U.S.-Russian relations were in the process of being re-set in 2009 when President Obama met with President Medvedev in Moscow, and a number of joint agreements were forged.

North Korea

The Perry Report, prepared by the United States (U.S.) special advisor on North Korea, was released in September 1999 and outlined a new approach to foreign policy regarding North Korea. The report called for the normalization of ties with North Korea and a cessation of attempts to depose the government. Perry recommended a reduction of sanctions in order to prevent North Korea from developing a nuclear weapons program. Moreover, the United States sought to disarm North Korea's nuclear program by helping to provide fuel aid to North Korea to help prevent the processing of nuclear fuel that can be turned into atomic weapons. For several years following the end of the

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Cold War, North Korea had focused its diplomatic activities on relations with the United States in its belief that improved relations with Washington, D.C. was crucial for the survival of the regime. The United States has been the largest grain donor to North Korea. But North Korea had complained that the United States had often ignored its desire to improve relations, believing that it paid attention to North Korea only when it launched provocative steps by resorting to nuclear weapons or missile development programs.

For years, North Korea tried to reach around South Korean leaders to strike a deal with the United States (U.S.), and the U.S. government insisted that direct dialogue between North and South Korea must come first. The U.S. goal had been to induce impoverished North Korea to drop its weapons of mass destruction program and fully turn from supporting terrorism. Then in June 2000, only a few days after the historic summit between the leaders of both Koreas, the United States made a decision to ease wide-ranging sanctions imposed on North Korea. This move has cleared the way for financial transactions and trade in all but the most sensitive goods between the two countries. In addition, it was intended to permit new air and shipping service between North Korea and the United States.

In October 2000, former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright paid a two-day visit to North Korea, being the most senior American official ever to go to the country. Albright's visit was seen as groundbreaking as well as opening a new chapter in U.S.-North Korea relations. During the visit, Albright and the North Korean leader Kim Jong il held several talks covering a full range of issues including terrorism, human rights and concrete steps for tension reduction on the Korean Peninsula. One week after Albright's visit, North Korea and the United States held discussions in Malaysia on the development of ballistic missiles by North Korea, but it was ended without reaching an agreement. The missile talks between the two countries focused on two key issues: North Korea's domestic long-range missile program and its export of missile technology to countries such as Pakistan and Iran. The United States claimed that North Korea was the world's top exporter of missile equipment and technology to those countries. As for the missile program, the United States was exploring the idea of exchanging launches of North Korea's satellites for serious missile restraint by North Korea.

The momentum towards normalization of relations between North Korea and the outside world was slowed with the election of President George Bush in the United States (U.S.). Early in his administration President Bush ordered a review of U.S. policy towards North Korea and the Bush Administration has made it clear that improved relations with the US depended on progress across a broad range of security issues including force deployments, nuclear weapons and missiles.

The U.S.-North Korea relationship was dealt a blow with the terrorist attack against the United States on Sept. 11, 2001. The backlash by the United States against the terrorists responsible for the attack and the labeling of North Korea as a member of the "axis of evil" along with Iran and Iraq resulted in a retrenchment by North Korea and saber rattling by both sides. This created an awkward tension between South Korea and the U.S. because of the desire by the South Korea for eventual reunification in accordance with the sunshine policy of President Kim Dee Jung of South Korea while at the same time looking to maintain a good relationship with the U.S.

The branding of North Korea as part of an "axis of evil" by the United States in 2002 appeared to have spurred (according to some, but not all, sources) the restarting of a nuclear program in the country, which reached a disturbing apex in 2006 when a nuclear weapon was tested. Despite assurances from the Chinese government in 2005 that it would push multi-party talks with North Korea, negotiations remained stalled.

In 2006, North Korea test-fired a number of short-range missiles and one Taepodong-2 long-range missile. The situation sparked international condemnation and threats of punitive measures by some countries, including sanctions.

The United Nations Security Council said that it would convene an emergency meeting later in the day to consider the missile tests. The closed session meeting was requested by Kenzo Oshima, Japan's ambassador to the United Nations. Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Shinzo Abe condemned the move by North Korea and announced that Japan was prohibiting the entry of officials, chartered flights and ferries from North Korea. Also, Japan's Foreign Minister Taro Aso warned that Tokyo was now considering the imposition of economic sanctions on North Korea.

In South Korea, the government in Seoul convened an emergency cabinet meeting and placed its military on high alert.

China expressed strong concern about North Korea's actions and called on the international community to stay calm.

The United States Department of State reacted to the situation by characterizing the launch of the Taepodong-2 as a "provocative" and attention-seeking act. White House press secretary, Tony Snow, said that President George W. Bush was consulting with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld on the matter. Secretary Rice called on North Korea to return to the multilateral discussion table.

For its part, North Korea said that further missile tests would be launched. North Korea also warned that it would react strongly to punitive pressures from the international community, and it threatened to carry out an "annihilating" nuclear strike if its atomic facilities were pre-emptively hit by the United States.

In October 2006, in the aftermath of North Korea's claims that it carried out a nuclear test, the United Nations Security Council was debating what type of response it should undertake. A draft document by the United States had undergone revisions to accommodate the reservations of China and Russia. Those two countries had stated that they would not support the military enforcement of financial and security sanctions against North Korea. With adjustments made, the United Nations Security Council unanimously approved Resolution 1718 on October 14, 2006. The resolution called for the inspections on cargo going to and from North Korea to search for weapons, a ban on the sale or transfer of materials related to North Korea's unconventional weapons program, and a freeze on the transfer of funds connected with North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile programs. Absent from Resolution 1718 was the Chapter Seven [of the United Nations charter] provision, which would enforce the sanctions via military force.

The 2006 missile tests, in conjunction with the nuclear weapon test, have intensified the widely-held view that North Korea is a threat to global security. Moreover, these moves by North Korea effectively served to further isolate the country and confirm its pariah status within the international community.

December 2006 marked the resumption of multilateral talks regarding North Korea's controversial nuclear program. North Korea, South Korea, China, Japan, Russia and the United States indicated their return to the negotiating table after a year-long hiatus. The re-opening of dialogue came a few months after North Korea caused global anxiety when it tested a nuclear weapon. That incident resulted in international condemnation, and ultimately prompted the imposition of sanctions against North Korea by the United Nations.

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While the news of the recommencement of six-party talks was welcomed, there was also a pervasive sense of caution. Experts conveyed limited optimism about the prospects of forging a resolution amenable to all parties. Indeed, the United States has consistently expressed vociferous opposition to the notion of North Korea being a nuclear power, while North Korea has been equally adamant about its need for nuclear weapons. These two absolutist positions have resulted in an impasse.

In preliminary talks with his Chinese and South Korean cohorts in the Chinese capital of Beijing, United States Envoy Christopher Hill expressly stated that he believed Pyongyang had a clear choice to make. To this end, he said, "We can either go forward on a diplomatic track or you have to go to a much more difficult track. That is a track that involves sanctions and I think ultimately will really be very harmful to the economy."

This view from Washington, however, was not likely to resonate particularly well with Pyongyang. First, North Korean Envoy Kim Kye-gwan made it clear that his country required nuclear weaponry for deterrent purposes. Second, he expressed the view that the problem was not rooted in North Korea's nuclear program itself, but rather, it stemmed from the hostile stance of the United States toward North Korea. He said, "The biggest problem is that the United States needs to change its hostile policy against North Korea. When they change their policy from a hostile stance to one of peaceful co-existence, the problem can be resolved."

The clear disconnection between the two perspectives on the eve of the resumption of multilateral talks augured grave difficulties during the negotiating process. In fact, it suggested that concurrence was not likely to be found easily. Nevertheless, the return of all parties to the table for dialogue presented a new opportunity to find creative solutions. For example, despite the hardline positions referenced above, there have been some suggestions that the United States might be willing to consider easing the financial component of the existing sanctions. Such a move could pave the way for decreased intransigence by North Korea. As well, there were hopes that an earlier offer by the United States of a security guarantee could be used as the foundation for forthcoming negotiations. That arrangement offered North Korea a security guarantee in exchange for the cessation of its nuclear program. In actuality, the December 2006 talks ended inconclusively.

A month later in January 2007, it was announced that six-party talks on North Korea's nuclear program would resume.

There were prevailing hopes that North Korea might abandon its nuclear ambitions and rejoin the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in exchange for economic aid and security guarantees. But the situation was made more complex as a result of a financial dispute involving North Korea and the United States (U.S).

By February 2007, the multilateral discussions commenced in China between all six parties -- North Korea, South Korea, China, Japan, the United States, and Russia. Progress was quickly made during the six-party talks in Beijing when North Korea agreed to move closer toward the position of disarmament. Of particular interest was an agreement reportedly requiring Pyongyang to shut down its nuclear facilities at Yongbyon over the course of the ensuing months, in lieu of aid, such as fuel oil provided by the United States and South Korea. The draft agreement, which had been drafted by Chinese, also called for the return of international inspectors to North Korea.

No concurrence was yet forged days after talks began. Nevertheless, spokespersons from the United States and North Korea refrained from harsh rhetoric, and instead commented on the work yet to be accomplished. Notably, United States delegate, Christopher Hill, struck a note of cautious optimism saying in an interview with Agence France Presse, "I think we have managed to get through what we thought were tough issues but nothing is agreed until everything is agreed so we must be very cautious." Along a similar vein, North Korean delegate, Kim Kye-gwan, said "There are still differences on a series of issues in the overall talks, so we will try to work them out."

The shift in tone on the parts of both the United States and North Korea demonstrated a sharp contrast to dynamics of the previous several years. The United States demonstrated greater willingness for dialogue during meetings in

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Berlin, which preceded the Beijing multilateral talks. Meanwhile, North Korea has been facing a massive food crisis in the winter months -- a scenario that may have also contributed to the more productive dynamics in 2007.

By February 13, 2007, it was announced that concurrence had been reached thanks to a Chinese-brokered initiative. As noted above, North Korea agreed to shut down its nuclear facilities at Yongbyon within 60 days in exchange for 50,000 tonnes of fuel oil or economic aid of equal value, with 950,000 tonnes of fuel oil or equivalent received after further disarmament steps are taken.

As well, both Japan and the United States agreed to discuss the possibility of normalizing ties with North Korea -- something that Pyongyang has been seeking for some time.

The United States also said that it would work with North Korea to resolve the banking dispute discussed above, and it would consider the prospects of removing North Korea from its list of state sponsors of terrorism.

United States President George W. Bush said that the deal represented "the best opportunity to use diplomacy to address North Korea's nuclear programs." In his official statement, he also stated that the agreement was emblematic of "the common commitment of the participants to a Korean Peninsula that is free of nuclear weapons."

Yet to be seen was whether or not the agreement would be ratified by all six parties, and also whether or not North Korea would fully comply with the provisions of the deal. For example, the state news agency of North Korea issued a report referring to the "temporary" suspension of nuclear activities, rather than enduring disarmament. United States negotiator, Christopher Hill, warned that the resumption of nuclear activities in the future would be a clear violation of the agreement.

In the third week of June 2007, North Korea reportedly agreed to shut down its nuclear reactor at Yongbyon and, then, disable its nuclear facilities. North Korea also noted that it was inviting International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors to return to North Korea to monitor the closure of its nuclear program and facilities. To that end, IAEA inspectors were expected to visit North Korea on June 26, 2007, for the first time since their dismissal from that country in 2002.

These announcements came months after the Chinese drafted an agreement in February 2007 (as noted above), in which the closure of the reactor at Yongbyon would be secured, in lieu of heavy fuel oil that would be secured by other countries (noted below) participating in the multilateral nuclear disarmament talks. The total amount of fuel oil -- one million metric tons -- appeared to more substantial than the original quantity discussed earlier in the year under the Chinese-brokered plan. In addition, diplomatic recognition and humanitarian aid benefits were included in the deal. Also included in the arrangement was the untangling of aforementioned financial dispute. With the deal now moving forward, North Korea said that it would begin the process of shutting down operations at Yongbyon within weeks, pending receipt of the frozen funds. Russia, which worked to facilitate the complex transfer, said that the money was in the process of being delivered.

North Korea characterized talks with United States nuclear envoy, Christopher Hill, on these matter as being both "comprehensive and productive." Hill responded to the developments positively but noted that the closure of the reactor at Yongbyon was only the start of an ongoing process, and would not solve all the problems at hand. Hill also said that a new round of six-party disarmament talks, which has included North Korea, South Korea, China, Japan, Russia and the United States, would commence in July 2007.

October 2008 saw the United States move to remove North Korea from its list of state-sponsors of terrorism. The development came after multilateral talks between North Korea, the United States, China, South Korea, Russia and Japan and appeared to end some dissonance that had been brewing in recent months, despite multilateral concurrence on North Korean disarmament.

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Pyongyang had finally handed over the details relating to its nuclear program in July 2008 and destroyed its main cooling tower as a sign of its commitment to the "disarmament for aid" deal. Pyongyang then expected that North Korea would be dropped from the United States' terrorism "black list." However, lack of progress on that front led to Pyongyang's belief that the United States has not fulfilled a key component of the "disarmament for aid" agreement, hence its threat to restart nuclear reactor at Yongbyon. For its part, the United States said that North Korea would remain on its list of state sponsors of terrorism until North Korea's disarmament process was fully verified.

The United States' decision to move in the direction of removing North Korea from the "black list" suggested that progress had been made on the verification process. Indeed, a spokesperson for North Korea's foreign ministry confirmed that Pyongyang would now resume disabling its nuclear facilities and allow international monitors access in order for the verification process to take place. The spokesperson was reported to have said: "We welcome the United States' implementation of its duty to remove us from the list of states sponsoring terrorism. We have decided to resume the disabling of nuclear facilities in Yongbyon and to allow United States and International Atomic Energy Agency monitors to carry out their work again."

The 2008 election of Barack Obama in the United States was expected to affect nuclear negotiations with North Korea in the future. But as discussed below, North Korea's increasingly provocative actions and bellicose statements have ensured that bilateral ties remained strained, with the nuclear issue a prevailing sticking point.

Iran

On Nov. 4, 1979, militant Iranian students occupied the American embassy in Tehran with the support of Ayatollah Khomeini. For 444 days, 52 Americans were held hostage. On April 7, 1980, the United States (U.S.) broke diplomatic relations with Iran, and on April 24, 1981, the Swiss government assumed representation of U.S. interests in Tehran.

The Pakistani government represented Iranian interests in the United States. In accordance with the Algiers declaration of Jan. 20, 1981, the Iran-U.S. Claims Tribunal (located in The Hague, Netherlands) was established for the purpose of handling claims of U.S. nationals against Iran and of Iranian nationals against the United States. U.S. contact with Iran through The Hague covers only legal matters.

In 1996 the U.S. Congress passed the Iran Libya Sanctions Act. The act gives the U.S. president discretionary power to impose sanctions on any individual or company anywhere in the world that invests more than \$20 million or more in an Iranian or Libyan oil or gas project.

Commercial relations between Iran and the United States consist mainly of Iranian purchases of food and manufactured products. In 1999 the U.S. allowed import of Iranian caviar, pistachios and carpets. The U.S. government prohibits the export of military and dual-use items to Iran as well as items forbidden under anti-terrorism legislation; it prohibits all imports from Iran. In August 2000 Iranian and American legislators met for the first time in what was the highest level meeting between the two countries since 1979.

Iranian officials expressed optimism regarding the new Republican administration, due to its close ties to the oil industry. Iranian leaders hoped for a reversal of U.S. policies towards the country and stated that they were willing to adjust their policy towards the U.S. in return. Iran is in need of foreign investment, and would welcome American, as well as other foreign businesses. While it was widely expected that the Bush administration would ease the sanctions on Iran, this has not happened. On June 20, 2001, the U.S. Congress voted to extend ILSA for a second five-year period. The vote reflected continued skepticism toward Iran based on the country's continued support of terrorism (the U.S. State Department labeled Iran as the world's "most active state-sponsor of terrorism in 2000"),

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Iran's presumed capability to develop weapons of mass destruction, its vocal opposition to the current form of the Middle East peace process, and support for the latest Palestinian Intifada.

Iran strongly condemned the attacks on New York and Washington D.C. on Sept. 11, 2001, but has not joined the U.S.-led coalition against terrorism. Iran strongly criticized the bombing of Afghanistan, and in an interview with CNN on November 12, President Khatami said that the "roots of terrorism must be examined before it can be stopped," and urged the U.S to examine its policies.

After President Bush's declaration of Iran as part of an "Axis of Evil" in January 2002, it appears highly unlikely that diplomatic relations will improve under the Bush administration. Bush's accusation not only shocked and offended Iran, it shocked much of the world, and many countries involved in the fight against terrorism do not support the United States' claims.

While the U.S. has verbally extended an invitation for diplomatic talks between the two countries, Iran has officially expressed strong resistance to the idea. While there are some in the reformist camps who would still welcome a breakthrough in diplomatic dialogue, Iranian hardliners are adamant in their position. In May 2002, the Iranian Justice Department went as far as to declare it illegal for newspapers to print articles supporting the idea of U.S.-Iranian talks. In that same month, the U.S. Department of State accused Iran as being the world's most active sponsor of terrorism.

By September 2003, the U.S. declared that Iran had clearly violated its United Nations nuclear safeguards obligations. However, the U.S. did say it was willing "to give Iran a last chance to stop its evasions." Iran continued to deny its uranium enrichment activities are part of an illegal weapons program. Meanwhile, the United Nations' International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was considering setting an October deadline for Iran to fully comply with its obligations under the international nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT.)

By late 2005 and into 2007, the nuclear issue had found no resolution. Indeed, United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice applied harsh words toward Iran's nuclear development while Iranian officials continued to defend Iran's right to develop nuclear power for peaceful -- and if necessary -- defensive purposes.

In early 2007, as noted above Iran's ambassador to Iraq, Hassan Kazemi Qumi, delineated the details of a plan to strongly expand his country's economic and military ties with Iraq. The Iranian ambassador also addressed the detainment of Iranians by United States forces in Iraq, acknowledging that they were, indeed, security officials.

Qumi explained that the Iranian security officials were in Iraq to meet with counterparts in the context of a bilateral agreement to resolve security. As such, he argued that the Iranians should never have been detained in the first place. Additionally, Qumi dismissed United States' claims that Iranians were involved in the orchestration of attacks against Iraqi and American forces.

For its part, however, the United States has maintained the view that there is a mountain of evidence pointing toward Iran's support for militants inside Iraq, even providing bombs and weaponry. United States President George W. Bush warned that his country's forces would "respond firmly" in response to Iran's alleged activities in Iraq. Bush also said, "It makes sense that if somebody is trying to harm our troops or stop us from achieving our goal, or killing innocent citizens in Iraq, that we will stop them," His words appeared to be evidence of the growing and very public standoff between Washington and Tehran. Bush additionally responded to the Iranian ambassador's plan to expand ties with Iraq with skepticism.

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To date, the government of Iraq has expressed dismay that it has been caught in the metaphoric cross-fire of hostilities between Iran and the United States. As such, Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki called on both parties to deal with their hostilities outside of Iraq. To this end, he said, "We have told the Iranians and the Americans, 'We know that you have a problem with each other, but we are asking you, please solve your problems outside Iraq.' "

September 23, 2007 saw Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad arrive in the United States to attend the meeting of the United Nations General Assembly, and also to speak at a forum at Columbia University.

Ahmadinejad's visit was met with protests, most especially by opponents of his speaking engagement at Columbia University. He had originally intended to lay a wreath at the site of the September 11, 2001 terror attack in New York, however, police cited security concerns in denying that request.

In a television interview on the American network CBS for the show, "60 Minutes," the Iranian president took a measured tone and said that his country was not building nuclear weaponry. To that end, President Ahmadinejad said, "Well, you have to appreciate we don't need a nuclear bomb. We don't need that. What need do we have for a bomb?" He continued, "In political relations right now, the nuclear bomb is of no use. If it was useful it would have prevented the downfall of the Soviet Union." President Ahmadinejad also noted that Iran was not embarking on a path to war with the United States, saying, "It's wrong to think that Iran and the U.S. are walking toward war. Who says so? Why should we go to war? There is no war in the offing."

These assertions were a departure from President Ahmadinejad's announcement several days prior in which he harshly issued a warning to any countries considering military attacks against Iran. Indeed, an Iranian air force official noted that if, in a worse case scenario, Iran was attacked by Israel, it had the capacity to respond with air and missile raids.

On the other side of the equation, the Bush administration in the United States repeatedly noted that although it intended to deal with Iran diplomatically, all possible options remained on the proverbial table. Meanwhile, the head of United States Central Command, Admiral William Fallon, observed that the emotional rhetoric was not productive. In an interview with al-Jazeera television, he said, "This constant drum beat of conflict is what strikes me, which is not helpful and not useful."

Iran and the United States have enjoyed poor relations over the years, and bilateral relations were at an all-time low over the United States' opposition to Iran's nuclear ambitions. Adding to the tensions were the accusations by the United States that Iran was assisting Shi'ite militias in Iraq. These allegations were disputed by the Iranian government, which assured its Iraqi counterpart that no such actions were ongoing.

In December 2007, the latest National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) in the United States concluded that Iran halted its weapons program in 2003. The NIE, which coalesces information from the United States' 16 intelligence agencies, asserted "high confidence" that Iran stopped its nuclear weapons program in 2003 "in response to international pressure." The NIE also expressed "moderate confidence" in its view that the nuclear weapons program has not since been restarted. Still, the NIE assessment noted that although Iran appears "less determined" to develop nuclear weapons, the Middle Eastern country has continued to enrich uranium. Indeed, the report stated that Iran had successfully installed centrifuges used for the enrichment of uranium but that "significant technical problems" prevented the operation of new equipment, and deemed the country unable to have actually manufacture a nuclear bomb until the 2010-2015 time period. Accordingly, the NIE reflected similar findings by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Mohammed ElBaradei, the head of the nuclear watchdog agency, said, "The report gives me a sigh of relief because it is consistent with our assessment."

While enriched uranium is, indeed, used to manufacture nuclear weapons, Iran has maintained throughout that its nuclear ambitions are peaceful and not oriented toward the proliferation of nuclear bombs. This latest NIE assessment appeared to bolster Iran's claims about the peaceful purposes of its nuclear program -- a point noted by IAEA chief ElBaradei who said that Iran had been "somewhat vindicated." To that end, Iran's Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki welcomed the report and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said that the NIE findings constituted "great victory" in favor of his country's stance. In a speech televised to the country, the Iranian

president said that the report was a "fatal blow" to those who had stirred the fears and tensions surrounding the threat of nuclear weapons development.

Nevertheless, the United States and other Western countries continued to characterize Iran's nuclear development as threatening. With Iran currently subject to both United Nations (U.N.) Security Council sanctions, as well as unilateral United States sanctions, there was speculation about how, or if, the sanctions regime would be affected by the new information.

United States (U.S.) National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley responded to the report by saying that it confirmed his country's concerns about Iran's nuclear ambitions and asserted that President George W. Bush had crafted "the right strategy" on Iran. In fact, he called on the international community to "turn up the pressure on Iran," and encouraged the use of tactics such as sanctions and diplomatic isolation against Iran. For his part, U.S. President Bush said that the report did not alter either his view or his policy on Iran. Bush said that in spite of the new intelligence, Iran was still a threat to the world. In fact, he said that the report proved that Iran was still trying to enrich uranium, and that it was a "warning signal" that Iran could very well restart its weapons program. Confirming Hadley's statement, Bush said that the NIE was "an opportunity for us to rally the international community."

Some of the countries in the West appeared to respond to the U.S. President's rallying call. French President Nicolas Sarkozy said that Iran remained a threat and noted that he supported the notion of further sanctions. German Chancellor Angela Merkel stopped short of calling for new sanctions against Iran, but agreed that Iran continued to pose a threat. She appeared to support the ongoing path saying, "We and our partners would like to continue with the U.N. process." Merkel also appeared to call for talks and diplomatic negotiations saying, "I think we and our partners need to continue to seek dialogue with Iran."

Yet even with support from France and Germany, the problem for the U.S. was that its very position [that Iran poses a dire danger to the world] was now mitigated by the NIE findings. That is to say, the NIE evoked grave skepticism about the very essence of U.S. President Bush's claim only a month prior that action against Iran was needed to prevent World War III. Indeed, the tone from the White House in using the hyperbolic language of "World War III" was now very likely to be decried as both alarmist and spurious. Seizing upon this view, Mohammad Ali Hosseini, a spokesperson from the Iranian foreign ministry said, "This report proves Bush's statements - which always speak of the serious threat of Iran's nuclear program - are unreliable and fictitious."

In fact, the most immediate outcome of the NIE has been the collapse of the argument in favor of military action against Iran. As noted just above, the NIE findings undercut the notion of an imminent threat posed by Iran's nuclear capacity. While dissonance on the international stage was expected to continue to smolder over the fact that Iran has continued to abrogate U.N. Security Council edicts that it stop its enrichment of uranium, the temperature of the conflict was expected to decrease.

Meanwhile, U.N. Security Council members, Russia and China, were now less likely to support the notion of strongly intensifying sanctions against Iran. Both countries were expected to argue that the NIE proved that the nuclear threat posed by Iran was now contained. Indeed, in light of the NIE findings, Russian President Vladimir Putin's view on the matter appeared quite prescient. Putin said that there was no "concrete evidence" that Iran was building a bomb.

As such, many analysts concluded that the NIE report very likely served to reinvigorate the diplomatic path. To that end, IAEA head, ElBaradei said, "I see this report as a window of opportunity. It's a window of opportunity because it gives diplomacy a new chance."

The United States (U.S.) Pentagon said on January 7, 2008 that five Iranian boats threatened five U.S. navy ships in the Strait of Hormuz, which has functioned as a major oil transportation route. The Pentagon said that the Iranian vessels approached and threatened to blow up the U.S. ships in what the U.S. said were international waters. When those U.S. ships prepared to open fire, the Iranian vessels -- believed to belong to the Revolutionary Guard -- withdrew. The U.S. authorities said that Iran's "provocative actions" could very well "lead to a dangerous incident in the future." For its part, Iran dismissed the incident as routine saying that the matter was resolved once both

sides were able to identify one another. In 2007, a similar incident resulted in the detainment of 15 British sailors for two weeks.

In May 2008, the United Nations nuclear watchdog group, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), said that Iran was withholding some information about its nuclear program. The IAEA said in a report that Iran was not providing enough information about its nuclear activities despite agreeing to clarify prevailing questions about the country's nuclear development program.

An issue for the IAEA was the fact that Iran has been operating 3,500 centrifuges in Natanz. The IAEA said that Iran had to provide substantially more details about its nuclear development regime. For its part, Iran insisted that it had "left no question unanswered" and vowed to continue to enrich uranium.

June 2008 saw international negotiators put forth a new package, laden with attractive incentives, to Iran aimed at halting that country's nuclear enrichment activities. The deal was reached after extensive consultations between European Union policy chief, Javier Solana, and Iranian representatives. The talks were aimed at resolving many of the contentious issues that had, to date, left the nuclear issue in Iran unresolved.

Javier Solana described the new incentive package for Iran as "full of opportunities." Solana said the five members of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (the United States, the United Kingdom, China, Russia, France) as well as Germany were willing to both recognize Iran's right to have a civilian nuclear energy program, and to assist in its development for peaceful purposes. To that end, Solana said, "We are ready to cooperate with Iran in the development of a modern nuclear energy program based on the most modern generation of light water reactors." He went on to state, "We can offer Iran legally binding fuel supply guarantees. We are offering the construction of nuclear power plants." Solana also noted the deal would also include trade benefits for Iran.

For its part, Iran has repeatedly warned it would not accept demands that it halt its nuclear enrichment activities. Nevertheless, Iran said it would study the proposal. United States President George W. Bush was quick to suggest that Iran had already dismissed the deal out of hand. However, Solana pointed out that, in fact, Iran had agreed to consider the deal.

Two days after the aforementioned incentives package was put forward, Prime Minister Gordon Brown of the United Kingdom and President George W. Bush of the United States warned Iran that it should accept their "offers of partnership" or deal with harsh sanctions as well as increased international isolation. Brown particularly noted that if Iran chose not to respect United Nations resolutions, then it would face a more difficult sanctions regime, including the freezing of overseas assets at Iran's predominant bank and the imposition of energy sanctions.

Years after deeming Iran to be part of the "axis of evil," the (United States) Bush administration in July 2008 offered no denial of reports that it would establish a diplomatic presence in Iran. According to the British newspaper, the Guardian, the United States was set to open an interests section in the Iranian capital of Tehran.

Since the hostage crisis of 1979, the United States has not had a diplomatic presence in Iran.

The United States Department of State released a statement by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, which noted that while the United States was not changing its policy in regard to the Iranian government, it was interested in outreach to ordinary Iranians.

That said, the United States was slated to convene talks with Iran in Geneva. It would be the first time in three decades that a high ranking American diplomat would be involved in such a meeting with Iranian counterparts. At that meeting, the United States reinforced its position on Iran's nuclear program, noting that Iranian obstinacy on the matter would lead to a heightened sanctions regime.

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The two developments appeared to indicate a marked departure from the adamant **hard line** approach taken by the Bush administration toward Iran to date. Republican presidential nominee, John McCain, did not shift his more **hard line stance** on Iran. McCain's rival, Democratic presidential nominee, Barack Obama, has consistently been a strong advocate of involved and engaged negotiations with the Iranians for some time. Obama's election as president of the United States in 2008, therefore, augured a possible shift in the dynamic with Iran. While there were possible indications of such a shift, the post-election crisis and crackdown that ensued in Iran in the spring of 2009 have prevented any progress from taking shape, although President Obama has said that Iran has until the end of the year to move to the negotiating table. See below for details.

Syria

Syria is not an official partner in the campaign on terrorism launched by the United States after the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States. Syria has called for a United Nations-led campaign on terrorism. The international climate after the 2001 attacks seems to have been of benefit to Syria, despite its label as 'sponsor of terrorism.' Syria was viewed as being part of a loose security alliance that cooperated with American authorities. Syria was particularly important as a source for intelligence information as well as for its policy of cracking down on Syrian Islamists both at home and abroad.

However, Syria's hosting of Palestinian opposition groups, including the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command that claimed responsibility for killing the Israeli minister of tourism on Oct. 17, 2001, has been a source of concern to the United States. Among some experts, it is believed that as long as Syria is able to relatively contain these groups and the Lebanese Hezbollah, and as long as no direct links to bin Laden's network can be traced to Syria, the United States would not wish to meddle.

An indication of indirect United States support for Syria was its tacit approval of Syria's membership as a non-permanent member of the United Nations security council in October 2001. These gestures, it was hoped, might create the ground for renewed Israeli-Syrian negotiations. In return for its cooperation with the security alliance with Washington, Syria hoped to reactivate the Syrian-Israeli peace negotiations. While in early 2002, Syria and Israel discussed a willingness to resume peace talks, none were scheduled in the near future and talks were expected to stall as the crisis in the Middle East continued.

In the last years, since the United States-led war in Iraq, relations between Syria and the United States have not travelled down the most productive path. Quite contrary to the earlier view that Syria might be instrumental in fighting the war on terrorism, the United States began to view Syria as an impediment to its objectives and policies.

Relations between the two countries devolved following Syria's adamant outcry against the United States-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. In May 2004, steadily-deteriorating relations between Syria and the United States met a new low when the United States decided to impose economic sanctions on Syria because of its alleged support for terrorism.

Since that time, well into 2007, the United States has repeatedly accused Syria of secretly supporting terrorism and allowing radicals and militants to cross the border from Syria into Iraq. The failure to control the border with Iraq has thus, according to the United States, contributed to the ongoing violence in that country, since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. For its part, however, Syrian officials have accused the United States of destabilizing the entire Middle East region by its actions in Iraq. In this regard, Syria joined Jordan in calling for a withdrawal of "occupation forces" from Iraq in mid-2004.

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The two situations contributed to deteriorating relations between the two countries, made worse by the United States' decision to close off high-level talks with Syria.

Meanwhile, Syrian authorities thwarted an attempted terrorist attack against the United States embassy in Damascus on Sept. 12, 2006. While a Syrian security guard was shot by the attackers, there were no other casualties. Syrian authorities then shot those responsible for the attempted terrorist attack. The scenario could easily have ended tragically since it was revealed that a car packed with explosives was found in close proximity to the embassy but was never detonated. United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice thanked Syrian authorities for their efforts in handling the situation. Whether or not this scenario would advance poor bilateral relations was unknown.

In May 2007, the United States Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, held landmark talks with her Syrian counterpart, Foreign Minister Walid Muallem, at a summit in Egypt. It was the first high level meeting between Washington D.C. and Damascus in several years, and came at a time when bilateral relations between the two countries had badly-devolved. The United States has accused Syria of trying to influence the political scene in both Iraq and Lebanon.

It was difficult to determine whether the talks, which were held during a summit aimed at advancing stability and economic relief in Iraq, would yield positive long-term benefits. Until this point, the Bush administration in the United States had eschewed such high-level contact with Syria, and even railed against Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi for meeting with the Syrians only weeks earlier.

The 2008 election that brought Barack Obama to power in the United States augured the possibility of further engagement with Syria. To that end, bilateral talks in 2009 were reported to have been "productive."

Note on Iraq

See above section titled "War in Iraq" for foreign policy issues and developments related to Iraq.

Special Report: Indications of Post-Bush Era Foreign Policy

Despite frequent assertions by the Bush administration in the United States that there be no fixed timeline for the withdrawal of troops from Iraq, the United States and Iraq agreed in July 2008 to establish a "time horizon" for the reduction of United States troops in Iraq. The agreement was part of the formal Status of Forces Agreement forged between President George W. Bush and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, which would allow a continued presence of United States forces in Iraq after the expiration of the existing United Nations mandate at the close of 2008. The agreement came a week after the Iraqi leader said he wanted a timetable for the United States troop withdrawal -- something the Bush administration has not endorsed.

For its part, the United States has been reluctant to advance such a timetable out of fear that security gains could be erased. President Bush has said that a fixed timetable would embolden violent insurgents. That said, the current "time horizon" offering appeared to be a compromise in the security deal being negotiated. While the actual distinction between a timetable and a time horizon would inevitably provide fodder for debate, the Bush administration was nonchalant about the idea that it was reversing its previous **hard line** position on the matter. Instead, the White House said that troop reductions in the future would be "based on continued improving conditions on the ground and not an arbitrary date for withdrawal."

After the news broke about a "time horizon" for the withdrawal of United States troops from Iraq, Prime Minister al-Maliki expressed support for the troop withdrawal plans proposed by presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, Barack Obama, during an interview with Der Spiegel.

In reference to Obama's 16-month withdrawal timetable (barring complications), Maliki said, "That, we think, would be the right timeframe for a withdrawal, with the possibility of changes." The Iraqi prime minister did not expressly endorse presumptive Democratic presidential nominee's candidacy, saying instead, "who they [Americans] choose as their president is the Americans' business." He then continued, "But it's the business of Iraqis to say what they want." Nevertheless, Maliki's views on the notion of a timeline appeared to be in line with Obama's stance on the issue.

A spokesperson for the Iraq government somewhat backtracked from these remarks, suggesting that Der Spiegel had "misunderstood and mistranslated" the Iraqi prime minister. The spokesperson did not, however, specify how precisely this misunderstanding or mistranslation might have occurred. Regardless, the German publication, Der Spiegel, issued a strong assertion stating it "stands by its version of the conversation."

Soon thereafter, Der Spiegel provided an audio recording of the Maliki interview to the New York Times, which appeared to bear out the fact that Maliki found Obama's 16-month withdrawal timetable to be illustrative of the Democratic contender's understanding of the situation on the ground in Iraq.

In the direct translation from Arabic, as published by the New York Times, Maliki said: "Obama's remarks that — if he takes office — in 16 months he would withdraw the forces, we think that this period could increase or decrease a little, but that it could be suitable to end the presence of the forces in Iraq." He continued: "Who wants to exit in a quicker way has a better assessment of the situation in Iraq."

This synergy could well help shore up support for Obama's foreign policy credentials, particularly in regard to the difficult question of how to (if possible) disengage from Iraq. Obama had consistently said he would end the war in Iraq and withdraw United States troops from that country in a careful manner. He has called for a 16-month phased withdrawal timetable pending given conditions on the ground. (Note: Obama was also helped by the fact that British Prime Minister Gordon Brown also expressed concurrence for the notion of a 16-month timetable.)

By contrast, Maliki's suggestion that Obama had "a better assessment of the situation in Iraq" was not expected to help the presumptive Republican nominee, John McCain. For his part, McCain has opposed a withdrawal timeline and has said that he expects United States troops to be in Iraq for a long time, assuming that the Iraqi government sanctions the American presence in that country. McCain's presidential hopes have largely rested on his own heroic military experience and perceived understanding of foreign policy, both of which have strong resonance at home in the United States.

Benefiting from apparent support from Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki for Barack Obama's 16-month phased withdrawal timetable from Iraq, the Democratic contender for the American presidency urged greater focus on Afghanistan.

The Obama campaign quickly responded to Maliki's favorable stance on their proposed withdrawal timetable by directing attention to Afghanistan. Obama's top foreign policy adviser, Dr. Susan Rice, said: "Senator Obama welcomes Prime Minister Maliki's support for a 16-month timeline for the redeployment of US combat brigades. This presents an important opportunity to transition to Iraqi responsibility, while restoring our military and increasing our commitment to finish the fight in Afghanistan."

These developments came at a time when Obama was launching an international tour, intended to shore up his foreign policy credentials. Not surprisingly, the Democratic contender commenced his trip in the country he has consistently said requires priority attention: Afghanistan.

During a visit to Kabul, Obama characterized the increasingly volatile landscape in Afghanistan as "precarious and urgent." As such, the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee said that Afghanistan should be the main

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focus of the "war on terror." In his meeting with Afghan President Hamid Karzai, he promised to continue the fight against terrorism "with vigor." Additionally, Obama discussed the illicit narcotics trade and bilateral ties with Karzai.

Speaking from across Afghanistan, Obama was interviewed for the CBS program "Face the Nation." In that interview he noted that the Bush administration had been distracted by a "war of choice" in Iraq rather than fighting those who were responsible for the attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, in the United States. He asserted that the time had come to correct the mistakes made by the Bush administration. Obama also called for more troops to be deployed to Afghanistan to fight resurgent Taliban, al-Qaida, and other extremist Islamic elements.

Obama's priority on Afghanistan was backed by British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who expressed concurrence with the Democratic presidential contender on this matter. Brown has also expressed support for Obama's proposed withdrawal timetable from Iraq.

Note on Obama's international tour:

Barack Obama's international tour began in Afghanistan but also included Iraq, Jordan, Israel, Germany, France and Britain. Obama was accompanied on this international trip by his Senate colleagues -- Republican Senator Chuck Hagel and Democrat Senator Jack Reed.

Obama's rival for the American presidency, John McCain, had criticized him for espousing policies before traveling to the Middle East to assess the situation. Nevertheless, Obama's policies were receiving unexpected sanction from key global players, as noted above.

Editor's Note:

Obama's election on November 4, 2008 augured a sea change in foreign policy for the United States as discussed below --

President-Elect Obama on Future Policy:

In his first television interview since winning office on November 4, 2008, President-Elect Barack Obama painted a portrait of his incoming administration on the CBS show, 60 Minutes. Signaling a sharp change on the foreign policy front, President-Elect Obama said that he intended to withdraw United States troops from Iraq and strengthen the military effort against al-Qaida in Afghanistan.

On the first matter, President-Elect Obama said that upon taking office, he would call in the Joint Chiefs of Staff and national security apparatus to execute a phased troop withdrawal plan from Iraq. On the second matter, he noted that with a worsening security situation in Afghanistan, there was a need to "shore up those efforts." The incoming United States president also asserted that a top priority for his administration would be "to stamp out al-Qaida once and for all," including the capture or killing of Osama Bin Laden.

President-Elect Obama also said that he intended to repair the United States' moral standing on the world stage. In a move both symbolically and concretely focused on such an end, the incoming president of the United States said that he would close Guantanamo Bay -- the prison camp that has been at the center of controversy and legal debate. Moreover, President-Elect Obama made clear that his administration would act in accordance with the Geneva Conventions. He said, "I'm going to make sure that we don't torture." Those two measures, said President-Elect Obama, "are part and parcel of an effort to regain America's moral stature in the world."

Guantanamo to be closed and torture banned; rule of law to be paramount:

In the first days of his presidency at the start of 2009, Obama fulfilled a campaign promise by ordering the closure of the Guantanamo Bay prison camp within one year. The deadline appeared to be an acknowledgement of the fact that it would take time to finalize arrangements for suspects currently being held at Guantanamo. The president also ordered the closure of overseas detention centers, sometimes referred to as "black sites," where terror

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suspects were taken using a controversial practice known as "extraordinary rendition." In addition, President Obama ordered a review of military trials for terror suspects and expressly prohibited the use of torture.

As before, these executive orders signified a clear break -- and indeed, a rebuke -- of the policies of George W. Bush. Repeating the stance uttered in his inauguration address, President Obama said that the United States would continue its fight against terrorism, but without relinquishing constitutionally-enshrined precepts and core American ethics. "The United States intends to prosecute the ongoing struggle against violence and terrorism," said President Obama. "We are going to do so vigilantly, we are going to do so effectively, and we are going to do so in a manner that is consistent with our values and our ideals."

"Vigorous Diplomacy"

Earlier, in a clear indication of his geopolitical priorities, it was reported that upon becoming the official head of states, President Obama's first calls to foreign leaders included Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Jordanian King Abdullah. This particular cast of characters indicated that an Obama administration intended to be quickly engaged and intensely committed to the Middle East peace process.

To that end, President Obama named a high profile envoy to the Middle East. George Mitchell, who chaired the Good Friday Agreement talks in Northern Ireland during the Clinton administration, was asked to revitalize the Middle East peace process. President Obama, at the same time, named another high profile envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan. Veteran diplomat, Richard Holbrooke, was asked to forge "a sustainable approach" to dealing with the volatile Afghan-Pak region.

This new diplomatic front was on full display when President Obama, Vice-President Biden, and newly-confirmed Secretary of State Hillary Clinton addressed the State Department and emphasized the dual emphasis on vigorous diplomacy and global development.

Clinton arrived earlier at the State Department and was greeted like a celebrity with resounding cheers and non-stop applause from State Department staffers. Making it clear that an Obama administration augured a new era for American foreign policy, she said, "President Obama set the tone with his inaugural address, and the work of the Obama-Biden administration is committed to advancing America's national security, furthering America's interests, and respecting and exemplifying America's values around the world."

President Obama and Vice President Biden were set to meet with Defense Secretary Robert Gates, National Security Advisor James Jones, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mullen, Central Command head in Iraq, David Petraeus, Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker, and the head of the Multi-National Force in Iraq, General Ray Odierno, to discuss the redeployment of United States troops from Iraq. In this way, Obama was making good on a campaign promise to quickly convene such a meeting, aimed at bringing the official Iraq war to an end.

Secretary of State Clinton Signals Shift in Foreign Policy --

In mid-February 2009, United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton embarked on her first overseas trip as America's leading diplomat in Asia. Her Asian trip included stops in Japan, Indonesia, South Korea and China. Not since the 1960s has Asia had the distinction of being the first destination for a United States Secretary of State. Working on behalf of the Obama administration, Secretary of State Clinton indicated that she would focus on a range of issues ranging from climate change and clean energy to the global financial crisis.

On her first stop in Asia, Clinton assured Japan that the United States intended to maintain strong ties with that country. Clinton aimed to assuage Tokyo of its primacy, given Tokyo's concern about the possibility of increasing rapport between Washington and Beijing.

In China, the antagonistic dynamic that was cast during the Bush years was on its way out. Instead, Clinton suggested that she, on behalf of the Obama administration, would strive to cultivate a more cooperative relationship

between Washington and Beijing. This stance was not unexpected since Clinton has often emphasized the importance of improving Sino-American relations. Clinton did receive some criticism because human rights issues were left off the agenda in her meetings in Beijing. For her part, Secretary of State Clinton noted that while she did, indeed, hope to press China on issues including the status of Tibet and human rights, her immediate focus involved the global economic crisis. To that end, she said, "Our pressing on those issues can't interfere on the global economic crisis, the global climate change crisis and the security crisis."

Overall, Secretary of State Clinton emphasized the significance of Asian-American ties. Striking a clearly collaborative tone, and making it apparent that Asia would factor as highly as Europe, the United States Secretary of State said during an address to the Asia Society, "I hope to signal that we need strong partners across the Pacific, just as we need strong partners across the Atlantic." She continued, "We are, after all, both a trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific power." Upon arriving in Asia, Clinton said, "I have come to Asia on my first trip as secretary of state to convey that America's relationships across the Pacific are indispensable to addressing the challenges and seizing the opportunities of the 21st century."

In this way, Clinton was foregrounding an emphasis on regional alliances from east to west. At the philosophical level, Clinton was also indicating a return to the integrationist model of international relations. It was an ostensible departure from the hegemonic mode of neoconservative policy, which was made famous under the Bush-Cheney administration.

Before arriving in Asia on her first overseas trip, United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton warned North Korea against any "provocative action and unhelpful rhetoric." En route to Asia, Clinton said that North Korea had to adhere to its commitments to dismantle its nuclear programs. She said, "The North Koreans have already agreed to dismantling...We expect them to fulfill the obligations that they entered into."

But the United States' top diplomat was also critical of the Bush administration for abandoning the 1994 agreement with North Korea, which was forged during the presidency of Bill Clinton. The 1994 framework, which called for North Korea to give up its weapons program, collapsed when the Bush administration accused Pyongyang of maintaining a parallel (secondary) enriched uranium program. Clinton suggested that Pyongyang's decision to restart its nuclear program may have been partially due to the Bush administration's intemperate accusations of North Korea.

Clinton was confronted with a significant challenge on the trip to Asia, and particularly, the Korean peninsula. Amidst devolving relations between Pyongyang and Seoul, North Korea was hinting that it was preparing to test-fire the long-range Taepodong-2 missile. As well, North Korea was declaring its right to launch a "space program." Since North Korea has, in the past, characterized rocket launches in similar terms, it was believed that the term "space program" or satellite launch was associated with the anticipated missile launch. Accordingly, Clinton was tasked with taking a strong positions on, first, the missile test, and second, on North Korea's nuclear ambitions, while also working to reinvigorate the diplomatic process in the region and improving relations between Pyongyang and Washington.

To these ends, Clinton warned that relations between her country and North Korea were unlikely to improve unless Pyongyang was willing to engage in dialogue with Seoul. Clinton, who was speaking in the South Korean capital, took a sharp tone as she called on North Korea to bring an end to its nuclear ambitions, consistent with the provisions of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1718. She also characterized the notion of a missile test as "provocative." Nevertheless, Clinton made clear that diplomacy was the central focus of her objectives by announcing a special envoy to North Korea. Clinton named former Ambassador Stephen Bosworth, who served in South Korea from 1997 to 2000, to that role.

Relations between the United States and North Korea were likely to be quickly tested. At issue was the aforementioned satellite launch by North Korea.

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In fact, by March 2009, North Korea was threatening to go to war with any entity that tried to shoot down the satellite it intended to launch. A statement by the North Korean military read, "We will retaliate any act of intercepting our satellite for peaceful purposes with prompt counter-strikes by the most powerful military means." It also included the following assertion: "Shooting our satellite for peaceful purposes will precisely mean a war."

In a presumed effort to augment its warning, North Korea said its military was placed on full combat alert. This warning came at a time when scheduled joint military exercises between South Korea and the United States were about to commence.

Meanwhile, the newly-appointed United States envoy to North Korea, , Stephen Bosworth, who was in Asia to revitalize six-party denuclearization talks, noted that a launch by North Korea would be "ill advised."

In early April 2009, North Korea said that its attempt to launch a satellite into orbit ended in failure with parts of the rocket landing in the Pacific Ocean. But such an end did little to quell the international outcry. Throughout, the United States and South Korea have said that North Korea's claim of launching a satellite in space was just a cover for an actual missile test of the Taepodong-2. Accordingly, they have urged the United Nations Security Council to issue a strong response at an impending emergency session, which was called by Japan. The United States, South Korea and Japan regard the launch to be an abrogation of United Nations Security Resolution 1718, which in 2006 banned North Korea from ballistic missile activity. On the other side of the equation, China and Russia have advocated a restrained and measured response.

Relations between the United States and China were quickly put to the test in March 2009. The United States Pentagon said that five Chinese ships manoeuvred in close proximity to an unarmed United States navy vessel -- the USNS Impeccable -- in the South China Sea. United States authorities said that one Chinese navy intelligence ship and four other Chinese vessels were acting in an "increasingly aggressive" manner over the course of days leading up to this incident. They described the incident as the ships moving dangerously close to the USNS Impeccable, which was conducting routine ocean surveillance in international waters. They described the moves by the Chinese ships as "unprofessional manoeuvres" and "harrassment." Accordingly, United States authorities indicated they would be launching a protest, pointing to the violation of international law that calls for respectful and responsible regard for the rights and safety of other vessels on the sea. There was no response from the Chinese government at the time of writing.

Meanwhile, United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was scheduled to travel to the Middle East at the start of March 2009. On the agenda at a meeting of international donors at the Egyptian resort of Sharm el Sheikh was the reconstruction of Gaza in the aftermath of the Israeli military operation into that Palestinian territory. Clinton, on behalf of the United States, was expected to pledge \$900 million to the cause of reconstruction, which was only to be distributed if the Palestinians met certain key conditions, as dictated by the Quartet of Middle East mediators (the Quartet is composed of the United States, the European Union, Russia and the United Nations). Ahead of the meeting in Egypt, Clinton said, "I will be announcing a commitment to a significant aid package. But it will only be spent if we determine that our goals can be furthered rather than undermined or subverted." Clinton was also scheduled to meet with Israeli and Palestinian leaders during her trip to the region.

The Matter of Iran's Nuclear Program --

As of early 2009, it was yet to be seen how the nuclear issue and the broader matter of foreign relations between Iran and other country would be handled given the new balance of power in the United States. United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, as the top diplomat for the new Obama administration, has signaled the possibility of talks with Iran.

That said, on February 20, 2009, a new report by the United Nations' nuclear watchdog entity, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), asserted that Iran was understating how much uranium it had enriched, and that it

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had built up a stockpile of nuclear fuel. According to reports by Reuters, the discrepancy in the amount of uranium believed to have been enriched and the amount enriched in actuality was not due to subterfuge by Iran, but rather, a result of a technical mistake.

The Obama administration in the United States expressed concern over these revelations and called on the international community to address the matter with urgency. White House spokesperson, Robert Gibbs said, "The report represents another lost opportunity for Iran as it continues to renege on its international obligations."

On March 1, 2009, the United States senior military commander, Admiral Mike Mullen, said that Iran had enough nuclear material to manufacture a bomb. In an interview on the cable network CNN, the chairman of the United States Joint Chiefs of Staff said, "We think they do, quite frankly. And Iran having a nuclear weapon, I've believed for a long time, is a very, very bad outcome for the region and for the world." This assertion by Mullen came two weeks after the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said in report that Tehran had increased its stockpile of fissile nuclear material.

There were some analysts, such as David Albright, president of Washington-based Institute for Science and International Security, have said that the Iranian stockpile was enough to be converted into enriched uranium sufficient for building one bomb (reported by Agence France Presse). But that view was not shared by United States Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who said on an interview on the NBC news show, Meet the Press, "I think that there has been a continuing focus on how do you get the Iranians to walk away from a nuclear weapons program? They're not close to a stockpile. They're not close to a weapon at this point."

Amidst the rising tide of anxiety over Iran's nuclear ambitions, there were questions of how Israel -- a sworn enemy of Iran -- would respond. According to a report published by the Daily Telegraph of London, Israel has launched covert operations against Iran, which include plans to assassinate nuclear scientists.

Drawing upon both United States and other Western intelligence sources, the report in the Daily Telegraph of London noted that Israel was using "hit men," "double agents" and "front companies," in targeted efforts to sabotage Iran's nuclear program by eliminating "key human assets." The report made mention of the death of an Iranian scientist at the Isfahan uranium plant. It reported of rumors linking the Israeli intelligence agency, Mossad, with the gas poisoning death of Ardeschire Hassanpour in 2007.

President Barack Obama offers "new beginning" and possibility of engagement with Iran --

Making good on a campaign promise, United States President Barack Obama offered the possibility of diplomatic engagement with Iran. In a videotaped message in the third week of March 2009, President Obama said, "My administration is now committed to diplomacy that addresses the full range of issues before us."

President Obama made a point of using the official name of the country when he said that he wanted "to speak directly to the people and leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran." President Obama also indicated that his administration was committed "to pursuing constructive ties among the United States, Iran and the international community."

President Obama's message was broadcast at the same time as the Iranian festival of Nowruz. The timing may have been orchestrated for its symbolic value since Nowruz is a significant celebration on the Iranian calendar marking the start of spring. Making clear that a new era of diplomacy was ahead, President Obama said, "With the coming of a new season, we're reminded of this precious humanity that we all share. And we can once again call upon this spirit as we seek the promise of a new beginning."

But President Obama also struck a warning when he noted, "This process will not be advanced by threats. We seek instead engagement that is honest and grounded in mutual respect." He continued, "The United States wants the Islamic Republic of Iran to take its rightful place in the community of nations. You have that right - but it comes with real responsibilities."

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In response, an advisor to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad cautiously welcomed the United States President Obama's message but called for a fundamental shift in American foreign policy. Of particular concern to Iran was the United States' support for Israel, according to Ahmadinejad's advisor, Ali Akbar Javafekr, who also said that the sanctions against Iran had to end. He continued, "By fundamentally changing its behavior, America can offer us a friendly hand." Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei issued a less diplomatic reaction, instead demanding that the United States radically change its policies.

Tense relations between the Washington D.C. and Tehran have been ongoing for decades but took a particularly negative turn when President Obama's predecessor, George W. Bush, referred to Iran as part of the "axis of evil." Bilateral relations devolved further when Iran decided to pursue its controversial nuclear program.

To date, the United States and many other countries have expressed anxieties about Iran's nuclear ambitions, which the Iranian government has maintained is for peaceful purposes and not intended to build atomic weaponry. The United States, first under the Bush administration, and now under the Obama administration, wants Iran to abandon its nuclear enrichment activities. That said, analysts surmise that in advancing this overture, President Obama has signaled interest in building a more constructive relationship with Tehran before directly confronting the nuclear issue.

Indeed, Javier Solana, the foreign policy chief of the European Union, characterized Obama's overture as "very constructive" and called on Iran to heed the United States' president's core message. Whether or not Iran's government was willing to do so was yet to be determined. Other Middle Eastern players were nevertheless applauding President Obama's gesture. Khaled Meshaal, the exiled political leader of Hamas, gave credit to the American president for using "a new language" for the Middle East.

With that said, the contested election in Iran in 2009, followed by a brutal crackdown on the opposition by the hard liners in that country, have only served to return bilateral relations to a strained state.

As noted elsewhere in this Country Review, United States Vice-President Joe Biden said in a July 2009 interview with ABC News that the Obama administration would not stop Israel from striking Iranian nuclear facilities. Biden said that the United States would not "dictate to another sovereign nation what they can and cannot do." Biden also said that President Barack Obama's overture of engagement with Iran remained on the table. That offer for talks would end at the close of 2009. Meanwhile, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has suggested that his country would deal with the nuclear threat posed by Iran, if the government in Tehran was unwilling to enter negotiations. For its part, Iran has said that it would guarantee a strong response if its facilities were attacked by Israel.

Exit strategy for Afghanistan also on the agenda --

Also on the agenda with regard to United States foreign policy was the matter of Afghanistan. The Obama administration was expected to unveil a new strategy for dealing with Afghanistan. To that end, even as the administration deployed more troops to that country to deal with the resurgence of the Taliban and the devolving security situation there, President Obama noted during an interview on CBS television show 60 Minutes that there must be an "exit strategy" with regard to the United States policy in Afghanistan. He said, "There's got to be a sense that this is not a perpetual drift" and emphasized that the central mission was to ensure that al-Qaida was not able to carry attacks against the United States.

Giving a glimpse of the new strategy for Afghanistan, Richard Holbrooke, the United States special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, said that the United States would no longer treat the two countries separately. He said, "In the past, the United States government stove-piped it, they had an Afghan policy and a Pakistan policy. We have to integrate the two and I hope the rest of the world will join us in that effort."

Holbrooke also indicated that there would be no further neglect of the region, suggesting more attention in terms of troop strength and resources would be in the works.

In May 2009, United States Secretary of Defense Robert Gates announced the replacement of General David McKiernan --the commander of United States-led forces in the field in Afghanistan. Secretary Gates explained the decision had been made because the fight against the Taliban required "new thinking." To that apparent end, Secretary Gates said the new commander would be General Stanley McChrystal, whose background as a specialist in counter-insurgency would apparently yield necessary insight and leadership in the fight against the Taliban.

The move was part of a strategic shift by the Obama administration to not only strengthen armed forces on the ground, but also to use non-military methods to fight the Taliban. In fact, Secretary Gates' announcement came at a time when the United States was set to increase its military combat presence by 21,000 in Afghanistan (the existing force numbered 38,000). That move, however, was sure to be met with resistance in Afghanistan where Afghan President Hamid Karzai was under pressure to decrease combat operations in his country in the aftermath of a United States airstrike that left 150 people dead.

Leaders forge \$1 trillion deal at G-20 summit in London --

Leaders of the world's largest economies, known as the "G-20," met in London in April 2009 to explore possible responses to the global financial crisis. To that end, they forged a deal valued at more than one trillion dollars (USD).

Central to the agreement was an infusion of \$750 billion to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which was aimed at helping troubled economies. Up to \$100 billion of that amount was earmarked to assist the world's very poorest countries -- an amount far greater than had been expected. In many senses, the infusion of funding to the IMF marked a strengthening of that body unseen since the 1980s.

In addition, the G-20 leaders settled on a \$250 billion increase in global trade. The world's poorest countries would also benefit from the availability of \$250 billion of trade credit.

After some debate, the G-20 leaders decided to levy sanctions against clandestine tax havens and to institute strict financial regulations. Such regulations included tougher controls on banking professionals' salaries and bonuses, and increased oversight of hedge funds and credit rating agencies. A Financial Stability Board was to be established that would work in concert with the IMF to facilitate cross-border cooperation, and also to provide early warnings regarding the financial system.

Aside from these measures, the G-20 countries were already implementing their own economic stimulus measures at home, aimed at reversing the global recession. Together, these economic stimulus packages would inject approximately \$5 trillion by the end of 2010.

United Kingdom Prime Minister Gordon Brown played host at the meeting, which most concurred went off successfully, despite the presence of anti-globalization and anarchist protestors. Prime Minister Brown warned that there was "no quick fix" for the economic woes facing the international community, but he drew attention to the consensus that had been forged in the interest of the common good. He said, "This is the day that the world came together to fight back against the global recession, not with words, but with a plan for global recovery and for reform and with a clear timetable for its delivery."

All eyes were on United States President Barack Obama, who characterized the G-20 summit as "a turning point" in the effort towards global economic recovery. He also hailed the advances agreed upon to reform the failed regulatory regime that contributed to the financial crisis that has gripped many of the economies across the globe. Thusly, President Obama declared the London summit to be historic saying, "It was historic because of the size and the scope of the challenges that we face and because of the timeliness and the magnitude of our response."

Ahead of the summit, there were reports of a growing rift between the respective duos of France and Germany -- and -- the United States and the United Kingdom. While France and Germany were emphasizing stricter financial regulations, the United States and the United Kingdom were advocating public spending to deal with the economic

crisis. Indeed, French President Nicolas Sarkozy had threatened to bolt the meeting if his priority issues were not addressed. But such an end did not occur, although tensions were existent.

To that end, President Obama was hailed for his diplomatic skills after he brokered an agreement between France and China on tax havens. The American president played the role of peacemaker between French President Sarkozy and Chinese Premier Hu Jintao, paving the way for a meeting of the minds on the matter of tax havens.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy said that the concurrence reached at the G-20 summit were "more than we could have hoped for." President Sarkozy also credited President Obama for the American president's leadership at the summit, effusively stating: "President Obama really found the consensus. He didn't focus exclusively on stimulus ... In fact it was he who managed to help me persuade [Chinese] President Hu Jintao to agree to the reference to the ... publication of a list of tax havens, and I wish to thank him for that."

Meanwhile, German Chancellor Angela Merkel also expressed positive feedback about the success of the summit noting that the new measures would give the international arena a "clearer financial market architecture." She noted that the agreement reached was "a very, very good, almost historic compromise." Finally, Chancellor Merkel had warm words of praise for President Obama. "The American president also put his hand into this," said Merkel.

Note: The G-20 leaders agreed to meet again in September 2009 in New York to assess the progress of their agenda.

NATO meeting --

On the heels of the G-20 summit in London, leaders of NATO member states met in the French city of Strasbourg amidst fierce --and sometimes violent --protests. The NATO meeting was being jointly hosted by the German city of Kehl although it was France that garnered more attention.

At the NATO meetings, United States President Barack Obama emphasized the need to repairing his country's ties with Europe in the wake of the Bush era, when unilateralism was the dominating philosophy. President Obama called for both greater responsibility and increased cooperation for the purpose of advancing global peace and security.

President Obama calls for nuclear weapons-free world and cooperative action on global security --

Ahead of a meeting with European Union leaders in the Czech Republic in April 2009, United States President Barack Obama called for a world free of nuclear weaponry and cooperative action on global security.

In a speech to a receptive audience of 20,000 at a castle in Prague, President Obama expressed hopes of forging new agreements aimed at preventing the spread of nuclear weapons, including an end to the production of fissile materials used to create such weapons. He also said that his administration would work to bring the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) into force in order to end nuclear testing. To date, the CTBT has not been ratified by either the United States or China, and it has not been signed by either India or Pakistan.

President Obama referenced North Korea's rocket launch, characterizing it as "provocative," and emphasizing that it illustrated the crucial need for action. He said, "North Korea must know that the path to security and respect will never come through threats and illegal weapons." President Obama also noted that Iran posed a potential nuclear threat and, as such, the United States would move forward with its missile defense system in Eastern Europe. The American leader warned of al-Qaida's desire to acquire a nuclear bomb and the immediate threat to global security saying, "One terrorist with a nuclear weapon could unleash massive destruction."

That said, President Obama said that his administration was committed to ultimately reducing the United States' nuclear arsenal, noting that the very existence of thousands of nuclear weapons was "the most dangerous legacy of the Cold War." He recounted a recent meeting with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev at the G-20 summit in London where the two leaders agreed to restart negotiations aimed at reducing nuclear warheads.

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Acknowledging that a nuclear weapons-free world was unlikely to be realized in his lifetime, President Obama made clear that he intended to work toward that outcome.

U.S. president makes surprise visit to Baghdad --

United States President Barack Obama made a surprise trip to Baghdad in early April 2009. He arrived in Iraq during his return trip from Europe where he attended the G-20, NATO and European Union summits. In an address to cheering United States troops serving in Iraq, he reiterated his 2010 intended timetable to withdraw most United States troops from Iraq, and he noted that the time had come for Iraqis "to take responsibility for their country."

Hours before President Obama's arrival in Iraq, a series of coordinated car bombings in Baghdad left at least 34 people dead. A few days later, another Baghdad bombing killed nine people. Then, on April 9, 2009, a bomb exploded at a shopping area in a predominantly Shi'ite Kadhamiya part of Baghdad. Seven people were reported to have died and more than 20 others were injured as a result of the blast. The location of the attack was in proximity to the tomb of Imam Mousa al-Kazim -- a significant Shi'a shrine -- thus suggesting a sectarian motive. While the level of violence has generally declined over the course of the last year -- indeed to the lowest levels since the post-invasion insurgency began -- the spate of recent attacks has raised some degree of anxiety about increasing sectarian hostilities and concomitant violence.

CIA shuts down its secret prisons --

In April 2009, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Leon Panetta, announced an end to the global network of clandestine prisons that had been used to detain terrorism suspects. The prisons, also known as "black sites," gained notoriety for being the venue of harsh interrogation techniques, indeed torture, used on terrorism suspects. Shortly after his inauguration to office, President Barack Obama vowed to close down these facilities. Making good on that promise, Panetta wrote in a letter to staff, "CIA no longer operates detention facilities or black sites."

Special Coverage: President Obama orders dramatic rescue of ship captain from pirates --

In April 2009, Somali pirates hijacked the Maersk Alabama in the Indian Ocean. The vessel was destined to dock at Mombassa in Kenya and was carrying food aid destined for Somalia, Rwanda and Uganda.

The Somali pirates, armed with guns, moved into proximity of the Maersk Alabama via a small boat. They used ropes and hooks to climb aboard the vessel and then began demonstrating their gunfire. Captain Richard Phillips ordered his crew to lock themselves in a secure cabin and gave himself over to captors.

While the crew was able to regain control of the vessel and eventually reach its destination, Captain Phillips was taken hostage and placed on a small lifeboat under the control of the pirates. He made one unsuccessful attempt to escape by diving into the water but was pulled back aboard by his captors.

United States warships and a helicopter quickly moved from other locations in the region to the site of the incident, but there was no immediate attempt to rescue Captain Phillips. Negotiators from the Federal Bureau of Investigation were then deployed in an effort to secure the captain's release. Those hostage negotiations with the Somali pirates, however, soon devolved with no agreement being forged. Some reports suggested that the sticking point in the negotiations was the United States' insistence that the the pirates be arrested and brought to justice.

Meanwhile, the White House was tight-lipped about the situation until the dramatic rescue was complete. To that end, President Obama twice gave orders to use force to secure Captain Phillips' release.

According to reports, United States snipers were perched on the navy warship. From their vantage point, they saw a pirate direct a weapon toward Captain Phillips, thus prompting the need for immediate action. The snipers opened

fire, killing three of the pirates. The fourth pirate surrendered to the navy forces. With the pirates no longer a threat, navy personnel boarded the lifeboat and discovered Captain Phillips unharmed but bound by ropes.

At a Pentagon briefing in Bahrain, Vice Admiral William Gortney, the head of the United States Naval Central Command explained the need to use force in the rescue saying, "The on-scene [navy] commander determined that the captain was in imminent danger." He continued, "He had a weapon aimed at him - that would be my interpretation of imminent danger."

United States authorities acknowledge that the dramatic rescue could well motivate the targeting of Western vessels in region. To date, such hijackings have been relatively bloodless and aimed at procuring hefty ransoms. But this strong response by the United States, coming on the heels of a similarly dramatic rescue by French military of four French citizens just days before, could well raise the proverbial stakes.

Speaking to this issue, Vice Admiral Gortney warned, " This could escalate violence in this part of the world, no question about it." On the other side of the equation, various media reports indicated that self-identified pirates on the Somali coastal town of Eyl were now identifying the United States navy as their prime enemy target.

Nevertheless, President Obama expressed satisfaction that Captain Phillips had been rescued and hailed the ship's captain for his courage, noting that it was "model for all Americans." President Obama also noted that he intended to directly confront the growing threat of piracy in the unsafe waters off the eastern coast of Africa.

Following his rescue, Captain Phillip was released and was said to be resting on the United States warship, the USS Bainbridge. He was then transferred to the USS Boxer where he was to have a medical examination. Captain Phillips was in contact with his family in his home state of Vermont and anticipated a reunion with them within days.

A spokesperson for the Maersk shipping line read a statement on behalf of the Phillips family expressing their relief that the ordeal was over. For his part, Captain Phillips was reported to have dismissed praise of his own courage, instead saying, "I'm just the byline, the heroes are the Navy seals who brought me home."

Summit of Americas in Trinidad:

U.S. President Obama calls for "new beginning" with Cuba, shares handshake with Chavez, and explains doctrine of engagement --

The Organization of American States (OAS) convened the Summit of the Americas on April 17, 2009 for two days in Trinidad and Tobago and involved participation of by the heads of state of 34 democratic countries in the Western Hemisphere. The OAS has noted that Trinidad and Tobago would be distinguished as the first Caribbean country to host the summit. The meeting was set to take place at the Trinidad Hyatt in the country's capital city of Port of Spain. Typically, the Summit of the Americas has focused on issues including poverty alleviation, fighting narcotics trafficking, anti-terrorism measures, as well as strengthening democratic governance.

Ahead of the summit, on February 26, 2009, the OAS Secretary General José Miguel Insulza announced that that the economic crisis would be addressed during the meetings of the 34 leaders of OAS member nation states in April 2009.

Speaking at an Ordinary Session of 2009 of the Summit Implementation Review Group (SIRG), which brought together the member states' negotiators to consider the Draft Declaration of Commitment of Port-of Spain, Insulza explained that the main focus would be upon the global financial and economic crisis on the region. He said, "We would like to have a declaration soon, so that the Heads of State and Government can read and examine it before attending the Summit; especially as there will be necessary modifications, after the G20 meeting (that will be held in London on April 2nd), on the big topic about the economic crisis."

But by April 2009, while the financial and economic challenges continued to dominate the public purview, the focus of the summit appeared to be evolving. Indeed, relations with and policies regarding Cuba began to command

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attention. At issue were ties between the United States-Cuba and the prevailing policy of the United States to Cuba. These matters bubbled to the surface when the Obama administration in the United States decided to reverse restrictions on travel and remittances to Cuba. See above for details.

At the broader level, other member states of the OAS were expected to place pressure on the United States to allow Cuba to re-enter its hemispheric body after decades of being suspended from participation. Cuba's suspension in 1962 has rested on the fact that it is governed by the personalist regime of the Castro brothers and not a democratically-elected government. The OAS resolution cast Cuba's communist system as incompatible with the democratic principles of the regional grouping.

In an opinion editorial published in the Trinidad and Tobago Express on April 16, 2009, United States President Barack Obama signaled the spirit of change in hemispheric relations. He wrote, "We can overcome our shared challenges with a sense of common purpose, or we can stay mired in the old debates of the past. For the sake of all our people, we must choose the future."

Staying on the theme of past versus the future, President Obama said that the United State-Cuba relationship was often "dragged back to the 20th century" and eschewed the usual communism versus capitalism debate. Instead, the United States leader called for "pragmatic and responsible action" aimed at advancing "common prosperity." He likewise urged "practical cooperation" in the areas of security, energy and economic recovery.

President Obama acknowledged that the United States had not always maintained engagement in the region, noting, "We have been too easily distracted by other priorities, and have failed to see that our own progress is tied directly to progress throughout the Americas." He continued, "My administration is committed to renewing and sustaining a broader partnership between the United States and the hemisphere on behalf of our common prosperity and our common security." To that end, the president outlined a regional effort to confront the economic and financial crisis, while propelling forward renewable and sustainable energy, which would itself address the threat of climate change manifest by the diminishing glaciers of the Andes and the rise of sea level in the Caribbean.

President Obama emphasized that the OAS member states have had their own paths but that they must be "joined together" in the pursuit of "liberty, equality and human rights." With a nod to Cuba, President Obama expressed the hope that all OAS countries might one day sit at the table. President Obama suggested that even as his country extended its hand to Cuba -- in the form of the new policy changes -- the following move would have to come from Havana. In essence, the United States leader was noting that Havana should reciprocate the administration's decision to change its policy by allowing travel and remittances to Cuba.

Within 24 hours, Cuban President Raul Castro responded by making clear that Cuba would welcome talks with the United States; he also signaled that all topics would be open for discussion. Such a position has stood in contrast to previous stances by Havana, upon which matters such as human rights and political prisoners were not welcomed subjects of discourse.

United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who was traveling in the Caribbean en route to Trinidad, characterized Raul Castro's comments as a "very welcome gesture."

She said, "We welcome his comments, the overture they represent and we are taking a very serious look at how we intend to respond."

In the background of these developments, the OAS head, Secretary-General Jose Miguel Insulza, indicated that he could call on member states to re-admit Cuba 47 years after the communist country was suspended from the hemispheric body via the 1962 resolution. Such a decision was not soon to come but would likely be addressed at the OAS general assembly at the end of May 2009.

Most of the OAS countries that ended bilateral ties with Cuba at that time have subsequently restored relations, with the clear exception of the United States. Accordingly, most OAS states have been sympathetic to the notion of

ending Cuba's exclusion. Moreover, Havana's rapid response to Washington's policy changes has likely fueled the energy surrounding the Cuba issue.

At the opening ceremony of the Summit of Americas at the Hyatt in Port of Spain, President Obama reiterated his administration's desire to accentuate engagement with other countries in the Western Hemisphere and to work cooperatively on the economic, political, energy-related, and security-oriented issues. The details of such efforts notwithstanding, it was Obama's emphasis on international engagement that took center stage. He said, "There is no senior partner and junior partner in our relations; there is simply engagement based on mutual respect, common interests and shared values." This lexicon marks a broader transformation from the United States on foreign policy from a more hegemonic positioning to one of practical cooperation.

But all attention was focused on whether or not the United States president would overtly address Cuba. Indeed, at the close of his speech on opening day at the summit, President Obama made a history-making assertion when he expressly said, "The United States seeks a new beginning with Cuba." He acknowledged that such an endeavor would entail a "longer journey to be traveled to overcome decades of mistrust."

Nevertheless, he emphasized that there were "critical steps" that could be taken "toward a new day." In a tacit acknowledgment of Raul Castro's offer of open discussion, President Obama warned that he was "not interested in talking for sake of talking," but he made it clear that he looked forward to a new era in bilateral relation with Cuba. President Obama ended by auguring the spirit of change between Washington and Havana. He said, "I do believe we can move U.S.-Cuban relations in a new direction."

Other developments at the summit involved a convivial handshake between President Obama and Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. The Venezuelan leader, known for his anti-American rhetoric, reportedly offered friendship to President Obama and also gave him a book as a gift, albeit one that detailed perceived ills of American hegemony.

Nevertheless, President Chavez approached Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to tell her that he was restoring diplomatic representation in Washington. He also expressed hopes for improved bilateral relations on state television saying, "We ratify our willingness to begin what has started: cementing new relations. We have the very strong willingness to work together."

Facing criticism at home by Republicans who did not look kindly on these encounters between President Obama and President Chavez, the United States leader said, "It's unlikely that as a consequence of me shaking hands or having a polite conversation with Mr. Chavez that we are endangering the strategic interests of the United States."

Addressing his policy of international engagement, President Barack Obama said on the closing day of the summit that it "strengthens our hand" by reaching out to enemies of the United States. At an outdoor news conference in Trinidad, the American president said that the United States should be a leader and not a lecturer of democracy. Explaining the Obama doctrine of engagement, he said, "We're not simply going to lecture you, but we're rather going to show through how we operate the benefits of these values and ideals."

Special Entry: North Korea conducts nuclear test sparking international action --

In April 2009, North Korea announced that it was withdrawing from multilateral disarmament talks and restarting its operations at the Yongbyon nuclear plant. This decision to withdraw from the negotiating table and resume reprocessing spent fuel rods came after the United Nations (UN) Security Council decided to impose sanctions on three North Korean companies. That decision by the UN Security Council was reached in the aftermath of a controversial missile launch. North Korea maintained that it had simply launched a satellite in space and so characterized the international reaction as

"a wanton violation of the UN charter." In the face of North Korean defiance, the United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has called on North Korea to return to its previous agreement to end its nuclear program on the Korean peninsula.

On May 25, 2009, North Korea said that it had successfully conducted an underground nuclear test. North Korea said that this test contained more explosive power than an earlier nuclear test conducted in 2006. Several independent entities confirmed that a powerful explosion had been registered, resulting in the conclusion that it was caused by the nuclear test. Indeed, the United States Geological Survey said that a 4.7 magnitude seismic tremor was detected underground and indicated a nuclear explosion of some kind.

Geopolitical analysts were trying to determine why North Korea had chosen to move from negotiations to a clearly confrontational **stance**. Two years earlier, North Korea agreed to close its nuclear facility at Yongbyong and comply with international monitoring of its nuclear assets. In exchange, it was to be the recipient of a generous aid package and the United States was to remove North Korea from its list of terrorism sponsors.

Later, however, North Korea withdrew from long-running multilateral negotiations and stopped inspectors from monitoring progress related to the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

There was some speculation that after a woeful harvest, with up to a quarter of the North Korean population in desperate need of food aid, according to the World Food Programme, Pyongyang may have been trying to divert attention from this internal crisis. There was also some suggestion that the domestic worries may have prompted an internal power struggle, which ultimately may have spurred this action by hard-liner within the regime.

For its part, Pyongyang appeared to indicate its motive via a communique announced on state radio, which asserted that the underground nuclear testing had been "successfully conducted... as part of measures to enhance the Republic's self-defensive nuclear deterrent in all directions." The statement went on to note that the test was intended to "contribute to safeguard the sovereignty of the country and the nation and socialism." Pyongyang also offered assurances that the underground nuclear testing had ensued in a safe manner with advanced technology.

International news agencies reported that in addition to the underground nuclear test, North Korea also test-fired two short-range missiles. There were reports that the test firing of these missiles was aimed at disrupting the ability of United States' surveillance of the nuclear testing.

The international community reacted with outrage and condemnation to these collective actions, which occurred just a month after North Korea test fired a long-range missile capable of reaching Asia as well as parts of the United States.

United States President Barack Obama said that the action by North Korea was a threat to international peace and stability. He warned, "The danger posed by North Korea's threatening activities warrants action by the international community." The American president observed that North Korea was "not only deepening its own isolation it's also inviting stronger international pressure."

Russia, which was at the helm of the rotating presidency, called for an emergency session of the United Nations (UN) Security Council, noting that North Korea had violated UN Security Council Resolution 1718.

In fact, the Russian Foreign Ministry categorically rebuked North Korea's actions in a statement that read: "We cannot describe the North Korean move other than as a breach of UN Security Council resolution 1718, which prohibits Pyongyang from carrying out nuclear tests." The statement continued, "The North Korean nuclear test has a serious impact on international efforts aiming to strengthen the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and breaches the international regime provided by the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty."

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Indeed, UN Security Council Resolution 1718 exists in tandem with Article 41 of Chapter VII of the UN Charter and compels compliance by all member states. A nuclear test would be an unassailable violation of UN Security Resolution 1718, which itself imposed sanctions in North Korea after it conducted a previous test in 2006.

Not surprisingly, the UN Security Council rapidly reacted with a strenuous statement of condemnation, registering North Korea's contravention of the resolution, demanding that North Korea return to multilateral talks aimed at denuclearization, and reminding all member states that they must comply with sanctions imposed on North Korea. The UN Security Council also made clear that further action, in the form of a new resolution with stronger measures, was in the offing.

United States Ambassador to the UN, Susan Rice, also said that the formulation of a new resolution with more stringent measures would commence right away. Rice said, "The US thinks that this is a grave violation of international law and a threat to regional and international peace and security. And therefore the United States will seek a strong resolution with strong measures."

On May 27, 2009, the North Korean military announced that it was abandoning the armistice that brought an end to Korean War.

The North Korean military said that this action was being taken in response to South Korea's decision to participate in the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI). North Korea said that South Korea's decision to join PSI -- a United States-led effort to patrol the oceans in search of nuclear weapons -- was tantamount to a "declaration of war" and promised military action if its shipping vessels were intercepted. In another development, South Korean media reported that steam had been observed emanating from North Korea's nuclear plant at Yongbyon -- a sign indicating North Korea had decided to recommence the manufacture of weapons-grade plutonium.

In the first week of June 2009, United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that North Korea could well be reinstated on her country's list of countries viewed as sponsors of terrorism. With some politicians in the United States calling for such a response, the country's top diplomat said, "Well, we're going to look at it. There's a process for it. Obviously we would want to see recent evidence of their support for international terrorism."

North Korea was removed from the terror list in October 2008 when it was compliant with a denuclearization agreement brokered via multilateral talks. But North Korea's recent decisions to pursue nuclear activities, manifest most blatantly in an underground nuclear test, as well as a volley of short-range missile tests, have rendered that agreement functionally void.

Secretary of State Clinton observed, "Obviously they were taken off of the list for a purpose and that purpose is being thwarted by their actions."

Secretary of State Clinton also warned that North Korea was likely to face harsh consequences from the United Nations, as the international body contemplated a new resolution against North Korea. To that end, Clinton said, "We think we're going to come out of this with a very strong resolution with teeth that will have consequences for the North Korean regime." She continued, "If we do not take significant and effective action against the North Koreans now, we'll spark an arms race in North-East Asia."

In the second week of June 2009, the United States special envoy to North Korea, Stephen Bosworth, said in an address to the Korea Society in New York that his government was considering stronger responses to the challenges posed by North Korea's recent missile activities. He said, "North Korea's recent actions to develop a nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile capacity require that we expand our consideration of new responses." He continued, "However, the North Korean claim to be responding to a 'threat' or a 'hostile policy' by the United States is simply groundless. Quite to the contrary, we have no intention to invade North Korea or change its regime through force, and this has been made clear to the DPRK repeatedly."

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Among the possible responses being considered by the United States were financial sanctions, as well as tougher inspections of shipping vessels in waters surrounding North Korea. Related to these possible moves was the unanimous decision by the United Nations Security Council to impose harsh new sanctions against North Korea in response to the nuclear test carried out in May 2009. Included in the new sanctions regime was the expected provision for the increased inspection of North Korean cargo not only on shipping vessels, but also on land and by air, and it authorized the destruction of any materials suspected of being linked to weapons of mass destruction. The new sanctions regime also expanded the arms embargo against North Korea, effectively prohibiting the sale of heavy and small arms by North Korea.

Rosemary DiCarlo, the United States deputy ambassador at the United Nations said: "North Korea chose a path of provocation. This resolution will give us new tools to impair North Korea's ability to proliferate, and to threaten international stability." For its part, North Korea reacted to these developments by threatening to weaponize its stocks of plutonium. United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that this threat by Pyongyang was both "provocative" and "deeply regrettable." She warned that the move would serve only to isolate North Korea even further from the wider international community.

Meanwhile, a political confrontation between the United States and North Korea could become more likely after reports emerged that a North Korea court convicted two American journalists of "hostile acts" and illegal entry into the communist state. Despite international protests and the two journalists' insistence of innocence, Laura Ling and Euna Lee were sentenced them to 12 years in a labor prison. The families of the two journalists have urged that they not be part of the burgeoning political challenge over North Korea's nuclear activities.

By the third week of June 2009, as reports emerged about a long range missile launch by North Korea -- quite possibly in the direction of Hawaii -- United States Defense Secretary Robert Gates noted that his country was "in a good position" to protect itself. Secretary Gates said, "We do have some concerns if they were to launch a missile to the west in the direction of Hawaii." But he made it clear that the United States had approved the deployment of both radar and missiles "provide support," should the American state of Hawaii face attack. United States President Barack Obama later echoed these assurances in an interview with CBS News. President Obama said, "This administration - and our military - is fully prepared for any contingencies."

The American president dismissed the notion that it was warning of a military response against North Korea. But he also said, "I don't want to speculate on hypotheticals. But I do want to give assurances to the American people that the T's are crossed and the I's are dotted."

In other developments, United States President Barack Obama renewed its sanctions -- separate from the United Nations sanctions -- against North Korea. President Obama explained that North Korea's nuclear development combined with threats posed a national security risk to the United States and destabilized the region of eastern Asia. The American president also said his administration would end the cycle of responding to North Korean nuclear threats by granting concessions and incentives to Pyongyang.

On July 2, 2009, North Korea test-fired four short-range missiles. According to South Korea's Yonhap News Agency, two surface-to-ship missiles had been fired from the port of Wonsan while the other two were launched from Sinsang-ni. All four were fired into the Sea of Japan, which South Korea regards as the "East Sea." The missile tests were not surprising as Pyongyang issued warnings to shipping vessels, urging them to avoid coastal waters. Two days later, North Korea was suspected of firing another seven ballistic missiles. These seven Scud-type missiles were launched from an east coast base and, as before, fell into the Sea of Japan, also known as the East Sea.

The timing of the missile tests coincided with the United States' celebration of its Independence Day on July 4, 2009, and was regarded as a clear act of defiance against Washington. Nevertheless, the United States was joined by Russia and China in calling for calm. Russia and China urged North Korea to return to the negotiating table and said all parties should work to avoid further destabilization of the region. The United States also said that the tense situation should not be exacerbated. Using highly restrained language, a United States Department of

State official said the volley of missile tests were "not helpful" and said that North Korea should not "aggravate tensions" but instead "focus on denuclearization talks." While British Foreign Secretary David Miliband echoed this sentiment by saying that tensions on the Korean peninsula should remain "at manageable levels," Japan and South Korea struck a somewhat harsher tone in saying that the missile launches constituted an "act of provocation."

Special Entry: President Obama calls for "a new beginning" with the Muslim world from Cairo University

Summary:

On June 3, 2009, United States President Barack Obama arrived in Saudi Arabia on his first stop on a trip to the Middle East. On June 4, 2009, President Obama traveled onto Egypt where he addressed the Muslim world from Cairo University. The trip was aimed at strengthening United States' engagement in the region of the Middle East and the broader Islamic world.

Background:

During his presidential campaign, Barack Obama promised that he would travel to an Arab country to address the Islamic world, with an eye on improving America's image in that part of the globe. Obama aimed to regain global goodwill that was abundant after the terror attacks in the United States in 2001, but which he and other Democrats have said was squandered and lost as a result of the previous Bush administration's decision to launch a war in Iraq. To these ends, President Obama was making good on that promise by traveling from Saudi Arabia to Egypt, where he was scheduled to offer an address at Cairo University.

Another rationale for President Obama's trip was a meeting with King Abdullah while in Saudi Arabia. Describing that meeting, President Obama said, "I thought it was very important to come to the place where Islam began and to seek his majesty's counsel and to discuss with him many of the issues that we confront here in the Middle East." He continued, "I am confident that working together, the United States and Saudi Arabia can make progress on a whole host of issues of mutual interest."

Indeed, the meeting at the Saudi king's ranch involved dialogue on Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations. The Saudi monarch has long been considered a key player in regional stability, and his sanctioning of any given peace path could well advance such an end. It should be noted that some years earlier, the Saudi government advanced its own "land for peace" deal.

The Peace Process:

The trip came on the heels of meetings between the American president and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas respectively. President Obama made emphatically clear his commitment to the two-state solution as the ultimate end to the Middle East peace process. President Obama said he believed Israel would see that the two-state solution would help that country achieve sustainable peace and security. President Obama also said that all Arab countries would be expected to support and respect the two-state solution, which would essentially require recognition of the legitimacy of the Jewish state.

To date, the fate of the Palestinian people and the security of Israel have been flashpoints in the quest for peace. The Arab world, with the exception of Egypt and Jordan, have refused to recognize Israel and have used the issue of Palestinian sovereign status as a rallying call for anti-American sentiment. Meanwhile, the status of the Palestinian people has remained unresolved as various players and interest groups argue over who is to blame for the situation, and how it might be resolved. For his part, President Obama was to become one more American leader in a line of predecessors trying to solve this problem.

Al-Qaida Emerges

Middle East peace notwithstanding, it was Pakistan that emerged on the landscape as a new rallying call for Islamic extremism. As President Obama arrived in the region, there was a message from al-Qaida leader, Osama Bin

Laden, transmitted on the Arabic television station al-Jazeera. In that message, Bin Laden accused the American president of being behind the ongoing crackdown on militants in Taliban strongholds of Pakistan. The terrorist leader warned that Obama had "sown new seeds to increase hatred and revenge on America." Bin Laden's deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, also urged his listeners not to heed the "polished words" of the internationally-popular President Obama. These statements coincided with an al-Qaida statement vowing to attack President Obama's convoy in Riyadh.

The White House in Washington dismissed these messages, noting that Bin Laden and his ilk wanted to distract attention from Obama's much-anticipated speech to the Islamic world. White House Press Secretary, Robert Gibbs, said to reporters: "I don't think it's surprising that al-Qaida would want to shift attention away from the president's historic and continued efforts to have an open dialogue with the Muslim world." Meanwhile, United States special envoy to the Afghan-Pak region, Richard Holbrooke, made clear that the only sources of the chaos in Pakistan were al-Qaida and the Taliban. He also announced a fresh aid package aimed at helping the displaced populations in Pakistan suffering from the cross-fire of the violence there.

Geopolitical analysts surmised that back-to-back messages from the al-Qaida leadership indicated that it might well be threatened by the Obama administration's overtures to - and influence of -- the Islamic world.

The Speech:

In his address to the Muslim world, President Barack Obama said, "I have come here to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world; one based upon mutual interest and mutual respect." Speaking before a crowd of 4,000 Egyptians in the Grand Hall of Cairo University, President Obama noted that the centuries-long relationship between Islam and the West has involved both co-existence and cooperation, but that it has also been marked by conflict and religious wars. He acknowledged that the "years of distrust" would require both sides to make a "sustained effort... to respect one another and seek common ground."

President Obama succinctly explained some of the cause of the tensions between the West and the Islamic world when he said, "The sweeping change brought by modernity and globalization led many Muslims to view the West as hostile to the traditions of Islam" and then observed that "violent extremists have exploited these tensions." He then went on to call for a new relationship based on common hopes and aspirations saying, "So long as our relationship is defined by our differences, we will empower those who sow hatred rather than peace, and who promote conflict rather than the cooperation that can help all of our people achieve justice and prosperity. This cycle of suspicion and discord must end."

President Obama went on to describe the historical contributions of Islam to the world, referencing the development of Algebra, the invention of the magnetic compass and other tools of navigation, as well as cultural contributions in the realm of the arts. While not directly germane to geopolitics, these references served to show respect to the Islamic world, which has often been juxtaposed competitively against Western civilization.

Switching to the theme of Muslims in America, President Obama acknowledged that Islam has "always been a part of America's story" and noting that the country's first diplomatic relations were forged with Morocco. Conjuring up that history, he reminded people that during the signing of the Treaty of Tripoli in 1796, President John Adams wrote, "The United States has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion or tranquility of Muslims."

President Obama said that it was his responsibility as to fight against negative stereotypes of Islam, but also to advocate on behalf of his own country. To that end he said, "America is not the crude stereotype of a self-interested empire. The United States has been one of the greatest sources of progress that the world has ever known. We were born out of revolution against an empire. We were founded upon the ideal that all are created equal, and we have shed blood and struggled for centuries to give meaning to those words - within our borders, and around the world. We are shaped by every culture, drawn from every end of the Earth, and dedicated to a simple concept: E pluribus unum: Out of many, one."

On foreign policy, President Obama explained that United States action in Afghanistan was not an act of war against Islam, but an imperative -- indeed, a necessity -- given the security threat posed by al-Qaida, which was

responsible for the traumatic 2001 terror attacks in the United States. To that end, President Obama said: "But let us be clear: al-Qaida killed nearly 3,000 people on that day. The victims were innocent men, women and children from America and many other nations who had done nothing to harm anybody. And yet al-Qaida chose to ruthlessly murder these people, claimed credit for the attack, and even now states their determination to kill on a massive scale. They have affiliates in many countries and are trying to expand their reach. These are not opinions to be debated; these are facts to be dealt with." He went on to assert, "We would gladly bring every single one of our troops home if we could be confident that there were not violent extremists in Afghanistan and Pakistan determined to kill as many Americans as they possibly can. But that is not yet the case."

President Obama distinguished Iraq from Afghanistan by described the war in Iraq as optional. He also indicated that the war in Iraq had functioned as a cautionary tale within America, reminding everyone of the need to deploy diplomacy and forge international consensus to solve difficult global challenges, if at all possible. The American president also made clear that his country had no desire to establish permanent bases in Iraq.

Moving to the Israeli-Palestinian issue, President Obama emphasized the United States' special relationship with Israel, describing the bond as "unbreakable" and the existence of the Jewish state was rooted in an undeniable history of tragedy, including the horrors of the holocaust. He excoriated those who would deny the holocaust, saying vociferously: "Six million Jews were killed - more than the entire Jewish population of Israel today. Denying that fact is baseless, ignorant, and hateful. Threatening Israel with destruction - or repeating vile stereotypes about Jews - is deeply wrong, and only serves to evoke in the minds of Israelis this most painful of memories while preventing the peace that the people of this region deserve."

President Obama also demanded that Palestinians abandon violent means of resistance. Contrasting the Palestinian struggle with that of African slaves, he said: "Resistance through violence and killing is wrong and does not succeed. For centuries, black people in America suffered the lash of the whip as slaves and the humiliation of segregation. But it was not violence that won full and equal rights. It was a peaceful and determined insistence upon the ideals at the center of America's founding." As if to underline his condemnation of violent resistance, President Obama said, "It's a story with a simple truth: that violence is a dead end. It is a sign of neither courage nor power to shoot rockets at sleeping children, or to blow up old women on a bus. That is not how moral authority is claimed; that is how it is surrendered."

At the same time, he acknowledged that the dislocation of Palestinians has been painful saying that the "situation for the Palestinian people is intolerable." As before, he emphasized the two-state solution and the right of Palestine to exist alongside Israel. "Israelis must acknowledge that just as Israel's right to exist cannot be denied, neither can Palestine's," Obama said.

It should be noted that the government of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu issued a statement following President Obama's speech that expressed the hope the American president's address would "lead to a new era of reconciliation between the Arab and Muslim world and Israel." On the other side of the equation, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas applauded the speech, saying that it was "a good start" to a reinvigorated peace process.

On the issue of Iran's nuclear ambitions, President Obama appeared to strike a pragmatic tone when he said, "No single nation should pick and choose which nations hold nuclear weapons." But he also said that there should be no nuclear arms race in the Middle East -- a clear reference to the generally-held belief that Iran desires to build nuclear weapons. The American president also called for United States' relations with Iran to move forward saying, "The question, now, is not what Iran is against, but rather what future it wants to build." But Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, delivered his own speech in which he offered no signal of progress, preferring instead to promote a negative stance in his pronouncement that that the United States remained "deeply hated" in the Middle East.

President Obama moved on to address the broad subject of democracy. President Obama said unambiguously, "No system of government can or should be imposed upon one nation by any other." But he went on to note that his policy was founded on the notion that government should reflect the will of the people. President Obama stated: "I

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do have an unyielding belief that all people yearn for certain things: the ability to speak your mind and have a say in how you are governed; confidence in the rule of law and the equal administration of justice; government that is transparent and doesn't steal from the people; the freedom to live as you choose. Those are not just American ideas, they are human rights, and that is why we will support them everywhere."

President Obama also disabused his listeners of the notion that elections were not the equivalent of democracy. He said, "No matter where it [change of government] takes hold, government of the people and by the people sets a single standard for all who hold power: you must maintain your power through consent, not coercion; you must respect the rights of minorities, and participate with a spirit of tolerance and compromise; you must place the interests of your people and the legitimate workings of the political process above your party. Without these ingredients, elections alone do not make true democracy."

On the issue of women's rights, President Obama struck a culturally sensitive tone as he said, "I do not believe that women must make the same choices as men in order to be equal, and I respect those women who choose to live their lives in traditional roles. But it should be their choice." He continued by saying, "I reject the view of some in the West that a woman who chooses to cover her hair is somehow less equal, but I do believe that a woman who is denied an education is denied equality. And it is no coincidence that countries where women are well-educated are far more likely to be prosperous."

President Obama ended his historic address by noting that the path toward peace and understanding would be a difficult one, but that it must nonetheless be charted together for the sake of common purpose. He asserted: "The issues that I have described will not be easy to address. But we have a responsibility to join together on behalf of the world we seek - a world where extremists no longer threaten our people, and American troops have come home; a world where Israelis and Palestinians are each secure in a state of their own, and nuclear energy is used for peaceful purposes; a world where governments serve their citizens, and the rights of all God's children are respected. Those are mutual interests. That is the world we seek. But we can only achieve it together."

In closing, President Obama cited all three Abrahamic religions in a call for international peace as follows --

The Holy Koran tells us, "O mankind! We have created you male and a female; and we have made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another." The Talmud tells us: "The whole of the Torah is for the purpose of promoting peace." The Holy Bible tells us, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God."

Throughout his speech, President Obama was interrupted 30 times by applause. At one point, a man in the audience called out "We love you." At the close of his speech, the American president received a standing ovation.

Global Reaction:

Attention turned to how the address resonated with the Muslim world. Mina al-Oraibi, a columnist with the London-based Asharq Al-Awsat, emphasized the fact that "Obama mentioned the word peace 29 times and never mentioned terrorism." She said that his peace agenda would make him "the radicals' worst nightmare. In an interview with Egyptian media, famed Middle Eastern television personality Emad el-Din Adib, said, "President Obama's charisma is unquestionable, but it's the substance and depth of his speech that made the hall roar."

In Pakistan, Sherry Rehman, former information minister and parliamentarian for the ruling Pakistan People's Party, said that Pakistanis should welcome the speech; she also hailed his respectful tone. Moreover, Rehman said "It's not a strategic shift, but more a welcome step in the right direction." But retired Pakistani General Talat Masood said that the speech "went right to the heart of the issues that bedevil U.S.-Muslim relations."

Not all those who heard the speech had positive words for President Obama. On CBS television in the United States, former Bush press secretary Ari Fleischer disapproved of President Obama's speech in Cairo. Fleischer said, "Bottom line -- the speech was balanced and that was what was wrong with it. American policy should not be balanced. It should side with those who fight terror." This view was reflected by the Republican Jewish Coalition (RJC), which charged that "Obama struck a balanced tone with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and that's

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what was wrong with this speech." The RJC continued saying, "American policy should not be balanced in regard to... those [Palestinians] who either engage in [terror] or are too weak to prevent it."

Following along those lines, there was a consensus complaint from neo-conservatives that President Obama had not used the word "terrorism" during his address, preferring instead to deploy the phrase "violent extremists." Analysts observed that President Obama may well have made a conscious effort to adopt a new lexicon reflective of his policy of engagement. In so doing, he expunged the Bush administration's term, "global war on terror," which may unwillingly connote notions of a ceaseless clash of civilizations.

Other critics of President Obama argued that a well-delivered speech was no substitute for action. But the president himself acknowledged that "no single speech can eradicate years of mistrust." That said, he made clear that the objectives of a new relationship between the United States and the Islamic world could only be started with dialogue. Indeed, as media pundit and Newsweek columnist, Howard Fineman, noted: "In this case, words matter." For its part, the White House said that President Obama's address was intended to start a process to "re-energize the dialogue with the Muslim world."

Note:

During his trip, President Obama also met with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. Following his address, President Obama visited the pyramids at Giza before leaving for Germany and France. After leaving Egypt, President Obama was scheduled to travel to Germany where he met with Chancellor Angela Merkel and visited both the Dresden and Buchenwald concentration camps there. Following, he traveled to France to meet with President Nicolas Sarkozy and attend D-Day ceremonies in Normandy.

Post-script on Middle East relations:

In July 2009, United States Vice-President Joe Biden said in an interview with ABC News that has the Obama administration would not stop Israel from striking Iranian nuclear facilities. Biden said that the United States would not "dictate to another sovereign nation what they can and cannot do." Biden also said that President Barack Obama's overture of engagement with Iran remained on the table. That offer for talks would end at the close of 2009. Meanwhile, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has suggested that his country would deal with the nuclear threat posed by Iran, if the government in Tehran was unwilling to enter negotiations. For its part, Iran has said that it would guarantee a strong response if its facilities were attacked by Israel.

U.S. and Russia forge agreement to cut stockpiles of nuclear weapons as Obama and Medvedev set new tone for bilateral relations --

On July 6, 2009, United States President Barack Obama met with his Russian counterpart, President Dmitry Medvedev, for talks on their countries' respective nuclear arsenals. Following three hours of discussion, the two world leaders signed an outline agreement aimed at reducing their countries' stockpiles of nuclear weapons. The "joint understanding" was signed in a public ceremony in Moscow and would cut deployed nuclear warheads to under 1,700 on both sides within seven years of a forging new accord. That new accord would stand in replacement of the 1991 Start I treaty, which was set to expire at the close of 2009.

A statement from the White House explained that the new treaty would "include effective verification measures" and "enhance the security of both the US and Russia, as well as provide predictability and stability in strategic offensive forces."

While the terms of the new concord would still leave both countries with enough weaponry to destroy one another, the move was intended to stop the diplomatic "drift" away from cooperation on shared interests, which had occurred in recent times.

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To that end, President Obama said the United States and Russia were both "committed to leaving behind the suspicion and the rivalry of the past." He also noted that the new agreement was part of an initiative "to reset U.S.-Russian relations so that we can co-operate more effectively in areas of common interest."

For his part, President Medvedev said that the talks had been "very frank and very sincere" and were

"without any doubt, the meeting we had been waiting for in Russia and the United States." The Russian leader went on to state, "I would like particularly to stress that our country would like to reach a level of cooperation with the United States that would really be worthy of the 21st Century, and which would ensure international peace and security."

In addition to reduced levels of nuclear warheads and delivery systems, including intercontinental ballistic missiles, there were also provisions for submarine-launched missiles and bombers.

In a separate agreement, Russia said it would allow the United States military to transport troops and weaponry across its territory to Afghanistan, where the war against resurgent Taliban and al-Qaida was ongoing. This use of Russian territory to move troops and equipment into the conflict zone would foreclose the use of routes through Pakistan, which have been the target of attacks by militants on a frequent and increasing basis.

In another development, Russia and the United States agreed to establish a joint commission, which would facilitate greater cooperation on energy, fighting terrorism and dealing with narcotics trafficking.

In a particularly significant move, the two countries agreed to resume military cooperation, which was suspended in 2008 as a result of the conflict between Russia and Georgia.

Yet unresolved was the prevailing source of controversy on both sides -- the United States' plan to develop a missile defence shield system in Eastern Europe. This proposal has been strenuously resisted by Russia, which eschews greater American domination in its own backyard.

In a move aimed at gradually moving the two countries toward consensus on the issue, both Obama and Medvedev said that they backed a joint study on the threat of ballistic missiles and the institution of a data exchange center.

President Obama, who characterized former President Vladimir Putin as having "one foot in the old ways of doing business and one foot in the new," was set to meet with the prime minister of Russia on July 7, 2009.

See below for further developments related to United States-Russia relations.

Iraqi politicians laud withdrawal of U.S. troops --

United States troops withdrew from Iraq's cities, towns and military bases on June 30, 2009, in keeping with a prevailing bilateral agreement. Iraqi security forces were now charged with keeping the peace.

Iraqi politicians of various ethno-sectarian backgrounds lauded the move as a sign of progress is the path of sovereignty. Hashim al-Taie of the Accordance Front said, "The pullout is a very good step on the path to independence and sovereignty and Iraqis are glad of that." Mahmoud Othman, from the main Kurdish alliance in parliament, said, "We have concerns. Some towns still have trouble -- mixed areas -- but those concerns should not prevent the withdrawal."

For his part, United States President noted that "Sovereignty Day" was a significant milestone for Iraq, but warned that Iraq would yet be faced with "difficult days" in the future. Indeed, there were some anxieties that the withdrawal of United States troops could well act as a trigger for increasing ethno-sectarian violence across the country.

Afghanistan Policy: U.S. president says immediate mission is to see Afghanistan through elections ---

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With casualties mounting amidst troops from the United States and the United Kingdom fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan, there have been increasing anxieties about Western efforts in that country to crush Islamic militants. Indeed, recent times have seen resurgent Taliban become increasingly violent and brutal in their attacks while Western forces have seen ever-increasing casualty lists. In July 2009, the United Kingdom and the United States had lost several soldiers as a result of attacks by resurgent Taliban. Indeed, as many as 15 British troops died in the space of days while four United States marines died in two separate roadside bombings.

Given this climate, United States President Barack Obama sought to quell anxieties by staking out a clear set of objectives for United States and allied troops trying to repel the Taliban in Afghanistan. To this end, President Obama characterized the war effort in Afghanistan as a "serious fight" against terrorism, and the crucial need to establish regional stability. President Obama said that United States and allied troops had enjoyed some success but were immediately tasked with the mission of seeing Afghanistan through the forthcoming presidential election set for August 2009.

Across the Atlantic in the United Kingdom, British Prime Minister was compelled to justify his country's continuing effort in Afghanistan by explaining that there was a vital interest to his country in fighting terrorism. President Obama had also emphasized the fact that the effort against the Taliban was as much in the interests of Europe as it was for the United States. He said, "The mission in Afghanistan is one that the Europeans have as much if not more of a stake in than we do. The likelihood of a terrorist attack in London is at least as high, if not higher, than it is in the United States."

United States offers limited legal rights to prisoners at Bagram ---

On September 12, 2009, it was announced that more than 600 prisoners held by the United States military at the Bagram air base in Afghanistan would be given new legal rights to challenge their detention. The new legal guidelines would include the right of each detainee to be represented by a United States military official, and the right to present evidence before a military board, which would determine whether or not continued detention was in order. The new legal guidelines presented the first significant shift in overseas detention policies since the Bush administration was in power. To date, human rights groups have condemned the practice of holding detainees as "enemy combatants" indefinitely at Bagram, with many of them not knowing the reasons for their imprisonment. Sahr Muhammed Ally of the Human Rights First cautiously welcomed the news saying, "Any reform in U.S. detentions in Afghanistan is an improvement, but it remains to be seen whether the new procedures will cure the ills of arbitrary and indefinite detention that have been the hallmark of detentions in Bagram."

Bin Laden Emerges --

On September 13, 2009, an audio message, believed to have been recorded by al-Qaida terrorist leader, Osama Bin Laden, was released on an Islamic website. The message was titled "a statement to the American people" and in it, the taped voice argued that the United States President Barack Obama was "powerless" to stop the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The taped voice -- believed to be Bin Laden -- accused the new United States president of failing to significantly change its foreign policy, as evidenced by the decision to retain officials from the previous Bush administration, such as Defense Secretary Robert Gates. The timing of the release of the message was significant, given that it occurred two days after the eighth anniversary of the tragic 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States. Indeed, the taped voice said that one motivating factor behind the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington was the United States foreign policy towards Israel. To date, Bin Laden is believed to be alive and living in the mountainous Afghan-Pak border region.

Head of Taliban in Pakistan likely killed by missile attack; some Taliban sources dispute claim by Pakistani government --

In the early hours of August 6, 2009, Pakistani and United States officials said they were examining reports that the leader of the Taliban in Pakistan, Baitullah Mehsud, may have been killed in a missile attack orchestrated by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) the day before.

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At the time, a United States official said that there was "reason to believe reports of his death may be true, but it cannot be confirmed." As well, Robert Gibbs, the spokesperson for United States President Barack Obama, acknowledged that the administration was yet to receive absolute confirmation but nonetheless said, "There seems to be a growing consensus among credible observers that he is indeed dead." Soon thereafter, a militant commander from the Taliban made clear that Mehsud died in the strike by a United States drone on a relative's house in South Waziristan.

During an interview with the Associated Press, Kafayat Ullah -- an aide to Mehsud -- said: "I confirm that Baitullah Mehsud and his wife died in the American missile attack in South Waziristan."

Days later, Pakistani Interior Minister Rehman Malik added to the assertions by the Pakistani authorities regarding the death of the Taliban leader when he said in an interview with BBC News, "All the credible intelligence I have from that area does finally confirm [Baitalluh Mehsud's death]."

With news abounding about Mehsud's likely death, attention had fixed on possible successors to the leadership of Pakistan's Taliban. In fact, there were reports that the Taliban as holding a "shura" council in South Waziristan to select Mehsud's successor,

Among the possible contenders for this role were Hakimullah Mehsud, Maulana Azmatullah and Wali-ur-Rehman.

But even the succession battle became one tinged with controversy when reports emerged that Hakimullah Mehsud may have been killed in a gun battle involving his main rival for the Taliban top spot, Wali-ur-Rehman. The situation became more complicated when a BBC interview was published with the man himself claiming to be alive. Indeed, Hakimullah Mehsud was quoted as denying reports of his own death; he also said that Baitullah Mehsud was not dead either. The Associated Press likewise reported that Hakimullah Mehsud and two other Taliban figures asserted on the record that Baitullah Mehsud was still alive.

For its part, the Pakistani government said that although it was inclined to believe veracity of the reports surrounding Baitullah Mehsud's death, it did not have available forensic evidence to make an irrefutable confirmation. As such, the government would have to send investigators into the field and final confirmation could take some time. The Pakistani government subsequently added that it would provide conclusive proof of Baitullah Mehsud's death, such as DNA evidence.

Should the apparent death of Pakistan's Taliban chief prove to be true, it would serve as evidence of the success of joint Pakistani-American efforts to stave off the advance of Islamic extremists in this nuclear-armed country. In fact, under pressure from the United States, Pakistan launched an intense military offensive into the areas bordering Afghanistan, where Islamic militants have held sway. The mission was aimed at destroying the Taliban and its network with other Islamic extremists, and re-establishing control over the region, which included the restive Swat valley. The Pakistani military said that it was nearing the successful completion of this mission in mid-2009, although close to two million were displaced as they fled the cross-fire of the violence in that region of the country.

While Mehsud's stronghold was in a part of South Waziristan that does not directly border Afghanistan, the Taliban chief has had strong ties with other commanders on the frontier and was known to have crossed into Afghanistan to help Islamic extremist insurgents there.

Accordingly, Mehsud's apparent -- but unconfirmed -- death could deal a significant severe blow to the Islamic extremist movement, which has been undermining the stability of Pakistan by carrying out brutal and violent attacks from the Afghan-Pak border region.

Known as Pakistan's most wanted man and the foremost threat to national security, Mehsud was also broadly regarded as a co-conspirator of the terror network of al-Qaida. Mehsud has been blamed for the assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto in Rawalpindi in December 2007. Although he denied having a role in

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Bhutto's murder, the Taliban has nonetheless plainly taken responsibility for a long list of bloody suicide bombings and violent clashes that have left thousands dead since 2007. In fact, the siege of radical mosque in Islamabad by government forces involved a conflict with Mehsud's loyalists inside the compound.

Meanwhile, United States officials -- unlike their Pakistani counterparts -- have not been not as fixated on eliminating Mehsud, and have instead viewed

the Pakistani Taliban as posing an internal threat. Nevertheless, as Mehsud's power and influence increased, and as some of Mehsud's militants were linked with attacks on supply convoys for NATO and United States troops, there were escalating anxieties that Mehsud's Taliban could pose a strategic threat to nuclear-armed Pakistan and the wider region. As such, by the start of 2009, United States drones commenced sustained strikes in Mehsud's stronghold of South Waziristan.

Clinton promises assistance for Somalia and threatens action against Eritrea --

United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton held talks with Somali President Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed in Kenya's capital, Nairobi, during an African tour in August 2009. The United States' chief diplomat said that her country was interested in a stable Somalia. She also blamed Eritrea for backing Islamist rebels, known as al-Shabab, which has the expressed objective of overthrowing the government of Somalia. To these ends, Secretary of State Clinton said: "Certainly if al-Shabab were to obtain a haven in Somalia which could then attract al-Qaida and other terrorist actions, it would be a threat to the United States." She continued, "It is long past time for Eritrea to cease and desist its support of al-Shabab and to start being a productive rather than a destabilizing neighbor. Accordingly, Secretary of State Clinton warned that the United States would take action against Eritrea if it did not cease its support for the extremist Islamist militants in Somalia. She said: "We are making it very clear that their actions are unacceptable. We intend to take action if they do not cease."

Of course, such action would not include the deployment of United States forces to Somalia to fight the militant insurgents there. However, Agence France Presse reported that the United States would double its supply of arms and ammunition to Somalia. In this way, the United States was effectively admitting that it has supplied pro-government forces in Somalia with weaponry in recent times.

On the other side of the equation, Eritrea has denied supporting Somalia's al-Shabab militants, and characterized the United States' accusations as a "fabrication."

Nevertheless, there was evidence that several Somali militant Islamist groups carried out their operations from inside Eritrean territory after they were driven by joint government and Ethiopian troops from the Somali capital of Mogadishu in 2006. The history of animosity between Ethiopia and Eritrea indicates that the two countries may have been carrying out a proxy war on Somali territory. While Ethiopia has been reluctant to re-enter the fray as of 2009, Clinton's accusations suggest that the United States believes Eritrea to be playing a continuing role in the chaos that has bedeviled Somalia.

Former President Clinton brings back detained journalists from North Korea --

Former United States President Bill Clinton traveled to Pyongyang in the North Korea to try to press for the release of two American journalists, Laura Ling and Euna Lee, who had been arrested and sentenced to prison for crossing the border into North Korea. Former President Clinton -- the husband of the United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton -- arrived in Pyongyang in the early hours of August 4, 2009 and was warmly met by a North Korean delegation that included a nuclear negotiator.

The landmark visit by the former United States leader came at a time of increasing tensions between Pyongyang and the West over its nuclear program.

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The official North Korean News Agency (KCNA) said that former President Clinton convened a meeting with the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-il, and his closest aides, where the involved parties had an "exhaustive conversation." The KCNA News Agency also reported that "a wide-ranging exchange of views on matters of common concern" were discussed at the negotiating table.

ABC News cited an anonymous government source in reporting that former President Clinton also had a "very emotional" meeting with the two female journalists, Laura Ling and Euna Lee. Soon thereafter, it was announced that Ling and Lee had been granted a special pardon. Indeed, the official North Korean News Agency (KCNA) asserted in a statement: "Kim Jong-il issued an order... granting a special pardon to the two American journalists who had been sentenced to hard labor." Subsequently, Reuters News Agency reported that the special pardon set the stage for the two journalists to be released from imprisonment.

The two journalists, Ling and Lee, had been working for former Vice President Al Gore's Current-TV network, when they traveled to eastern Asia to work on a documentary. They were arrested in March 2009 when they entered North Korean terrain and accused of "hostile acts." Ling and Lee argued that their presence in North Korean territory was accidental. Nevertheless, in June 2009, Ling and Lee were sentenced by North Korea highest court to 12 years of hard labor camp for crossing the border illegally.

The Obama administration has been trying to secure the release of the two female journalists since that time.

Indeed, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called on North Korea to grant Ling and Lee amnesty, characterizing the two journalists as being remorseful. But the situation was not helped by the fact that Washington D.C. and Pyongyang do not share diplomatic relations. That said, according to Daniel Snieder, the associate director of research Stanford University's Shorenstein Asia Pacific Research Center, negotiations were ongoing between the North Korean mission to the United Nations and the United States Department of State.

That quiet diplomacy appeared to have seen results and the Obama administration considered sending a high level envoy to North Korea to bring the negotiations to a positive conclusion, according to the Washington Post. In that report, Asian expert, Chris Nelson, said that Massachusetts Senator John Kerry, New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson -- a seasoned negotiator with the North Koreans -- and former Vice President Al Gore, were all named as possible emissaries. Ultimately, it was the high profile and internationally popular former President Bill Clinton who was asked to take on the difficult task, which clearly was on track to end successfully.

For its part, the White House has declined to comment at length on Clinton's visit to North Korea or the status of Ling and Lee. Instead, the Obama administration has limited its statements on the matter to simply describing former President Clinton's trip to Pyongyang as a "solely private" mission, intended to secure the release of Ling and Lee. It also denied a claim by North Korea's KCNA News Agency, which asserted that Clinton dispatched a message to North Korea from United States President Barack Obama. Norah O'Donnell of MSNBC News said that the White House was reluctant to speak on the record until the former United State president and the two journalists were safely en route home to the United States. Indeed, White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs said, "We do not want to jeopardize the success of former President Clinton's mission."

The characterization of Clinton's visit to North Korea as a "private" endeavor was also likely intended to draw a line in the sand between the former president's role as negotiator in this specific case, and that of his wife, Secretary of State Clinton, as the United States' chief diplomat. Certainly, Secretary of State Clinton would still have to contend with a nuclear North Korea. To these end, President Obama's advisor, David Axelrod, said in an interview with MSNBC News that Clinton was on a "private humanitarian mission" quite separate from the prevailing issue of North Korea's reconstituted nuclear program. Axelrod said, "I don't think it's related to other issues."

The news of the pardon and likely release of Ling and Lee was met generally with positive acclaim. Clearly "overjoyed" by the news of the pardon. The families of Ling and Lee issued a joint statement that read: "We are so grateful to our government: President Obama, Secretary Clinton and the U.S. State Department for their dedication to and hard work on behalf of American citizens."

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The statement continued, "We especially want to thank President Bill Clinton for taking on such an arduous mission and Vice President Al Gore for his tireless efforts to bring Laura and Euna home."

California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, the executive head of the state that Ling and Lee call home, said that he and his wife, Maria Shriver, joined all Californians in celebrating the likely release of Ling and Lee. He wished them a safe return home. Bob Dietz, the Asia program coordinator for the Committee to Protect Journalists, said: "This is welcome news and we are pleased to see movement in this case."

By contrast, however, critics said that Clinton's visit to North Korea was tantamount to rewarding Pyongyang for bad behavior. Notably, John Bolton, who temporarily served as Ambassador to the United Nations under the Bush administration, said that Clinton's efforts in North Korea came precariously close to negotiating with terrorists.

Evidently, engagement of any kind with North Korea, even as regards this "solely private" mission, would be fodder for much debate over the appropriateness of direct talks with a dictator, such as Kim Jong-il. Of course, on the other side of the equation, internationalists may well argue that Clinton's trip to Pyongyang was proof that vigorous diplomacy can yield positive results.

Whether or not this particular success would extend to an overall thaw in relations between Pyongyang and Washington D.C. was yet to be seen.

Editor's Note:

Former President Bill Clinton is the highest ranking American to visit North Korea since his own Secretary of State Madeleine Albright met with Kim Jong-il in 2000.

North Korea send envoys to meet with Clinton era diplomat --

North Korea deployed envoys to the United States to meet with New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson. The seasoned diplomat, Richardson, served as United Nations ambassador and Energy Secretary under the Clinton administration in the 1990s, and was responsible for helping to broker an agreement with the North Koreans that brought a temporary end to its nuclear development.

Following his meeting with the North Koreans, Governor Richardson, a Democrat who endorsed Barack Obama for president, said that believed that Pyongyang had issued "good signals" that pointed toward the restarting of dialogue with Washington. Indeed, multilateral talks on North Korea's controversial nuclear program had stalled in recent times, and relations became increasingly strained after North Korea went forward with an underground nuclear, followed by a succession of missile tests. Now, however, in the aftermath of a successful but unofficial trip by former President Bill Clinton to North Korea to secure the release of two American journalists, Governor Richardson said that he believed the climate had improved. Indeed, Governor Richardson said that he indicated a "thaw" in relations and believed that North Korea was "ready for a new dialogue with the United States regarding the nuclear issue."

That said, an actual diplomatic breakthrough was still in the offing. According to Governor Richardson, North Korea remained intransigent on the issue of returning to six-party talks. Instead, Pyongyang believed that it had earned some goodwill and wanted to pursue direct bilateral talks with the United States. To this end, Governor Richardson said that Pyongyang had "obviously used the journalists as a bargaining chip" and was looking for a reciprocal a "gesture" from Washington.

The Obama administration has indicated that while it was willing to return to the negotiating table with North Korea within the multilateral framework, with an eye on irreversible denuclearization, it would not soon engage in direct talks. State Department spokesman, Ian Kelly, said: "Our goal is the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. And, of course, we want to see progress toward that."

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The White House also made clear that it had not orchestrated the meeting between the North Korean envoys and the New Mexico governor. As well, Governor Richardson expressly noted that he was not acting as an emissary on behalf of President Obama.

After the meeting between the Governor Richardson and the North Korean envoys, North Korea invited the United States envoy to North Korea, Stephen Bosworth, for direct negotiations on its nuclear program. South Korea media reported that there were rumblings about the White House giving serious consideration to the idea of actually sending Bosworth to North Korea. But on the record, the United States embassy in Seoul would offer no comment on the matter.

Iran issues nuclear proposal; United States and Russia react --

In September 2009, the issue of Iran's controversial nuclear program returned to the fore. A report by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) noted that Iran's Natanz nuclear plant registered a reduction in the number of centrifuges used to actively enrich uranium. Nonetheless, the IAEA also charged that Iran was not cooperating in an investigation of allegations that Iran was on the path toward weaponization of uranium.

To that end, the United States envoy to the IAEA, Glyn Davies, asserted that Iran was continuing to enrich uranium in defiance of the United Nations Security Council and could already have garnered sufficient enriched uranium to eventually produce a nuclear bomb. At a meeting of the IAEA in Vienna, Davies said, "We have serious concerns that Iran is deliberately attempting, at a minimum, to preserve a nuclear weapons option." In response, Iran's envoy to the IAEA, Ali Asghar Soltanieh, argued that there had been false accusations about Iran's nuclear program from the United States before. He said, "The world is observing curiously whether or not this [American] administration follows the same trend as the Bush administration - pursuing hostile political confrontation, using fabricated baseless allegations." Iran has maintained that its nuclear program has only a civilian energy purpose and that its rocket building activities would be oriented toward satellites alone.

But analysts warned that Iran's vociferous defense of its nuclear program could be a strategy intended to stall further international action that might be in the offing. Indeed, United States President Barack Obama has warned Iran that its friendly overtures toward engagement with Tehran would expire by the end of September 2009. At that time, the United States president was prepared to pursue new sanctions against Iran. Mohamed El Baradei, the head of the IAEA, urged Iran to accept the United States' offer of dialogue. Ahead of the IAEA meeting in Vienna, he said, "The U.S. is making an offer without preconditions and on the basis of mutual respect." He continued, "The offer by the U.S. is an offer that should not be refused, that cannot be refused, because it has no conditions attached to it. And I hope [the] response will be positive."

Such hopes of dialogue were somewhat complicated after Iran put forth its package of proposals to the five permanent United Nations Security Council members and Germany. According to the independent United States-based entity, ProPublica, the five-page proposal, Iran called for "comprehensive, all-encompassing and constructive" negotiations on a range of security issues, including global nuclear disarmament. However, the document detailing Iran's latest proposals on its nuclear ambitions conspicuously failed to mention Iran's own nuclear program.

The United States reacted by registering dissatisfaction with the proposal package. Philip Crowley, the United States Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs, said that the proposed measures failed to address the status of Iran's nuclear program. He said, "Our concern is that the response itself did not really address what is the core issue of the international community and the core concern, which is Iran's nuclear ambitions." Conversely, Russia reacted by suggesting that the Iranian proposals signaled positive progress. Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said, "Based on a brief review of the Iranian papers my impression is there is something there to use." Lavrov also indicated that there would be no oil sanctions against Iran. "Some of the sanctions under discussion, including oil and oil products, are not a mechanism to force Iran to co-operate, they are a step to a full-blown blockade and I do not think they would be supported at the UN Security Council."

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The American and Russian responses showed divergent approaches to the Iranian nuclear issue, and suggested that consensus on the matter would not be easily achieved.

President Obama reverses Bush-era missile defense system for Europe; Russia responds favorably --

On September 17, 2009, United States President Barack Obama announced that his administration was abandoning the Bush-era missile defense shield program in Eastern Europe, which caused the grave consternation of Russia. In its place, President Obama unveiled a "phased, adaptive approach" for missile defense on the European continent. At a news conference in the White House, President Obama said, "This new approach will provide capabilities sooner, build on proven systems and offer greater defenses against the threat of missile attack than the 2007 European missile defense program."

President Obama explained that he made the decision based on an assessment of Iran's missile threat and the Pentagon's "phased and adaptive" approach, which would ensure the American homeland defense. While President Obama acknowledged the threat posed by Iran, and although he insisted that he was committed to "deploying strong missile defense systems which are adaptable to the threats of the 21st century," he also wanted to institute a plan that would be appropriate and effective in responding to the current intelligence assessment of Iran's missile programs. To that end, recent intelligence appeared to indicate that Iran's capacity to attach warheads to long-range missiles would not pose an immediate strategic threat to the United States and its allies. Indeed, Iran was more likely to pursue short-range and medium-range missile development.

President Obama noted, "The best way to responsibly advance our security and the security of our allies is to deploy a missile defense system that best responds to the threats that we face and that utilizes technology that is both proven and cost-effective." He explained that the new missile defense architecture would provide "stronger, smarter and swifter defenses."

The plan would essentially nullify former President George W. Bush's plan to deploy 10 missile interceptors in Poland and a radar system in the Czech Republic as part of its European missile shield, charged with preventing European allies from missile threats by "rogue states," such as Iran. Bush's plan had been criticized by some as being impractical to implement. Perhaps more significantly, Russia strongly opposed the missile defense shield concept and argued that it posed a security threat to the region. The matter caused a devolution in positive relations between the United States and Russia at the time, with Russia warning of retaliatory moves.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Russia was now lauding the decision by the Obama administration to dispense with the Bush missile defense shield system. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev welcomed the shift as "positive" and made clear that there were now "good conditions" for United States-Russia talks on dealing with missile proliferation. It was apparent that the "reset button" on bilateral relations between the two countries had, indeed, been pressed.

At home in the United States, Republicans such as Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell decried the move as "short-sighted" and "harmful." Republican presidential candidate, John McCain, who was defeated by President Obama in 2008, called the decision "seriously misguided." Other conservatives also accused the Obama administration of appeasing Moscow and getting nothing in return. On the other side of the equation, Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said the decision by the Obama administration was "brilliant" and had been forged from an accurate assessment of the current threats. As well, United States Defense Secretary Robert Gates -- a Republican who also served in the Bush administration -- penned an article in the New York Times, which explained the pragmatic value of President Obama's proposed changes. He also excoriated those whom he described as a "devoted following" to missile defense plans that were "unworkable, prohibitively expensive and could never be practically deployed."

Russia quickly announced that it would now scrap its own controversial plans to deploy missiles close to Poland. That proposal had been advanced in response to the Bush missile shield plan.

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But now, as noted by Deputy Defense Minister Vladimir Popovkin during an radio interview in Moscow, "Naturally, we will cancel the measures that Russia planned to take in response to the deployment of U.S. missile defense systems." He continued, "Common sense has finally prevailed over ambitions."

For his part, President Obama said on an interview with CBS on September 20, 2009, that his decision was not dictated by Russian opposition. He said, "The Russians don't make determinations about what our defense posture is." He continued, "If the by-product of it is that the Russians feel a little less paranoid... then that's a bonus." President Obama also noted that one of the bonus effects could be that the Russians might be more willing to work with the United States in dealing with ballistic missiles from Iran or nuclear development in Iran.

Middle East Peace Push --

September 2009 was marked by developments on the peace process front. United States envoy, George Mitchell, has met with Israeli leaders to discuss the expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank. The issue of continued expansion of Jewish settlements has been an obstacle in the peace process, and one that the Obama administration in the United States has taken a key role in resolving. On the other side of the equation, Mitchell was also pushing Arab nation states to officially recognize the Jewish state of Israel. The dual moves were part of an effort by the Obama administration in the United States to finalize the terms of fresh peace negotiations between Israel and Palestinians. Following a meeting with Israeli President Shimon Peres, Mitchell said "While we have not yet reached agreement on many outstanding issues, we are working hard to do so."

President Barack Obama was set to meet with Israeli and Palestinian leaders on September 22, 2009, with an eye on revitalizing the peace process. President Obama was expected to hold separate talks with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas before convening a joint meeting. This announcement came in the aftermath of a visit by United States Middle East envoy, George Mitchell to the region, with an eye on trying to find some common ground ahead of the meeting in the United States. Mitchell returned home without consensus and with both sides blaming one another for the inability to find common ground. Nevertheless, Mitchell, said that President Obama's willingness to engage directly at this stage with the two principal players showed his "deep commitment to comprehensive peace."

More than a month later, United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was in the Middle East to pursue peace talks between Israel and Arab states over the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

Arab leaders were reported to have been disappointed that the United States' top diplomat did not pressure the Netanyahu government in Israel more over its settlement activity. But Secretary of State Clinton explained the United States' position saying, "The Israelis have responded to the call of the U.S., the Palestinians and the Arab world to stop settlement activity by expressing a willingness to restrain settlement activity. This offer falls far short of what our preference would be but if it is acted upon it will be an unprecedented restriction on settlements and would have a significant and meaningful effect on restraining their growth."

Secretary of State Clinton also acknowledged that the Palestinian leadership of Mahmoud Abbas for taking "positive steps" to improve security in the West Bank.

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U.S. President Barack Obama calls for global unity and joint action in first U.N. address --

In his first address to the United Nations (U.N.) General Assembly, United States President Barack Obama called for global unity and joint action in tackling the complex challenges facing the international community. Expounding on a litany of global problems, such as nuclear proliferation and disarmament, war and conflict, global warming and climate change, as well as financial instability and economic crisis, President Obama called on all nation states to meet their responsibilities in dealing with these challenges. President Obama also acknowledged that foreign policy in the previous years had not advanced global goodwill to his country saying that when he took office, "many around the world had come to view America with skepticism and mistrust." But President Obama also heralded a new day dawning marked by international cooperation and team effort. In a reference to the purpose of the United Nations, he said, "We must build new coalitions that bridge old divides... All nations have rights and responsibilities - that's the bargain that makes this work." President Obama additionally noted that just as America should not exert its military might while alienating the global community, it was concomitantly unfair to expect America to act on its own to resolve problems facing the countries of the world. To this end, he said, "Those who used to chastise America for acting alone in the world cannot now stand by and wait for America to solve the world's problems alone."

U.S. President Barack Obama issues call for nuclear disarmament --

One day after giving his first address to the United Nations General Assembly, United States President Barack Obama issued a call for nuclear disarmament. Ironically, this call came at a time when the attention of the international community was focused on Iran's nuclear development program and amidst increasing fears that Iran's nuclear ambitions might include weaponization. That said, in a session of the United Nations Security Council that was chaired by President Obama, member states unanimously adopted a resolution calling for nuclear disarmament, advancing efforts to halt the proliferation of nuclear arms, and boosting endeavors aimed at decreasing the risk of nuclear terrorism. After the resolution was adopted, President Obama said, "The historic resolution we just adopted enshrines our shared commitment to the goal of a world without nuclear weapons." United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon hailed the newly-adopted resolution as "a fresh start toward a new future." The occasion was distinguished as being the first time an American president had chaired a United Nations Security Council summit.

United States accelerates withdrawal of troops from Iraq --

The United States has accelerated its military withdrawal from Iraq and will redeploy 4,000 troops within a month. Accordingly, the number of United States troops in Iraq was expected to go from 124,000 to 120,000 by the close of October 2009. The top American commander in Iraq, Army General Ray Odierno, explained that it was the latest move aimed at ending the United States' engagement in that country. In an eight-page statement intended to be delivered at a Congressional committee, he said, "We have already begun deliberately drawing down our forces - without sacrificing security." Odierno continued, "As we go forward, we will thin our lines across Iraq in order to reduce the risk and sustain stability through a deliberate transition of responsibilities to the Iraqi security forces."

Odierno expressed tentative optimism about the prospects of a stable Iraq in the future, while acknowledging the reality of continued violence, as evidenced by the August 19, 2009 bombings at two Iraqi government ministries. He also noted that ethnic, sectarian and regional divisions continued to plague the country. He observed that unresolved tensions between the Arab and Kurdish populations promised to present problems in the 2010 parliamentary elections, with various groups seeking control over regional oil wealth. That said, Odierno suggested that most Iraqis sought peace and security, while opposing militancy and violence. He said, "The overwhelming

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majority of the Iraqi people have rejected extremism," Odierno said. "We see no indications of a return to the sectarian violence that plagued Iraq in 2006-2007."

Note: Odierno's congressional testimony was obtained by the Associated Press and the plan to reduce the number of brigades in Iraq was confirmed by the Defense Department.

On October 19, 2009, United States defense officials said that they would cancel the expected deployment of 3,500 soldiers to Iraq as a result of the improving security situation in that country. Those soldiers were set to deploy to Iraq at the start of 2010 but, based on the assessment by General Raymond Odierno, the Pentagon said that Iraqi security forces should be able to protect their citizens and institutions without the addition of the United States troops.

Ironically, this announcement came a week before suicide bombings in Baghdad left more than 150 people dead and another 500 people wounded. The rising tide of violence was also linked with the anticipated withdrawal of United States combat troops from Iraq in 2010, with a full withdrawal in 2012.

President Obama makes commitment to Pakistan --

In October 2009, as the Pakistani military was carrying out an offensive operations against Islamic militants, it was clear that there would be some degree of an impact on the extremists living in the tribal region of South Waziristan. One of the core implications of the offensive operation would be the substantial displacement of militants, as they flee the air strikes and ground offensive. Strategic experts have said that the militants who are flushed out of the combat zones would likely take refuge in nearby areas, also characterized by lawlessness and difficult terrain, such as tribal Balochistan and North-West Frontier Province. Still other experts warn that some militants will relocate to areas further away, essentially guaranteeing that the problem of extremist Islamists will have a wider, regional effect, ultimately requiring a broader response from policy makers not only in Pakistan but internationally.

To that end, Hakeemullah Mehsud, a top commander in the Pakistani Taliban, issued an ultimatum to Pakistani forces. He said that the Taliban in Pakistan would halt its attacks if the Pakistani military would cease cooperating with the United States. Clearly, the Taliban in Pakistan was responding to pressure by United States drone attacks on its strongholds -- some of which have resulted in the deaths of high value militant targets, not the least of which was the strike on Baitalluh Mehsud. This call by Hakeemullah Mehsud also highlighted a shift on the geopolitical terrain. Specifically, in a shift from the past in which the Pakistani intelligence units were often complicit in attacks by militants, now the Pakistani authorities were actively cooperating with the United States in the fight against Islamic militants.

The new strategic partnership between the United States and Pakistan was brought into sharp relief when United States President Barack Obama signed into law "The Enhanced Partnership with Pakistan Act of 2009."

White House spokesperson, Robert Gibbs, said that the bill was "a tangible manifestation of broad support for Pakistan in the U.S., as evidenced by its bipartisan, bicameral, unanimous passage in Congress." Gibbs said that the bill formalized a partnership whereby the United States was committed to improving living conditions in Pakistan via economic development, strengthened democracy, and combating extremists.

Shifting Relations with China --

After leaving the 2009 Asia-Pacific summit in Singapore, President Barack Obama traveled to China for a three-day visit to that country, beginning in Shanghai. The two countries have sought to strengthen ties in recent times, and the United States and China were expected to continue to work together on international issues ranging from climate change to nuclear proliferation in North Korea and Iran. Despite a desire to work cooperatively, Washington and Beijing have nonetheless had to balance significant differences on these issues. Washington and Beijing must

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deal with the chasm in their targets for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. As well, Washington has taken a harsher approach than Beijing in dealing with the uranium enrichment activities of North Korea and Iran -- a scenario that will eventually have to be reconciled. In the background of these global challenges -- where both countries have played leading roles -- there is the reality that China holds much of the United States' debt, the fact that a trade imbalance exists largely due to the undervalued Chinese currency, as well as the prevailing objections held by the United States to China's human rights record, and its anxieties about the build-up of the Chinese military.

It has been precisely this complicated relationship that has led the Obama administration toward a highly diplomatic tone in which there has been less focus on these contentious issues, and, instead, on the gradually improved bilateral ties. To this end, President Obama addressed a large gathering of the bilateral delegations in Shanghai saying, "Both of the countries have benefited greatly from the progress we have made over the last two decades." This diplomatic tone, which eschews the negative elements and emphasizes the common ground, was not likely to gain President Obama support from hardliners at home. Nevertheless, analysts have noted that President Obama has been cognizant of the fact that ascendant China -- with one of the world's largest economies -- cannot be easily subordinated.

While in Shanghai, President Obama attended a town-hall style meeting attended by university students who had been selected by the Chinese authorities. There, President Obama said his country did not seek to impose its will or system of government upon other nation states; however, he expressly noted that principles of freedom were not unique to only the United States. To this end, President Obama said, "These freedoms of expression, and worship, of access to information and political participation - we believe they are universal rights." President Obama also emphasized the importance of unfettered access to information in the information age, including the freedom of people to criticize his own policies. His statement held particular poignance, given the fact that the town hall was scrubbed from Internet access -- a manifestation of what has been called the "Great Firewall of China." President Obama was scheduled to travel on to Beijing for a state visit, which was to be hosted by Chinese President Hu Jintao.

Policy on Burma (Myanmar) --

At the start of November 2009, the United States Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia, Kurt Campbell, met with the democratically-elected winner of Burma (Myanmar), Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been kept under house arrest by the ruling military junta of that country. The government of Burma (Myanmar) arranged for the meeting to take place at the Inya Lake Hotel and marked the highest level visit by an American official to Suu Kyi since August 2009 when Senator Jim Webb, Chairman of the East Asian and Pacific Affairs Subcommittee of the United States Senate Foreign Relations Committee, was in Burma (Myanmar). Earlier, Assistant Secretary Campbell met with the country's Prime Minister General Thein Sein, as well as a number of other government officials. These moves appeared to be consistent with a potential foreign policy shift indicated by the United States towards Burma (Myanmar). To that end, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that while the United States intended to keep sanctions in place against Burma (Myanmar) for the immediate future, it was exploring increased engagement.

During his trip to Asia, United States President Obama waded into stormy geopolitical waters by attending a meeting of the 10-country bloc Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), which was also attended by one of the leaders of the military junta ruling Burma (Myanmar). It was a move aimed at pressing Burma (Myanmar) towards a return to democracy. While some hardliners at home were expected to rail against President Obama for attending such a meeting, it appeared to be consistent the Obama administration's policy of "pragmatic engagement." In the past, leaders from the United States have not attended meetings with Asean when the military leadership of Burma (Myanmar) was present.

In something of a policy shift, it was hoped that increased engagement would yield more productive results on the path towards democratic change in Burma (Myanmar). Still, such engagement, would not include the removal of sanctions until democratic progress has been tracked.

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During this notable meeting attended by Burma's (Myanmar's) General Thein Sein, President Obama demanded the release of pro-democracy leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been held under house arrest for much of the last two decades. As well, a joint statement by the United States and Asean called for "free, fair, inclusive and transparent" elections in Burma (Myanmar) in 2010.

Special Report

United States (U.S.) Policy and Strategy on Afghanistan

Summary:

United States President Barack Obama was expected to unveil his administration's much anticipated policy for Afghanistan. At issue was the question of whether or not President Obama would grant the request of General Stanley McChrystal, the chief United States and NATO commander in Afghanistan, for an increase of more than 40,000 troops in that country to combat the threat of resurgent Taliban and other extremist Islamic elements, or if he would opt for a more modest deployment. Sources at the White House indicated there was almost no chance there would be a withdrawal or de-escalation of the effort in Afghanistan. Accordingly, speculation rested on (1) the number of United States troops to be deployed in a spring offensive, (2) the strategy behind United States efforts in Afghanistan [was it quelling al-Qaida and the Taliban?] and (3) the exit strategy.

To these ends, President Obama addressed the American people from Westpoint on December 1, 2009. In that speech, the president ordered another 30,000 troops to Afghanistan on an accelerated timetable starting in late 2009 and reaching an apex in mid-2010. The troops would be tasked with fighting extremist Islamic elements as well as the training of Afghan security forces, with an eye on turning over the security apparatus to locals. President Obama called on other countries to contribute troops for the NATO war effort in Afghanistan. The governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan also factored highly in the president's speech, with increased emphasis being placed on their responsibilities for advancing stable governance free of corruption and fighting terrorism respectively. At the same time, the president outlined a clear exit strategy with redeployment expected to commence within a year and ending in mid-2011, pending favorable circumstances on the ground. President Obama cast this war plan for Afghanistan as being a matter of necessity and not choice -- a view consistent with his campaign position on the topic.

Background:

On Sept. 21, 2009, it was reported in the Washington Post that General Stanley McChrystal, the chief United States and NATO commander in Afghanistan was calling for more troops on the ground. McChrystal argued that the United States risked failure in the war in Afghanistan without such a commitment.

In a Pentagon report that was sent to United States Defense Secretary Robert Gates, McChrystal wrote, "Resources will not win this war, but under-resourcing could lose it." He continued, "Although considerable effort and sacrifice have resulted in some progress, many indicators suggest the overall effort is deteriorating." Indeed, McChrystal warned that the United States had to reverse the momentum of the resurgent Taliban. The commander also indicated that beyond military tactics, there was a need to revise overall strategy in Afghanistan. To this end, he wrote: "We run the risk of strategic defeat by pursuing tactical wins that cause civilian casualties or unnecessary collateral damage. The insurgents cannot defeat us militarily; but we can defeat ourselves."

The Pentagon's decision to release the document to the Washington Post gave rise to speculation that some were attempting to force President Obama's hand on action in Afghanistan at a time when the American public's support for that military effort was waning.

In October 2009, the commander of United States and NATO forces in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, officially submitted a set of possible options to policymakers, aimed at curbing the advance of resurgent Taliban. Among the proposals given to the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen and NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe, Admiral James Stavridis, was an option to deploy between 30,000 to 40,000 additional combat

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troops and trainers to Afghanistan. This option was said to be strongly favored by McChrystal, although there were other options, such as a more modest increase of troop strength by 10,000, as well as another plan calling for a surge of 60,000 troops to be sent to Afghanistan, and an option for maintaining current troop strength. While the actual content of the proposal has remained confidential, McChrystal has himself said that more troops were needed to help support the Afghan security forces who were preparing to take full control over the country's security in 2013. Moreover, McChrystal -- who was backed by NATO leadership -- was calling for a broad counter-insurgency strategy.

Strategic Overview

General McChrystal's report was being reviewed by President Barack Obama who had said earlier-- on Sept. 20, 2009, during an interview on CNN -- that he would assess the findings from his commander on the ground, before making a decision as to the possible deployment of troops to an increasingly unpopular conflict. President Obama noted, "I don't want to put the resource question before the strategy question." He then continued, "But right now, the question is, the first question is, are we doing the right thing? Are we pursuing the right strategy?" The president acknowledged that the original mission to hunt those responsible for 9/11 could be subject to what is known as "mission creep."

Before considering McChrystal's request for more combat troops in Afghanistan, the White House in the United States said it wanted to undergo an overall strategic review of its policy in the Afghan-Pak region. At issue for the Obama administration was the question of whether to remain on track with the existing mission, and perhaps with an extended nation-building imperative, aimed at securing the cooperation of the Afghan populace. Alternatively, there was the question as to if the mission should be recalibrated, perhaps with reduced military operations, and a concentration purely on striking al-Qaida terrorists in the Afghan-Pak border area.

By the end of October 2009, media reports emerged that the Obama administration would make their Afghanistan strategy known after that country's contested presidential election was decided, given the rising clamor for the establishment of a credible government in Afghanistan. Indeed, the Obama administration noted there would be no action pending the establishment of a legitimate government in Afghanistan. In an interview with CNN, White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel said it would be "reckless" to make such a decision without thoroughly determining whether or not the government at the helm of Afghanistan held democratic authority. That rationale was not helped by the fact that the election was marred by allegations of fraud, and the fact that the main opposition candidate withdrew from the second round, effectively allowing President Karzai to hold onto to power by default.

Around that period, there were intimations that President Obama was prepared to accept that Afghanistan's political future might well include the Taliban's involvement, given the Islamist movement's ingrained influence on Afghan culture. However, the Obama administration was not willing to go so far as allowing the Taliban to regain control over Afghanistan, and thus be able to give sanctuary to al-Qaida, as was the case in the period leading up to the September 2001 terror attacks. This approach could gain steam at home in the United States where the citizenry was war-weary, consumed with domestic challenges, and hostile to the idea of a surge in Afghanistan. Indeed, polling data showed ever-devolving public support for the war itself in Afghanistan. While Democrats in Congress were not keen to endorse the deployment of additional troops to Afghanistan, Republicans argued that without such an escalation, the war effort could end in failure. Also at play was the fact that the United States military forces were severely strained after eight years of war.

The focus on the dwindling number of al-Qaida in Afghanistan was derived from President Obama's repeated question of "Who is our adversary?" during strategy meetings. Clearly, the United States military has been involved in a fight primarily against resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan -- a distinct entity from al-Qaida. While the Taliban has given safe haven to al-Qaida in the past, and even though the two groups have reportedly worked together, the Taliban's objective has typically been local and territorial, while the terrorist network, al-Qaida, has global jihadist aspirations.

White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs conveyed the Obama administration's stance on the distinction between the two entities saying, "They're not the same type of group. It's certainly not backed up by any of the

intelligence." Following this trajectory, in an interview with the BBC, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton emphasized this objective saying that the United States' goal in Afghanistan was to defeat al-Qaida. Secretary of Clinton also indicated that the White House's forthcoming strategy would involve "a much more careful analysis of who actually is allied with al-Qaida." Accordingly, the escalation of United States forces in Afghanistan could only be justified with a modified mission.

At the same time, the reality was that as of 2009, while al-Qaida saw dwindling numbers in Afghanistan, its terrorist objectives were now being carried out by an emboldened Taliban, and were illustrative of shifting alliances and power dynamic in the region. Of course, that region is not limited only to Afghanistan, and active factions of both al-Qaida and the Taliban have been waging violent attacks in neighboring Pakistan. Accordingly, President Obama was expected to be considering a strategy that addressed the Afghan-Pak region.

Whatever strategy was ultimately selected, it was apparent that Vice President Joe Biden's preference for targeted strikes in the wider Afghan-Pak region, coupled with downgraded emphasis on the Taliban, was having an influence on the decision-making process. In an article in Newsweek by Holly Bailey and Evan Thomas, there was a description of an insider strategy meeting that included the president and his top advisors. It read as follows:

"Joe Biden had a question. During a long Sunday meeting with President Obama and top national-security advisers on Sept. 13, the VP interjected, 'Can I just clarify a factual point? How much will we spend this year on Afghanistan?' Someone provided the figure: \$65 billion. 'And how much will we spend on Pakistan?' Another figure was supplied: \$2.25 billion. 'Well, by my calculations that's a 30-to-1 ratio in favor of Afghanistan. So I have a question. Al Qaida is almost all in Pakistan, and Pakistan has nuclear weapons. And yet for every dollar we're spending in Pakistan, we're spending \$30 in Afghanistan. Does that make strategic sense?'"

In this way, Vice President Biden was not only emphasizing the concentration on al-Qaida -- the identified primary enemy of the United States, as noted above -- but, he was also illuminating the reality of the threat, which had to be addressed at the broader regional -- Afghan-Pak -- level. Furthermore, he was questioning the strategic value of United States' expenditures in a country where there were only a few hundred al-Qaida vis a vis nuclear Pakistan where al-Qaida has been a far more dominant force.

Augmenting the Biden approach has been the fact that the Pakistani government has been willing to carry out aggressive offensive operations against militant Islamic extremists within its own borders. Until recently, courting Pakistani cooperation has been a difficult task, as certain factions of Pakistani society eschew close ties with the United States.

Decision-Making Process

By the close of October 2009, there was no decision forthcoming from the president who was, in fact, requesting status reports from across Afghanistan to assess specific conditions on the ground. At home in the United States, there was a clear division among those -- disproportionately from the neoconservative wing of the Republican Party -- who wanted the president to quickly assent to McChrystal's wishes, and the liberal base of the Democratic Party, which has demanded that President Obama bring an end to the war in Afghanistan.

Opponents of the president from the Republican Party have also accused him of taking too long to make the crucial decision on the war strategy for Afghanistan. Former Vice President Dick Cheney has gone so far as to characterize President Obama as "dithering" over this key decision to be made. However, military experts have noted that any offensive operation would not begin until the spring of 2010. Other voices have said that when one considers the criticisms of the Bush administration's decision-making with regard to war, Cheney holds no credibility on the matter. They pointed to the fact that the rationale behind the Iraq war was flawed, and Republicans now clamoring for intensified efforts in Afghanistan held no such priority while the Iraq war was in full swing. Allies of President Obama have said that he is functioning true to form, by acquiring as much information as possible and acting in a deliberative manner on the important issues of the day.

At the close of October 2009, President Obama flew to a military air base in Dover, Del.. to witness the return of 18 Americans who had died in Afghanistan. President Obama noted that the experience was a "a sobering reminder"

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of the human toll exacted by war. His predecessor, George W. Bush, never met the return of American servicemen and servicewomen returning from war at Dover. In fact, the Bush administration barred such events from being publicized.

By the first part of November 2009, it was reported that President Barack Obama had, in fact, rejected all four of the options for Afghanistan, which had been presented by security advisers. He asserted that they did not satisfy his concerns over a clear exit strategy. This position was confirmed by White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs who said in an interview on Air Force One, "An exit strategy is as important as ramping up troops. It's important to fully examine not just how we're going to get folks in but how we're going to get folks out."

In a related development, the United States ambassador to Afghanistan was reported to have sent two classified cable to Washington expressing concern over the deployment of further troops to Afghanistan, at a time when the Karzai government in Kabul was re-elected amidst allegations of vote fraud -- the latest manifestation of corruption and mismanagement at the core of governance. Indeed, it was the very climate of corruption and mismanagement that facilitated the resurgence of the Taliban in the first place. Ambassador Karl W. Eikenberry -- who served as the United States military commander in Afghanistan in 2006 and 2007 before retiring from the military and taking on a diplomatic role in April 2009 -- apparently characterized Afghan President Hamid Karzai as erratic, excoriated senior Afghan government officials for their rampant corruption, and criticized the installation of warlords and drug smugglers in influential positions on the Afghan governing landscape. Eikenberry reportedly concluded that the Afghan leadership was incapable of being an effective -- or appropriate -- partner, and accordingly, advised President Obama against escalating troop strength in Afghanistan.

No actual decision on the Afghan-Pak strategy was expected until later in November 2009 when President Obama was expected to return from a trip to Asia. White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs defended the protracted process of decision-making saying, "This has been a very rigorous and deliberative process ... to get the best decision possible." He continued, "The president outlined the way we would go about making this decision, and that's what he's stuck to. He understands that the key is getting this decision right. "

Latest Developments

United States President Barack Obama was expected to unveil his administration's much anticipated policy for Afghanistan on Dec. 1, 2009. At issue was the question of whether or not President Obama would grant the request of General Stanley McChrystal, the chief United States and NATO commander in Afghanistan, for an increase of more than 40,000 troops in that country to combat the threat of resurgent Taliban and other extremist Islamic elements, as discussed above. Alternatively, would the American president would opt for a more modest deployment? Reports from sources at the White House indicated that there was almost no chance that there would be a withdrawal or de-escalation of the effort in Afghanistan. Accordingly, speculation rested on the following -- (1) the number of United States troops to be deployed in a spring offensive, (2) the strategy behind United States efforts in Afghanistan [was it quelling al-Qaida and the Taliban?], (3) the exit strategy. To these ends, President Obama was expected to convey his plans to the American people in an national address from the United States Military Academy at Westpoint.

In a rare twist, Republicans were expected to applaud action pointing toward additional troops being deployed to Afghanistan whereas Democrats were expected to denounce such a course. That being said, in his presidential campaign before being elected, Barack Obama never suggested that he would withdrew troops from Afghanistan. While he was an early vocal opponent of the Iraq war, characterizing it as "the wrong war," Barack Obama simultaneously asserted that the United States was not paying attention to the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan. He had steadfastly stated that the United States' military objectives should focus on the hunt for those responsible for the 2001 terror attacks at home -- al-Qaida and Osama Bin Laden in the mountainous region spanning Afghanistan and Pakistan. As such, President Obama's continuing concentration on Afghanistan appears to be consistent with his expressed campaign promises and stated foreign policy stances.

The Speech

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During his address to the nation from Westpoint, President Barack Obama ordered another 30,000 troops to Afghanistan on an accelerated timetable starting in late 2009 and reaching an apex in mid-2010. The president explained that the mission at hand would focus on "disrupting, dismantling, and defeating" al-Qaida in Afghanistan, and denying them any further safehaven in Afghanistan under Taliban auspices.

As such, a concomitant aspect of the mission would include reversing recent Taliban momentum.

The troops would also be tasked with the training of Afghan security forces, with an eye on turning over the security apparatus to locals. To that end, President Obama noted that the another central component of the mission was to stabilize Afghanistan so that the Afghan people would soon be able to take responsibility for their own security. Ahead of the speech, there were reports that one "brigade-sized element" of between 3,000 to 5,000 troops would be solely tasked with training of Afghan troops.

At the same time, the president noted that the redeployment of United States forces was expected to commence within a year and end in mid-2011, pending favorable circumstances on the ground.

In this way, a timeline ending theoretically in 2011 appeared to be a core aspect of the exit strategy. To that end, the president emphasized that he was ordering the fastest possible deployment of additional troops to Afghanistan, in order to facilitate the conditions for a responsible exit from that country. Ultimately, the president said that the objective was to "come together to end the war successfully... for common security."

President Obama called on the international community to continue to work with the United States to deal with the global threat posed by militant Islamic extremists, noting that "this burden is not ours alone to bear." According to media reports ahead of the speech, the president had already conducted talks with the leaders of several key countries, including Denmark, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Russia, China and India, and had called for other countries to contribute up to 10,000 troops for the NATO war effort in Afghanistan.

The governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan also factored highly in the president's speech, with increased emphasis being placed on their responsibilities for advancing stable governance free of corruption and fighting terrorism respectively. He additionally addressed the Afghan people in saying that the United States did not seek to occupy their country, and sought to be a partner in the process toward stability, rather than a patron. On Pakistan, he particularly emphasized the nuclear capacity of that country and the heightened geopolitical stakes therein.

For his part, President Obama cast this war plan for Afghanistan as being a matter of necessity and not choice -- a view consistent with his campaign position on the topic. In his speech, however, he made clear that his decision was not made easily, saying: "I do not make this decision lightly."

The president's philosophical stance on the matter was made clear when he said that he had opposed the Iraq war because he believed in restraint when it comes to the use of military force. But at the same time, the president acknowledged that he believed the current course of remaining in Afghanistan at current levels and without an exit strategy was "unsustainable." To this end, President Obama said that "the status quo of muddling through" would only be a costly option that served to prolong the current farrago, ultimately never generating the conditions in which United States forces could leave Afghanistan.

The president went on to state that the decision was made in the interests of national security, noting that the dangers emanating from the Afghan-Pak region were "no idle danger" and "no theoretical threat."

President Obama addressed the fact that he inherited two costly wars amidst an economic crisis in saying: "In the face of the current economic crisis, we simply cannot afford to ignore the price of these wars...All told, by the time I took office the cost of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan approached a trillion dollars." He thusly specified a current

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price tag of \$30 billion for the year, while also noting, "I will work closely with Congress to address these costs as we work to bring down our deficit."

Obama connected his aforementioned exit strategy with former President Eisenhower's call for balancing domestic and foreign interests by saying: "Our prosperity provides a foundation for our power. It pays for our military. It underwrites our diplomacy. ... That is why our troop commitment in Afghanistan cannot be open-ended -- because the nation that I am most interested in building is our own." Fundamentally, the president made clear he was not interested in an endless war in Afghanistan precisely because American interests at home and abroad were at stake.

Editor's Note:

While the president did not go into great detail about the Afghan-Pak strategy in his speech, his administration's policy was illuminated in a separate interview with United Nations Ambassador Susan Rice, which was conducted by MSNBC News. Dr. Rice explained that while many al-Qaida members had crossed the porous border from Afghanistan to Pakistan after the Taliban lost power, they were still moving across the border regions, and could re-establish safehaven in Afghanistan if resurgent Taliban in that country regained control over broad swaths of Afghan territory. She explained the symbiotic relationship between the Taliban and al-Qaida by characterizing Afghanistan under Taliban rule as the "tissue" within which "the cancer of al-Qaida" develops. In effect, resurgent Taliban can facilitate the ascendancy of al-Qaida. While the United States and NATO forces were actively dealing with this threat on the Afghan side of the border, there was pressure on the Pakistanis to continue their efforts to the same on their side of the border. Dr. Rice also emphasized the fact that although al-Qaida members could be found in various countries across the world, the mountainous Afghan-Pak region was the very location of terror training camps -- a venue for far more ambitious terrorist planning than single cell terror operations. Moreover, she echoed the president's own words when she said that there was a "proximate threat to national security emanating from Afghan- Pak border."

NATO says 25 countries have pledged thousands of troops to support U.S.-led war effort in Afghanistan --

A week after United States President Barack Obama ordered another 30,000 troops to Afghanistan as part of the new strategy (discussed above), NATO announced that 25 countries had pledged a total of around 7,000 more troops to support the United States-led war effort in Afghanistan. At a news conference following talks with NATO foreign ministers, NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said: "Nations are backing up their words with deeds." He continued, "At least 25 countries will send more forces to the mission in 2010. They have offered around 7,000 new forces with more to come ... That is solidarity in action and it will have a powerful effect on the ground." Rasmussen also remarked on the new road map for operations, noting that the new NATO mission would include amplified aid and training of Afghan security forces, consistent with the strategy outlined by President Obama. He also emphasized that another core objective remained the same -- to prevent Afghanistan from falling into the clutches of militant extremist Islamists.

For its part, the Afghan Taliban said that the plans outlined by President Obama and echoed by Secretary-General Rasmussen would serve only to strengthen their resolve. Nevertheless, the battlefield commander, General Stanley McChrystal, lauded the new war plan for Afghanistan, by emphasizing the benefits of more troops in the field and conjuring up Winston Churchill in a videophone speech as he declared "the end of the beginning" of the war.

Senate report indicates that Bin Laden was "within grasp" in late 2001 --

A report by the United States Senate indicated that United States military forces had al-Qaida leader Osama Bin Laden "within their grasp" in Afghanistan in late 2001. The report, which was prepared by the Foreign Relations Committee staff, stated that calls for reinforcements of United States troops were dismissed, effectively allowing the world's most well-known terrorist mastermind to "walk unmolested" into Pakistan's tribal regions. The report stated that United States commanders in the field "chose to rely on air strikes and untrained Afghan militias" to pursue Bin

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Laden in the mountainous region of Tora Bora, while at the same time keeping most of America's military power "on the sidelines." In many senses, it was an argument articulated by former Democratic presidential contender Senator John Kerry, who was now serving as the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee.

The report placed blame on officials in the administration of former United States President George W. Bush. Notably, there was a sense that former United States Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld objected to an escalation of troop strength in Afghanistan because it could present a backlash of sorts, and also because he did not believe the evidence about Bin Laden's location was conclusively accurate. The report excoriated this claim as follows: "The review of existing literature, unclassified government records and interviews with central participants underlying this report removes any lingering doubts and makes it clear that Osama Bin Laden was within our grasp at Tora Bora."

While the report acknowledged that eliminating Bin Laden would not have removed the global threat from Islamist terrorists, his escape and survival served elevate the al-Qaida leader into being a "potent symbolic figure" among Islamic extremists. The report also argued that the failure to kill or capture Bin Laden has had long-term deleterious effects, while also contributing to the ongoing and protracted conflict in Afghanistan, marked by the efforts of resurgent Taliban. To that end, the report stated that the "failure to finish the job" laid the groundwork for the current insurgency in Afghanistan, and inflamed the "internal strife now endangering Pakistan."

The release of the report has coincided with an anticipated announcement by United States President Barack Obama on a strategy for Afghanistan going forward. For his part, President Obama was an early vocal opponent of the Iraq war, characterizing it as "the wrong war." President Obama simultaneously asserted that the United States was not paying attention to the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan. He had steadfastly stated that the United States' military objectives should focus on the hunt for those responsible for the 2001 terror attacks at home -- al-Qaida and Osama Bin Laden in the mountainous region spanning Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Suicide bomber kills seven CIA agents in Afghanistan; may have been courted as possible informant --

On Dec. 30, 2009, seven Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) officers were killed by a suicide bomber in the Afghan area of Khost -- a known hotbed of Taliban militant activity. It was the worst attack against United States intelligence agents since the American embassy was bombed in Beirut in 1983. United States intelligence officials later said that CIA agents may have been trying to recruit the suicide bomber as a possible informant, not knowing that he would turn out to be a "double agent" of sorts. It was possible that this background may have accounted for the fact that he had not undergone a full body search before entering the military base at Khost and was, therefore, able to move inside the base with the explosives belt undetected. The Taliban claimed responsibility saying that one of its members carried out the attack.

Special Report

United States and Russia announce replacement treaty aimed at reducing nuclear arms should be ready by year's end --

Summary:

The United States and the Russian Federation announced they would present a new treaty, aimed at replacing the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) -- the prevailing nuclear arms agreement between the two countries that was set to expire in December 2009. The announcement came at the close of a summit of Asia-Pacific leaders in Singapore, and occurred following discussions between United States President Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. According to United States officials, the leaders of the United States and Russia agreed on the broad outline a new treaty, which could be signed in December 2009 when President Obama was expected to travel to Europe to accept the Nobel Peace Prize. Both the United States and Russia characterized the bilateral negotiations as positive, pragmatic and cooperative.

Background:

In April 2009, United States President Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev agreed to forge a new nuclear arms reduction pact, which would not only replace START --the treaty signed by former United States President George H. W. Bush and former Soviet President Michel Gorbachev -- but also expand upon its parameters, with an eye on increased disarmament.

Then, in July 2009, at a summit in Moscow, President Obama and President Medvedev agreed to cut the number of nuclear warheads in the possession each country to between 1,500 and 1,675 over the course of the next seven years. Russian President Medvedev described this particular objective as "reasonable." The agreement was expected to set the foundation for a later treaty to be forged, which would replace START as noted above. Speaking from the Kremlin in Moscow, President Obama explained that he intended to move toward nuclear arms reduction and greater bilateral engagement saying, "We must lead by example, and that's what we are doing here today." He continued, "We resolve to reset U.S.-Russian relations so that we can cooperate more effectively in areas of common interest."

In October 2009, United States officials were in Russia for missile defense negotiations with Russian counterparts. The Russian were led by Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov while Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, Ellen Tauscher, was to head the United States delegation. After the groundwork has been established, further talks were set to take place later in the week between Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Speaking ahead of the negotiations, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said the United States and Russia must advance strategic arms reduction. In an interview with Russia's Channel Once, President Medvedev said, "While dealing with non-proliferation, we must simultaneously deal with the limitation and reduction of strategic offensive potentials -- both carriers and nuclear warheads." Medvedev continued, "Today we have the chance to advance this process. We will be dealing with this. And I call on our American partners to do the same."

With the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty set to expire on Dec. 5, 2009, President Medvedev said he believed Russia and the United States could reach a new strategic arms reduction accord.

He observed, "There is definitely a chance for the agreement, since the new U.S. administration has demonstrated interest in this issue." Medvedev also said he did not support the expansion of nuclear weapons states recognized by the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty. Striking a tone harmonious with his American counterpart, President Barack Obama, President Medvedev said, "We are against the extension of the nuclear club. Otherwise the situation will get out of control. The world without nuclear weapons is an ideal which should be on our agenda."

President Medvedev also reiterated his appreciation for President Obama's decision to scrap the Bush-era missile defense shield plan, calling President Obama's new missile shield plans "sensible." He additionally noted that Russia was eager to extend missile defense cooperation with the United States and Europe.

On this very issue, United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has struck a similar chord. On Oct. 13, 2009, United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton traveled to Moscow to meet with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lvov. In addition to the issues related to a new successor treaty aimed at strategic arms reduction, the two diplomats also discussed the matter of missile defense. In an interview with the Newsweek's Russian edition, which was published in the German daily, Die Welt, and translated by Reuters,

Secretary Clinton addressed the Obama administration's plan to scrap the Bush-era missile defense system in Eastern Europe saying, "On the question of the missile shield, we are very open to cooperation with the Russians. We have made this clear to them. We believe that a joint missile defense would make sense."

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In an interview with the Newsweek's Russian edition, which was published in the German daily, Die Welt, and translated by Reuters, Secretary Clinton said that her country and Russia found broad agreement on the issue of Iran's controversial nuclear program. While there was no specific promise from Moscow to impose harsh sanctions on Iran if diplomacy failed, Secretary Clinton said, "We have agreed to make diplomacy the priority with Iran. But if we are not successful, we will consider other steps." She described her talks with Russian leaders as "very constructive" and noted that the United States and Russia were in "full agreement" on the path before them. The United States' top diplomat also lauded Russia for not following through with plans to deliver high-grade S300 air defense missiles to Iran.

Negotiations and Bilateral Relations

In November 2009, nuclear arms reductions negotiations were on the agenda at a meeting between the leaders of the United States and the Russian Federation. At issue was the crafting of a new agreement that would replace the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) -- the prevailing nuclear arms agreement between the two countries -- which was set to expire in December 2009.

Ahead of negotiations with Russian President Medvedev, during a news conference in Japan with Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama, United States President Obama signaled his country's readiness to move forward on the issue of joint disarmament saying, "We are already taking steps to bring down our nuclear stockpiles in cooperation with the Russian government."

As noted above, days later, the United States and the Russian Federation announced they would present a new treaty, aimed at replacing START. The announcement came at the close of a summit of Asia-Pacific leaders in Singapore, and occurred following discussions between United States President Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. According to United States officials, the leaders of the United States and Russia found concurrence on the broad outline of a new treaty, which could be signed in December 2009 when President Obama was expected to travel to Europe to accept the Nobel Peace Prize.

As reported in the Associated Press, President Obama said that he and his Russian counterpart had made "excellent progress" on the new treaty negotiations. President Medvedev said his objective was to "finalize the text of the document by December." While acknowledging that technical details were yet to be worked through, President Obama said, "I'm confident that if we work hard and with a sense of urgency, we'll be able to get that done."

With such a tight timeline in the offing, Daryl Kimball, the executive director of the Arms Control Association, said he did not anticipate any significant obstacles that foresee could not be resolved before December 2009. According to the Associated Press, he described the urgency motivating both American and Russian negotiations saying, "Neither side wants to go without a new agreement for very long."

The news agency, Itar-Tass, cited Russian presidential aide Sergei Prikhodko, who described the timeline on the agreement as follows: "We are working in order to prepare the treaty within the timeframe about which the presidents spoke."

Prikhodko also lauded the spirit of engagement from the Obama administration in the United States saying, "We are satisfied at present with the nature of the open, pragmatic and future-oriented dialogue that is developing with the new administration: it allows us to hope for the continuation of the joint work on issues where solutions have not been found yet." He continued, "Each meeting of President Medvedev with Barack Obama give a considerable impulse to the interaction in bilateral affairs, contributes to confidence building, understanding on key issues." Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov described the current climate of bilateral relations as follows: "The two presidents absolutely agree that we should overcome the stagnation in relations between Moscow and Washington that was observed during the Bush administration when good personal relations did not transform in any way into something really partnership-like."

The White House has not denied the existence of disagreements between the United States and Russia on certain elements of the proposed agreement to replace START. As noted by Itar-Tass, a spokesman for the White House's National Security Council, Mike Hammer, explained that both countries were working to resolve the existing disagreements. Echoing some of the sentiment expressed by Prikhodko and Lavrov, Hammer characterized relations with the Russians as constructive, and he noted that both the United States and Russia were committed to the December 2009 deadline, given the imperative of increasing global security and advancing the objective of global non-proliferation.

Indeed, President Obama's call for nuclear disarmament was one of the key rationales behind the Nobel Committee's decision to award him the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize. At the time of its announcement, the Nobel Committee said that it "attached special importance to President Obama's vision of and work for a world without nuclear weapons." To that end, the committee noted that Obama's vision and work related to a nuclear weapons-free world has "powerfully stimulated disarmament and arms control negotiations."

On Dec. 21, 2009, Russia and the United States were reported to have made good progress on negotiations on a new strategic arms agreement. In an off-side meeting at the Copenhagen Climate Change Summit, United States President Barack Obama met with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and expressed confidence that a new treaty would soon be signed. At issue was the impending expiration of the existing Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty and the need to forge a new agreement.

Editor's Note:

The 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) was forged between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) on the Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms. START prohibited its two signatories from deploying more than 6,000 nuclear warheads on a total of 1,600 intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and bombers. START has been regarded as the most complex and substantial arms control treaty in history. It was signed just months before the collapse of the Soviet Union on July 31, 1991, and its entry-into-force was delayed as a result. An annex was crafted, which enforced the terms of the treaty upon the newly-independent states of Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine, and called for the transposition of nuclear arms from Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine to Russia for disposal.

Special Report:

Barack Obama wins Nobel Peace Prize

The Nobel Committee in Oslo (Norway) announced on October 9, 2009, that United States President Barack Obama won the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize for his "extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples." For his part, President Barack Obama said that he was "surprised and deeply humbled" to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize less than 10 months into his presidency. He said that the award was a "call to action" and urged international action in facing the global challenges that "cannot be met by one person or by one nation alone."

Barack Obama joins three American presidents and one vice president in a select club of peace prize laureates. Theodore Roosevelt was the prize laureate in 1906 for negotiating an end to the war between Russia and Japan. In 1919, Woodrow Wilson earned the Peace Prize for his work towards the formation of the League of Nations. Jimmy Carter garnered the 2002 Peace Prize after he left office for his work in advancing peace and democracy in countries across the world. In 2007, former Vice President Al Gore earned the Peace Prize for his work on climate change after he left office.

The announcement was regarded as something of a surprise with detractors claiming that President Obama had only been in power for a few months and, therefore, had not necessarily accomplished anything of substance. Other critics of the award going to Obama have said that he received the award while two acting as Commander in

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Chief over two wars. But it should be noted that the Nobel Peace Prize is not necessarily awarded to pacifists or on the basis of accomplishments. It is also not a humanitarian reward. Indeed, it is a political award, oriented to achieving certain broadly-defined liberal and democratic outcomes.

To these ends, the Nobel Committee has made a point of awarding some recipients who are "in process" in their pursuits, essentially encouraging the peace process along. For example, Aung San Suu Kyi's plight to free Burma from the rule by military junta has yet to be realized, yet her distinction as a Nobel Peace Prize laureate has only augmented her influence. Likewise for the case of Iranian dissident, Shirin Abadi. As noted by Kristian Berg Harpviken of the International Peace Institute in Oslo in regard the selection of Obama - "They want the prize to have an impact on things that are about to happen and want to affect events." Accordingly, this is part of the revitalized activist thrust of the Nobel Peace Prize Committee.

Nevertheless, the Nobel Committee was quick to point out that it had chosen Obama precisely for his significant accomplishment in shifting the climate of international relations to one of diplomacy and engagement reliant on international instruments of peace and stability, and away from muscular militarism and hegemony. To that end, the Nobel Committee said that Barack Obama "created a new climate in international politics. Multilateral diplomacy has regained a central position, with emphasis on the role that the United Nations and other international institutions can play."

The Nobel Committee also said that it "attached special importance to Obama's vision of and work for a world without nuclear weapons." To that end, the committee noted that Obama's vision and work related to a nuclear weapons-free world has "powerfully stimulated disarmament and arms control negotiations."

The Nobel Committee appeared to issue a tacit rebuke against the previous Bush administration -- sustained by a nod to the new Obama administration -- in regard to environmental policy. The committee noted that Obama's initiatives were responsible for the fact that United States was now playing a "more constructive role" in meeting climate change challenges.

But in addition to these accomplishments, the Nobel Committee explained its central reason for choosing Barack Obama as its 2009 Peace Prize recipient. It said, "Only very rarely has a person to the same extent as Obama captured the world's attention and given its people hope for a better future." It continued, "His diplomacy is founded in the concept that those who are to lead the world must do so on the basis of values and attitudes that are shared by the majority of the world's population." Perhaps most importantly, the Nobel Committee underlined its core rationale for selecting Barack Obama as the 2009 Peace Prize recipient when it said, "For 108 years, the Norwegian Nobel Committee has sought to stimulate precisely that international policy and those attitudes for which Obama is now the world's leading spokesman." In this way, the Nobel Committee was suggesting that Obama was leading global consensus on how to address and resolve global conflicts and challenges, and he was leading this charge while embodying the Nobel Peace Prize ethos.

Round up of world reaction --

UN SECRETARY-GENERAL BAN KI-MOON

We are entering an era of renewed multilateralism, a new era where the challenges facing humankind demand global common cause and uncommon global effort. President Obama embodies the new spirit of dialogue and engagement on the world's biggest problems: climate change, nuclear disarmament and a wide range of peace and security challenges.

FRENCH PRESIDENT NICOLAS SARKOZY

It confirms, finally, America's return to the hearts of the people of the world... you can count on my resolute support and that of France.

ANGELA MERKEL, GERMAN CHANCELLOR

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In a short time he has established a new tone, creating a willingness for dialogue and I think we all should support him to make peace in this world possible. There is a lot to do but a window of opportunity has been opened. His advocacy of a world free of nuclear arms is an aim we all need to make real in the next few years.

YUKIO HATOYAMA, JAPANESE PRIME MINISTER

I am really pleased. I want to congratulate him from my heart. I've seen the world changing since President Obama took office. It was outstanding when he made the speech in Prague calling for a nuclear-free world.

NATO SECRETARY GENERAL ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN

President Obama has made extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and co-operation between peoples. He has also demonstrated his strong commitment to help build peace and defend fundamental human rights, including through the Atlantic alliance. This honor is well deserved.

MOHAMED ELBARADEI, HEAD OF THE INTERNATIONAL ATOMIC ENERGY AGENCY AND NOBEL PEACE PRIZE WINNER

There is nobody today in my view who is more deserving of that peace prize than Barack Obama. In less than a year he brought a radical change in the way we look at ourselves, in the way we look at our world. He is restoring the basic core values that every one of us should live by - dialogue, respect, democracy, due process, human rights, a security system that does not depend on nuclear weapons. His dedication to these values rekindles hope that, finally, we could have a world at peace with itself.

On Dec. 10, 2009, United States President Barack Obama received the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, Norway. President Obama acknowledged the irony of receiving the lauded peace prize at a time when he had ordered more troops to fight the ongoing war against militant terrorists in Afghanistan. By way of explanation, he attempted to thread together the notion of a just war with the tragic realities of conflict. He explained: "A non-violent movement could not have halted Hitler's armies. Negotiations cannot convince al-Qaida's leaders to lay down their arms." He then said, "To say that force is sometimes necessary is not a call to cynicism -- it is a recognition of history." At the same time, President Obama noted that this understanding had to go hand in hand with the realization that "no matter how justified, war promises human tragedy."

President Obama also linked the war in Afghanistan with the matter of religious extremism by railing against the use of religion "to justify the murder of innocents." He went on to note, "Such a warped view of religion is not just incompatible with the concept of peace but the purpose of faith -- for the one rule that lies at the heart of every major religion is that we do unto others what we would have them do unto us."

President Obama additionally addressed one of the themes that won him the Nobel Peace Prize in the first place -- nuclear disarmament by mentioning the security conflicts posed by the nuclear ambitions of Iran and North Korea.

The awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to President Obama in the first year of his presidency has been a matter of consternation, with some critics alleging that the United States president had not been in office long enough to deserve the honor. At the ceremony in Oslo, the head of the Nobel Peace Prize Committee, Thorbjørn Jagland, said, "Many have argued that the prize comes too early, but history can tell us a great deal about lost opportunities. It is now, today, that we have the opportunity to support President Obama's ideas. This year's prize is indeed a call to action for all of us."

Special Report

Attempted Terror Attack on U.S. Airliner

Summary:

Yemen's al-Qaida connection has become the focus of geopolitical anxiety in the aftermath of an attempted bombing of a U.S. airliner on Christmas Day. A Nigerian national charged with attempting to bomb the aircraft said

he received explosives and training from al-Qaida in Yemen. Fears of terrorist attacks emanating from that country have led to increased anti-terrorism support for Yemen.

The Foiled Attack:

On Dec. 25, 2009, a Nigerian national on a flight from Amsterdam in the Netherlands to Detroit in the United States attempted to carry out a bomb attack. The Christmas Day incident occurred when Northwest Airlines Flight 253, carrying 278 passengers and 11 crew, was less than half an hour from arriving at its destination.

The incident ensued when the suspect, identified as 23-year old Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, tried to ignite an incendiary device, and burnt his leg in so doing. No one else was hurt in what United States officials described as a failed terrorist attack. Passengers on the aircraft described a scene of panic in the cabin after they detected smoke and flames. There were some suggestions that the attempted bomb attack was thwarted when one passenger, Dutch tourist Jasper Schuringa, jumped across several rows of seats to tackle the suspect, and other passengers then helped to fully subdue him. Water, blankets and a fire extinguisher were used to put out the fire. A report by the Associated Press noted that the lives of the passengers and crew about Flight 253 were actually saved because the explosive device failed to detonate due to an apparent malfunction. Nonetheless, Schuringa was hailed as a hero for his quick reaction to the unfolding crisis aboard the flight.

The aircraft was soon cleared for emergency landing at Detroit Metropolitan Airport where Abdulmutallab was taken into official custody and treated for the aforementioned burns at the University of Michigan Medical Center in Ann Arbor. While there, United States District Judge Paul Borman officially charged Abdulmutallab with placing a destructive device on an aircraft, and attempting to destroy a passenger jet by detonating a bomb. According to the Associated Press, Abdulmutallab was asked in English if he understood the charges being brought against him and responded, "Yes, I do." Abdulmutallab's lawyer later said he had been transferred to a federal prison in Milan, Michigan.

Abdulmutallab reportedly told United States authorities that he was acting on behalf of the notorious terrorist enclave, al-Qaida. Indeed, ABC news reported that Abdulmutallab told authorities that he spent one month being trained by al-Qaida in Yemen. Abdulmutallab also apparently explained that he acquired the explosive powder from al-Qaida operatives in Yemen, which he attached to his leg and mixed in a concoction with liquid chemicals, with the intent of causing an explosion. Subsequent media reports indicated that the highly explosive substance was pentaerythritol (PETN) -- the same substance used by the failed show bomber, Richard Reid, exactly eight years earlier in December 2001, when he attempted to bring down a flight from France to the United States. CNN reported that the amount of PETN in this 2009 case was certainly enough to destroy the aircraft, presumably killing all those on board.

Counter-terrorism authorities in the Netherlands confirmed that Abdulmutallab first boarded a KLM flight in Lagos, Nigeria, bound for Amsterdam. It was not known at the time of writing if Abdulmutallab had the explosives attached to his body when his originating flight departed from Nigeria at the very start of the journey. In fact, the logistical details were complicated by the revelation that Abdulmutallab actually flew from Ghana to Nigeria on a one-way ticket.

Nevertheless, once Abdulmutallab arrived in the Netherlands, he transferred to the Northwest flight headed to the United States. According to the Justice Department in the United States, Abdulmutallab at that point had "a device attached to his body" when he boarded the flight in Amsterdam bound for Detroit. He presumably was allowed to board that flight because he had a valid United States visa.

There were serious questions being raised regarding the ease with which the transportation of explosives was able to elude detection. It was possible that security conditions in Nigeria helped in this regard. That is to say, the Lagos airport has long held the dubious distinction of being one of the least efficient travel centers in the world, where lax security runs rampant, largely as a result of widespread corruption. On the other hand, later evidence showing the explosives had been carried in a specially-made pouch within the alleged bombers undergarments would suggest that detection would be almost impossible using a regular magnetometers, and would require more intrusive body scanning techniques.

Accordingly, security at airports worldwide was expected to increase. For his part, United States President Barack Obama ordered that air travel be subject to heightened security measures. Homeland Security and the Transportation Security Administration in the United States warned that additional screening procedures would be implemented, however, they declined to specify particulars, suggesting that the intent was to preserve the element of surprise for obvious security reasons. Certain international aircraft carriers, though, such as Air Canada and British Airways, noted on their websites that passengers on international flights would be subject to much more intense security, and would be prevented from accessing carry-on luggage or getting up from their seats at certain points during flights. Delays, particularly on trans-Atlantic flights, were being anticipated.

White House spokesperson Robert Gibbs announced that a review of air safety was underway. On one front, there would be an investigation into the systems in place for detecting explosives before passengers board flights. On another front, there would be an examination of the terrorist identification protocols, in light of the revelation that Abdulmutallab was already listed in a broad terrorist database and yet allowed to board a flight. Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano explained in an interview with CNN that despite the fact that Abdulmutallab's own father had warned the United States' embassy in Nigeria that his son might have jihadist inclinations, it was not sufficient actionable information to have moved him to the terrorism "no fly" list. The actual criteria for inclusion in these various databases -- some overseen by the Director of National Intelligence and some by the Federal Bureau of Investigation -- was not made known to the public.

Nevertheless, the fact that Abdulmutallab's own father -- a well-known Nigerian banker -- had gone to such lengths to notify United States officials of his suspicions, along with revelations that Abdulmutallab had purchased a ticket from Ghana using cash and was carrying only one carry-on piece of luggage, were matters expected to be subjects of grave critique in the coming weeks. Typically, such actions would be flagged as suspicious and indicative of a possible terrorist threat and so Secretary Napolitano's assurances that flying was still "very, very safe" were unlikely to go unchallenged. However, despite the perception of breaches in the air transport security system, preliminary examinations in the Netherlands -- where Flight 253 originated -- found that existing security procedures were correctly followed. The obvious conclusion, therefore, has been that current security technology does not facilitate the easy detection of explosive devices and substances. Indeed, as indicated above, most passengers in airports have to pass through only magnetometers, which detect metal and not explosives. Accordingly, there was likely to be intensified focus in the future on equipping airports with "puffer" machines that detect explosive powder residue, manual hand swabs to the same end, bomb-sniffing dogs, as well as body scanners.

Meanwhile, attention was on Abdulmutallab himself, who was born into a life of relative privilege. He once studied engineering at a prestigious school in the United Kingdom, but his Islamic views had caught the attention of his own family, including his father, Alhaji Umaru Mutallab. Indeed, media reports suggested that he was estranged from his family, actually losing touch with them in the months he may have been living in Yemen. The official Saba News Agency in Yemen subsequently reported that Abdulmutallab had, in fact, been living in that country from August 2009 to the start of December 2009 while he attended the Sanaa Institute for the Arabic Language (SIAL). Nigerian authorities suggested that Abdulmutallab used surreptitious means to re-enter Nigeria before departing on the trip that would span three continents.

Yemen and al-Qaida:

The United States government has been reticent about drawing conclusions about a global terrorist plot in this case. Nevertheless, this attempt to carry out an in-flight bombing on Christmas Day appeared to be in keeping with al-Qaida's latest terrorist directives. The NEFA Foundation published an October 2009 al-Qaida article calling for operatives to use "small explosives" to kill "apostates" and Westerners at airports and in aircrafts. Moreover, Abdulmutallab -- the man at the center of the Christmas Day attempted terror attack -- has expressly conjured up al-Qaida in his interrogations with authorities. Finally, a Yemen-based branch of the network removed some prevailing doubts about the orchestration of the failed terrorist attack by claiming responsibility.

It should be noted that al-Qaida was not the only meaningful reference point offered by Abdulmutallab to the authorities during initial interrogations. Also of significance was his mentioning of Yemen as being the place he

garnered the PETN, as well as the venue of his Islamic militant training. Yemen -- the ancestral home of Osama Bin Laden -- is strategically located at the end of the Arabian peninsula and stretches from the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden. It is also located in close proximity to another emerging al-Qaida haven -- Somalia. Accordingly, Yemen has increasingly factored into the discussions of global terrorism.

Al-Qaida's satellite base in Yemen may be attempting to gain ascendancy at a time when global attention is on the Afghan-Pak region. To this end, Anwar Eshki, the head of the Middle East Center for Strategic and Legal Studies, has argued that al-Qaida in Yemen "is stronger than it was a year ago" and intent on turning that country into a major base of operations against the West. Part of that strength may be derived from the fact that Saudi and Yemeni elements of al-Qaida have joined forces to form the merged entity, al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula. The Saudi authorities, who have carried out a crackdown on its elements, have suggested that many Saudi operatives have fled to Yemen. The Saudi authorities have sometimes accused Yemen of not doing enough to round up its own bastions of extremism.

In the aftermath of the failed terror plot aboard the airliner discussed above, the government of Yemen indicated that while it had the will to deal with al-Qaida, it was hampered by a lack of support. Nonetheless, the Yemeni authorities insisted that they have been working with regional and Western powers to crush militancy within its borders, noting that such action was in the country's own best interests since Islamic extremists pose a grave national security threat. It should also be noted that in the latter part of 2009, faced with the threat that Yemen was becoming a stronghold for Islamic extremists, United States intelligence was credited with helping Yemeni forces carry out military offensives against major al-Qaida bases in that country, much to the consternation of al-Qaida itself. But the Yemeni authorities have to contend with not only the al-Qaida threat, but also a secessionist movement in the south and a Shi'a Zaidi rebellion in the north. This complex political terrain has left large isolated swaths of land vulnerable for use by extremists of many stripes in Yemen.

Meanwhile, Evan Kohlmann, a senior investigator for the NEFA Foundation, warned that rivalry among al-Qaida's branches could be a driving force behind the uptick in Yemen-based al-Qaida activities. He said, "There's now a competition in the world of al-Qaida between various al-Qaida factions, with each trying to prove themselves and prove their worth." There could therefore be an attempt by Yemen-based al-Qaida to distinguish itself as an active base of anti-Western and Jihadist militancy.

This threat was amplified when, a week after the aforementioned attempted terrorist attack, the Yemeni authorities warned that hundreds of al-Qaida operatives were present in Yemen and could be plotting further terrorist attacks. This claim appeared to coincide with warnings made by Abdulmutallab -- the man behind the attempted Christmas Day attack -- who said that there were other al-Qaida operatives who stood ready to strike with fresh attacks.

Some of those al-Qaida operatives could well be among the hundreds already present in Yemen, as noted by the Yemeni authorities. But Yemen's location close to Somalia might also be a factor. The militant extremist Islamist group, al-Shabab, which has held sway in portions of Somalia, has warned it would send its fighters to assist fellow Islamic militants in Yemen. Sheikh Mukhtar Robow Abu Mansour of al-Shabab reportedly said: "We tell our Muslim brothers in Yemen that we will cross the water between us and reach your place to assist you fight the enemy of Allah."

With attention now focused on the Islamic extremist threat emanating from Yemen, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown called for a summit to be convened in London at the end of January 2010 simultaneously with a pre-scheduled conference on the future of Afghanistan. The objective of the summit on Yemen would be identify Yemen's counter-terrorism requirements and to determine ways of dealing with the thrust towards extremism via aid and reform. Prime Minister Brown also urged all key international partners to be involved in this endeavor saying, "The international community must not deny Yemen the support it needs to tackle extremism." He also announced that the United Kingdom would commit 100 million British pounds and intelligence support to Yemen -- the most significant outlay by any global power to that Middle eastern country.

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Meanwhile, General David Petraeus, head of United States military operations in the Middle East and Central Asia, visited the president of Yemen, Ali Abdallah Saleh, to pledge American support in the fight against al-Qaida. One day earlier, Petraeus announced that the United States would double its counter-terrorism aid to Yemen in 2010.

Across the globe, clearly there was increasing anxiety about Yemen becoming a failed state -- the very environment within which violent extremist groups often find safe haven. To that end, Mark Pritchard, a British parliamentarian and the vice chairman of the Parliamentary Yemen Group, said: "If Yemen does become a failed State it will provide a safe haven for terrorists with close proximity to important shipping routes and neighboring oil-producing Saudi Arabia. The stakes for the region and the West are very high indeed."

For its part, the government of Yemen appeared to give tacit sanction for greater assistance from the Western powers with the Yemeni Foreign Minister Abu Bakr al-Qirbi saying in an interview with the BBC, "We need more training. We have to expand our counter terrorism units and this means providing them with the necessary training, military equipment, ways of transportation - we are very short of helicopters. The United States can do a lot, Britain can do a lot, the European Union can do a lot in that regard."

Such help would be of paramount importance given the reports in the early days of 2010 that al-Qaida was planning an attack on the Yemeni capital of Sanaa. In an interview with ABC News, John Brennan, the top counter-terrorism adviser to United States President Obama, said, "We know that they [al-Qaida operatives] have been targeting our embassy, our embassy personnel." Because of this threat, Brennan announced that the United States was temporarily closing its embassy in Sanaa. The British and French governments reportedly moved to do the same. Brennan's claims were consistent with a call from al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula encouraging Muslims to assist in "killing every crusader who works at their embassies or other places."

Latest Developments:

On Jan. 5, 2010, it was reported that Yemeni security forces killed several suspected al-Qaida militants as part of its ongoing effort to crush al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula. According to reports, the Yemeni forces ambushed a cadre of militants in the Arhab district -- about 40 miles north of the Yemeni capital -- effectively igniting a violent clash with the militants, ultimately yielding the aforementioned deaths.

But even as this offensive operation was taking place, the Yemeni president was signaling that it was interested in engaging with al-Qaida in an effort to end the violence in his country. President Ali Abdullah Saleh suggested he would grant leniency to members of al-Qaida who were willing to enter talks with his government and renounce violence. In an interview that was broadcast on Abu Dhabi TV, he said: "Dialogue is the best way ... even with al-Qaida, if they set aside their weapons and return to reason." The move was essentially an extension of the Yemeni president's previous stance in dealing with al-Qaida. Accordingly, it was expected to be met with grave disapproval from Western powers who have viewed it as a failed strategy, given the terrorist threat emanating from Yemen.

Yemen is the base of both foreign and local al-Qaida fighters. The local fighters are often aided by relatives, typically as a result of tribal loyalty more than ideology. However, when these fighters are killed or arrested by government forces, these heavily-armed tribes often are emotionally driven to increase support of the militants. Meanwhile, Yemen has also been home to thousands of Islamic militants who are veterans of several "holy wars" in other countries and regions, including Afghanistan, Bosnia and Chechnya. While most of these Islamic militant veterans are no longer active, they nonetheless maintain their extremist views in keeping with al-Qaida ideology. As noted by Ali Saif Hassan, the manager of a Yemeni group that mediates between the government and opposition: "It is difficult to draw the line between who is a fundamentalist and who is al-Qaida. It's a spectrum." As constituents of the country, these elements form part of the broader anti-American and anti-Western base of the country, over which President Saleh has only fragile control.

It is this matter of fragile control that informs President Saleh's stance. With a rebellion in the north, a secessionist movement in the south, extremists in other parts of the country, and actual control over only Sanaa, Yemeni President Saleh has moved cautiously in the fight against al-Qaida. This wary and cagey positioning has been largely due to President Saleh's concern that working closely with the United States and the West on anti-terrorism efforts could spark a backlash.

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In fact, the Yemeni leader has to walk a political tightrope of sorts. He has had to crack down on the rebels, secessionists and militants in order to maintain national security, while simultaneously demonstrating anti-terrorism efforts for geopolitical reasons. Yet, in so doing, President Saleh cannot afford to alienate significant elements of Yemeni society. To this end, he must demonstrate the precise amount of cooperation with the Western powers to assuage them, while currying favor with the extremist elements of his own country. In many senses, it has been the same challenge facing other leaders in the region who must contend with a volatile population base while attending to the geopolitical and national security threats posed by militant Islamic terrorism.

The other territorial battles in Yemen have also factored into the country's complex landscape and challenging security situation. In January 2010, Yemeni security forces entered into the sixth month of conflict with Shi'ite rebels in the northern part of the country. This was part of the government's ongoing "Operation Scorched Earth" offensive aimed at ending the Houthi rebellion. The situation in the north has intersected to some degree with the increasing global attention on Yemen as an emerging base of al-Qaida extremist militants. The government of Yemen has had to balance fighting terrorism and rebellion with appeasing extremist elements of the society, amidst a country with rebels in the north and secessionists in the south. To satisfy these contradictory objectives, the Yemeni government has at times aligned itself with controversial Islamists. Among them has been Sheik Abdul-Majid al-Zindani whom the United States has classified as a terrorist due to his alleged connection to al-Qaida, and who has gained notoriety for his anti-Western rhetoric. But the Yemeni government has relied on its alliance with cleric like al-Zindani in the fight against the Shi'ite rebels in the north, to oppose the secessionists in the south, and to hold onto its tenuous grip on power.

Cast along the complicated landscape has been the growing international call for the government to take a harder stance against al-Qaida, and the reality that such a move could ignite a fierce and deleterious repercussions from the Islamic fundamentalist and tribal factions of Yemeni society. Indeed, as noted by Ali Mohammed Omar, a Yemeni who, according to a report by the Associated Press, fought in Afghanistan in the early 1990s and met Osama Bin Laden: "Any movement against al-Qaida will lead to the fall of the Yemeni regime." He went on to note that if the United States or its allies were to become too directly involved in Yemen, "the whole (Yemeni) people will become al-Qaida. Instead of 30 or 40 people, it would become millions."

Clearly aware of this potentiality, while the United States and the United Kingdom have increased support for anti-terrorism efforts in Yemen in the form of increased funding and training for counter-terrorism forces (noted above), there is no indication of an overt military presence in that country. In fact, in an interview with People magazine, United States President Obama made clear that he had no intention of deploying American troops to Yemen (or Somalia), despite the nations' growing importance as emerging centers of terrorism on the global landscape. To this end, President Obama said: "I have no intention of sending U.S. boots on the ground in these regions." Instead, he suggested that working with international partners on the situation in Yemen would be the best course. President Obama also emphasized that the main center of al-Qaida activity was still in the Afghan-Pak region.

The president's sentiment was reflected in statements by General David Petraeus, who has been directing the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In an interview with Christiane Amanpour on CNN, he said of the Yemeni government that it was "quite clear that Yemen does not want to have American ground troops there. And that's a ... good response for us to hear, certainly." He continued, "We would always want a host nation to deal with a problem itself. We want to help. We're providing assistance." Echoing what was clearly the Obama administration's position on the matter, Admiral Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said in an interview with Fareed Zakaria on CNN, "Right now, as far as any kind of boots on the ground there, with respect to the United States, ... that's not a possibility."

Recent Foreign Policy Developments

Imbroglia With Israel

Roadmap for peace hits roadblock with East Jerusalem settlement plan; diplomatic imbroglia ensues between Israel and United States as a result

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On March 8, 2010, Israeli and Palestinian negotiators agreed to indirect peace talks. Following a meeting with United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, Israeli Vice Premier Silvan Shalom confirmed that his country wanted to "move to direct talks" with the Palestinians. He said, "Israel would like to resume the negotiations directly immediately." He also called for a shortened period before both parties moved toward direct dialogue. At issue has been the so-called "roadmap for peace," which has been sanctioned by the Middle East Quartet made up of the United Nations, European Union, United States and Russia, and which calls for the establishment of two states -- Israel and Palestine -- living side by side in peace and security.

Days later on March 11, 2010, this "roadmap for peace" appeared to have hit a roadblock when the Palestinian Authority made clear that indirect talks could not proceed unless Israel could commit to a total construction freeze of Jewish settlements. According to Ynetnews.com, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas was not willing to negotiate "under the current circumstances" -- an apparent reference to the news that Israel had new construction plans for east Jerusalem. At the heart of the matter was a plan by Israel to build 1,600 new homes in in Ramat Shlomo in east Jerusalem, despite repeated pressure by the United States for a halt on Jewish settlements in the interests of peace.

For some time, Jerusalem has been a flashpoint in the ongoing conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. Jerusalem is the official capital city of the Jewish state of Israel, and Israel has laid claim to the eastern part of the city since the 1967 war. However, Palestinians have clamored for East Jerusalem to be the capital of a future Palestinian state. Palestinians have argued that settlement activity in east Jerusalem is illegal under international law. Israel, though, has disputed this view of international jurisprudence. Of course, to date, these competing claims over the contested part of the city have seen no resolution, and the status of Jerusalem has remained a sticking point in the peace process.

Key officials in the Obama administration in the United States have registered disapproval of this development, noting that it was an obstacle to the process of building trust, confidence, and ultimately peace between Israelis and Palestinians. Indeed, the Obama administration in the United States railed against Israel in response to the announcement of settlement activity in east Jerusalem.

Vice President Joe Biden, who was ironically in Israel at the time for the purpose of advancing the peace process, denounced the development. On NBC News, David Axelrod, senior adviser to President Barack Obama, referred to Israel's settlement announcement as both destructive to the peace effort, and insulting to the United States, a likely reference to the timing of the announcement when Vice President Biden was in Israel. He said, "This was an affront, it was an insult but most importantly it undermined this very fragile effort." He continued, "We have just started proximity talks, that is shuttle diplomacy, between the Palestinians and the Israelis, and for this announcement to come at that time was very destructive." Earlier, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton warned Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that this move by Israel was "deeply negative" for American-Israeli relations.

For his part, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu expressed his apologies for the situation that unfolded and explained that the announcement had been accidental, however, even a promise for an inquiry into the timing of the announcement did little to assuage the White House. Press Secretary Robert Gibbs said that the Israeli premier's regrets were only "a good start" and pressed for more constructive dialogue with an eye on peace. The situation was not helped by news reports that Prime Minister Netanyahu's brother in law, Hagi Ben-Artzi, referred to President Obama as "anti-Semitic." This declaration only exacerbated the tense climate of relations and Netanyahu was compelled to make it clear that he did not share the views of Ben-Artzi.

For his part, Prime Minister Netanyahu was trying to negotiate a difficult balancing act. On one hand, he could not afford to alienate Israel's most important and most powerful ally, the United States. This was a particularly pressing priority at a time when global action was needed to deal with the nuclear ambitions of Iran, whose leadership has been vitriolic in its anti-Israeli sentiment. But on the other hand, Prime Minister Netanyahu also had to deal with coalition partners at home from nationalist and Orthodox parties that embrace expanded settlement activity. In an effort to simultaneously downplay the diplomatic imbroglio unfolding with the United States, and to shore-up the right-wing elements of his fragile ruling coalition, Prime Minister Netanyahu addressed members of a cabinet

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meeting as follows: "I propose not to be carried away and to calm down." He continued, "We know how to handle these situations, calmly, responsibly and seriously."

By March 16, 2010, the situation in Jerusalem was marked by a lack of calm as angry Palestinians in the Arab-dominated eastern part of the city set fire to garbage cans and tires, and also hurled stones and rocks at Israeli riot police. In response, Israeli riot police used tear gas and rubber bullets to try to quell the violence. The devolving security scene only served to underline the complicated scene unfolding in Israel.

Meanwhile, United States envoy George Mitchell, cancelled his scheduled trip to Israel as a result of the diplomatic imbroglio. On the issue of that diplomatic imbroglio, Secretary of State Clinton brushed aside claims that relations between the United States and Israel were in a state of crisis. She emphasized the "close, unshakeable bond" shared between the two countries. But at the same time, Clinton noted that her country wanted Israel and the Palestinians to demonstrate their clear commitment to the peace process. Days later, at an address before the pro-Israel lobby group, American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), Secretary of State Hillary Clinton urged Israel to make "difficult but necessary choices" if it desired a peace agreement with the Palestinians, emphasizing the "unsustainable" nature of the status quo. She also highlighted the "unshakable" bond between her country and Israel.

In a move intended to emphasize Israel's commitment in this regard, Prime Minister Netanyahu proposed "trust-building measures" with the Palestinians, in the context of renewed peace negotiations. Of course, the Palestinians noted it would be difficult to move forward with "proximity talks," given Israel's decision to expand settlement in Ramat Shlomo, as discussed above. An already-scheduled trip to the United States to address AIPAC, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu offered the opportunity for face-to-face talks with United States President Barack Obama, with an eye on resolving the diplomatic imbroglio. However, Netanyahu's decision not to call for a halt on the settlement plan in Jerusalem did not bode well for progress. Indeed, the closed nature of the talks suggested that the dissonance would not easily be ended.

At the broader level, the Middle East Quartet of peace mediators -- the United Nations, European Union, United States and Russia - - has issued its own condemnation of Israel's construction plan in east Jerusalem. The Quartet made it clear that the matter would be reviewed during its forthcoming ministerial meeting, which took place on March 19, 2010, in Moscow.

Romanian president says his country will host United States missile interceptors

On February 4, 2010, President Traian Basescu of Romania said that his country would host missile interceptors as part of a new United States defense shield system. President Basescu explained that Romania's chief military and security entity, the Supreme Defense Council, agreed to such the proposal by the United States. While the proposal would still have to be ratified by the legislative branch of government, there was some degree of confidence that it would successfully pass through that branch of government.

President Basescu said in an interview with Radio Free Europe, "Terrestrial interceptors will be placed on Romania's territory as part of the anti-missile system. According to the calendar agreed with the American side, the components located on Romania's territory will become operational in 2015." While he noted that the missile defense system would protect Romanian territory, he emphasized that the move would not threaten Russia.

Indeed, the plan for Romania to host the missile defense system was a departure from a Bush-era program to station 10 long-range interceptor missiles in Poland and a radar system in the Czech Republic. These directives raised the ire of Russia, which threatened to relocate its own missiles closer to Europe. But the new proposal, which would instead involve Romania, appeared to be part of the Obama administration's approach to missile defense. Indeed, this new approach would focus on a combination of both fixed and movable Standard Missile 3 interceptors, as well as radars responding to the threat posed by short- and medium-range missiles. The location of fixed or ground-based interceptors in Romania was thought to be related to that country's proximity to Iran.

The Iranian Nuclear Issue

On the issue of Iran, the international community, led by the United States, was looked toward imposing a new round of economic sanctions on Iran for its intransigence regarding its controversial nuclear development program. At the start of 2010, United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was reportedly discussing a sanctions proposal with allied nations aimed at placing pressure on the Iranian regime and the Revolutionary Guard. Indeed, Secretary Clinton emphasized the inclusion of the Revolutionary Guard in this proposal saying, "We have already begun discussions with our partners and with like-minded nations about pressure and sanctions. Our goal is to pressure the Iranian government, particularly the Revolutionary Guard elements, without contributing to the suffering of the ordinary people, who deserve better than what they currently are receiving."

This proposal by the United States was being advanced in the wake of the fact that Iran missed the Dec. 31, 2009, deadline set by the United States for Iran to accept a compromise deal to transfer its low enriched uranium outside its terrain for processing into fuel rods with the purity of 20 percent.

Accordingly, five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany met for several hours on Jan. 16, 2010, to discuss the matter. The meeting ended without a clear agreement but Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov explained that most of the discussions were focused on the "second track" - a reference to the path of sanctions.

By February 2010, in defiance of the international community, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad called on his country's nuclear head, Dr. Ali Akbar Salehi, to intensify uranium enrichment. The move was essentially a fulfillment of an earlier threat by Iran to enrich uranium at a higher purity level of 20 percent. At issue has been Iran's prevailing claim that it is entitled to carry out a civilian nuclear program, aimed at generating energy. This claim has been disputed by several countries of the West, and Iran's case has been compromised by revelations of clandestine nuclear development facilities.

This development came after Iran rejected a compromise deal to transfer its low enriched uranium outside its terrain for processing into fuel rods and, instead, imposed an ultimatum of its own. Specifically, Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki warned that his country would enrich uranium at the higher purity level (20 percent) if the West did not meet its counter-demand that nuclear fuel be sold to Iran or nuclear fuel be swapped for Iran's low-enriched uranium. Of significance has been the fact that civilian nuclear power requires uranium enriched to about only three percent, whereas weapons grade uranium has to be enriched to 90 percent. Intensification beyond the three percent range has, therefore, signaled alarm bells across the globe.

Clearly, the situation marked a further deterioration of relations between Iran and the West. The United States called for united global action in the face of a possible Iranian nuclear threat. United States Defense Secretary Robert Gates said that while there was time for the proposed sanctions to work, the world would have to "stand together." During a visit to Italy, Gates said, "Pressures that are focused on the government of Iran, as opposed to the people of Iran, potentially have greater opportunity to achieve the objective."

In May 2010, as Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan traveled to Tehran for negotiations on Iran's controversial nuclear program in that country, there were suggestions from Ankara that a compromise deal was at hand. The Turkish leader, along with Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, were playing key roles in trying to persuade Iran's government to agree to a deal that would transport its nuclear material abroad for processing. There were hopes that the two countries, which have enjoyed relatively friendlier diplomatic terms with Iran than the Western powers and Russia, might be positioned to successfully make the case for compromise.

This plan has seen several iterations over recent times, including provisions for the transfer of stockpiles of low enriched uranium to Russia and France for processing. It should be noted that until this time, the proposal has never garnered Iranian concurrence. In this new arrangement, the low enriched uranium would be transferred to Turkey. With Iran already trying to avert the prospect of new sanctions being imposed by the United Nations, it was

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possible that there would be greater receptivity to the resurrected compromise deal, albeit with a more neutral country as the partner state. There were hopes that such a proposition would allay the West's fears that Iran's nuclear ambitions include nuclear weapons proliferation. These anxieties have only been strengthened by revelations about secret nuclear facilities in Iran, and non-compliance with monitoring regulations set forth by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

However, the United States dismissed the deal brokered by Turkey, and drafted its own proposal to levy new sanctions against Iran. That United States-drafted proposal was tabled at the United Nations Security Council, prompting Turkey to call for a delay in the interests of further negotiations.

Such a delay was unlikely, as United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that the strong draft proposal against Iran was already backed by the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. For his part, United States President Barack Obama made it clear that his country intended to pursue the new sanctions against Iran, irrespective of the new nuclear deal with Turkey and Brazil. President Obama reportedly informed Turkish Prime Minister during a phone call that the new agreement failed to build "necessary confidence" that Iran would abide by its international obligations. Further, the United States leader acknowledged Turkey's and Brazil's efforts, but noted that the new deal left open a host of "fundamental concerns" about Iran's atomic ambitions and broader nuclear program.

From Tehran, the head of Iran's atomic energy organisation, Ali Akbar Salehi, dismissed the prospect of looming sanctions and predicted that such a move by the international community would ultimately backfire. Salehi said, "They won't prevail and by pursuing the passing of a new resolution they are discrediting themselves in public opinion." Nevertheless, the draft resolution on sanctions against Iran was reported to be already circulating in the chambers of the United Nations Security Council.

Nevertheless, by June 2010, the United Nations had passed sweeping sanctions against Iran, which reflected the United States' draft proposal and the expressed objective to specifically target the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, which has emerged as a power center within that country.

Soon thereafter, the United States announced its own unilateral sanctions to be imposed on Iran. The new sanctions by the Treasury Department targeted Iran's nuclear and missile programs, by concentrating on the financial sector, the shipping industry and Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps.

Other Key Foreign Policy Developments

On March 2, 2010, the United States agreed to move forward with the sale of missiles, helicopters and ships to Taiwan, effectively sparking the anger of the Chinese government in Beijing. Despite a thawing of relations generally between Washington D.C. and Beijing, this move was expected to raise bilateral tensions, which had been strained over a number of issues ranging from Internet censorship to climate change. The United States' moved to dispatch envoys to Beijing to calm the situation. But on the other side of the equation, the Chinese government made it clear that arms sales to Taiwan would deleteriously affect Sino-American relations.

For its part, however, the United States has been compelled to ensure Taiwan's ability to defend itself under the Taiwan Relations Act. In an effort to act in accordance with this accord, while also recognizing China's sensitive relationship with Taiwan, United States President Barack Obama attempted the geopolitical balancing act by reaffirming his country's acknowledgment of "only one China."

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Also in March 2010, the House Foreign Affairs Committee of the United States Congress approved a resolution, which characterized the World War I killing of Armenians by Turks as a genocide. An issue for many Armenians has been the sense of betrayal over the deaths of 1.5 Armenians between 1915 and 1923 at the hand of the Ottoman Empire. Armenia has steadfastly called for international recognition of what they term as the Armenian genocide, but Turkey has vociferously denied this bloody legacy. The Armenian call for recognition came to fruition in the United States, largely as a result of the determination of the Armenian diaspora, particularly in California. But with it has come the outrage of the Turkish government. With an eye on preserving its crucial NATO alliance with Turkey, the Obama administration said it intended to block the bill from passage into law. This scenario repeated a similar situation two years prior when the same committee approved a similar resolution, but which did not go forward due to concerns of the previous Bush administration for precisely the same reason. President Barack Obama, however, had said he intended to characterize the mass deaths of Armenian Christians as a genocide during his 2008 campaign for the presidency. As such, this new position by his administration was regarded as something of a policy reversal. Secretary of States Hillary Clinton explained the shift noting that circumstances had "changed in very significant ways." Specifically, she pointed toward the 2009 accord, which normalized bilateral relations between Armenia and Turkey.

March 2010 was also marked by violence across the border. A couple from the United States and one Mexican national were killed in two separate incidents in Ciudad Juarez in Mexico, just across the border from El Paso in Texas. All of the three victims were affiliated with the United States Consulate in Ciudad Juarez. United States President Barack Obama expressed "outrage" and "deep sadness" at the killings. A statement released by the White House read as follows: "The president is deeply saddened and outraged by the news of the brutal murders of three people associated with the United States Consulate General in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, including a U.S. citizen employee, her U.S. citizen husband and the husband of a Mexican citizen employee. He extends his condolences to the families and condemns these attacks on consular and diplomatic personnel serving at our foreign missions. In concert with Mexican authorities, we will work tirelessly to bring their killers to justice."

On March 28, 2010, United States President Obama made a surprise trip to Afghanistan to show resolve for the peace and security effort in that country. It was his first trip to Afghanistan since becoming president and lasted only a few hours; it was not pre-announced for ostensible security reasons. Addressing United States troops at the Bagram air base close to Kabul, the president thanked them for their service and sacrifice to the United States saying, "My main job here today is to say thank you on behalf of the entire American people." To that end, President Obama emphasized that the central mission of the United States forces in Afghanistan against al-Qaida and the Taliban, noting that it was ultimately aimed at "keeping America safe and secure." President Obama also met with Afghan President Hamid Karzai, whom he invited to the United States for talks in May 2010. President Obama indicated that he wanted to press for progress on not only the peace and security front, but also in terms of corruption and narcotics trafficking in Afghanistan.

In a strange twist, following this visit from President Obama, Afghan President Karzai accused the West of election fraud plot and threatened to join Taliban. Karzai's rhetoric would likely feed sentiment that the Afghan leader was an unpredictable and erratic player on the geopolitical scene. It would certainly do little to help the increasing perception by the West that he was not acting in good faith and could not be counted on as a stable partner for the peace effort in Afghanistan. On June 28, 2010, ten individuals using aliases were arrested in the United States for allegedly spying for the Russian government. According to the Justice Department of the United States, the ten individuals were charged with conspiracy to act as unlawful agents of a foreign government. Eight of the ten suspects were reported to have had "long-term, deep-cover assignments" in the United States. As well, nine of the ten suspects were charged with conspiracy to launder money. Five of the suspects appeared in a New York federal court where they were ordered to remain in jail pending hearings set for the end of July 2010. Other suspects soon faced court in Virginia. The arrests came after an investigation that went on for several years and, if convicted, the suspects could face five years in prison.

Authorities said they were in pursuit of an eleventh suspect. That eleventh suspect was soon arrested in Cyprus and released on bail; he was subsequently reported to be missing after failing to present for a scheduled "check in" meeting with the Cypriot police. An arrest warrant was issued for that individual as a result but reports soon

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emerged that he may have fled that country. The Cypriot authorities were now under fire for mishandling the situation; members of the opposition party in that Mediterranean country railed against the fact that an alleged spy was allowed bail rather than being subject to a detention order.

Meanwhile, United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, on a trip to Eastern Europe, made clear that the U.S. was committed to positive ties with Russia, the emerging spy scandal notwithstanding. Secretary Clinton said, "We're committed to building a new and positive relation with Russia." She continued, "We're looking toward the future." For its part, Russia has also indicated that the scenario would not affect closer bilateral relations with the United States.

By the first week of July 2010, plans were in the works for a Cold War era "spy swap" in which ten Russian agents would be deported in exchange for the return of United States agents being held in Russia. Those agents sought by the United States included a Russian nuclear scientist, a former Russian military intelligence agent and a former KBG agent who were jailed for spying on behalf of the United States. There was also a former military intelligence agent jailed for spying for the United Kingdom.

The exchange ensued in Austria with the ten Russian agents boarding a flight to Moscow, and the four agents released by the Kremlin boarding an American aircraft close to the main passenger terminals at the airport in Vienna. The entire exchange took a total of 90 minutes.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the two countries involved cast the spy swap in positive terms. Russia said that the ten persons in United States custody facing charges there had been freed "for humanitarian considerations." Russia also lauded the move as being illustrative of "the general improvement of Russia-United States relations." Meanwhile, the United States was dismissing claims that only four agents were released in exchange for the ten Russians. United States authorities made clear that then four in question were "high value" and garnered far more usable information in comparison to the ten Russians. Moreover, the White House in the United States was playing up the fact that knowledge of the spy ring and plans for the spy swap had been in the works for several months before the Russians were ever arrested.

In the third week of July 2010, the United States (U.S.) announced that it was imposing new sanctions against North Korea. The announcement by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton came in the aftermath of her visit to the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) that separates North Korea from South Korea. Secretary of State Clinton explained that the sanctions would target North Korea's sale and purchase of arms, and were aimed at preventing nuclear proliferation and discouraging provocative actions by North Korea.

South Korea accused North Korea of provocative action over the sinking of its Cheonan warship months earlier, which an international investigation ultimately blamed on North Korea despite Pyongyang's denial of culpability. As one the most sanctioned countries in the world, these new sanctions were likely intended to intensify the pressure on North Korea in response to the Cheonan incident. In fact, as indicated by Secretary of State Clinton, they were aimed at compelling Pyongyang to take responsibility for the sinking of the warship that left 47 dead. For its part, North Korea warned that fresh sanctions would be interpreted as an act of war.

Tensions on the peninsula were unlikely to decrease since the U.S. and South Korea conducted joint naval exercises, which North Korea characterized as "dangerous sabre-rattling." But defense officials of United States and South Korea said that the military drills were intended to deliver a clear message to North Korea that its "aggressive" behavior should cease. Indeed, the North Korean official news agency reported the following statement from the government in Pyongyang: "The army and people of the DPRK will legitimately counter with their powerful nuclear deterrence the largest-ever nuclear war exercises to be staged by the U.S. and the South Korean puppet forces."

In November 2010, a nuclear scientist from Stanford University in the United States, Dr. Siegfried Hecker, said that during a visit to North Korea, he was shown a new nuclear facility. There -- at the new nuclear facility at the Yongbyon nuclear complex to the north of the capital of Pyongyang -- he viewed "more than 1,000 centrifuges" for enriching uranium -- elements needed for the production of nuclear weapons.

Since the nuclear facility did not exist when international nuclear weapons inspectors were expelled from North Korea in 2009, it was clear that it had been constructed quickly. But Dr. Hecker noted that the facility boasted a high level of sophistication, and as reported in the New York Times, it included an "ultra-modern control room." According to Dr. Hecker, the facility appeared oriented for the use of civilian nuclear power. Noting that there was no sign of plutonium production, which is needed for weapons proliferation, Dr. Hecker nonetheless cautioned in an interview with the Associated Press that the new facility could be "readily converted to produce highly enriched uranium bomb fuel."

Dr. Hecker additionally shored up previous reports that North Korea has been constructing a light-water nuclear reactor. His observations on the ground in North Korea appeared to coincide with satellite imagery depicting the construction of the reactor at Yongbyon. Typically, light-water reactors are associated with civilian energy usage, however, uranium enrichment is part of the process, it was not inconceivable that further enrichment could potentially ensue at weapons-grade levels.

To date, North Korea is believed to have sufficient weaponized plutonium for about six atomic bombs, although there has been little evidence to suggest that the country has actively pursued a weapons program. That being said, Western powers have been advocating a resumption of six-party talks dealing with North Korea's nuclear program. Those talks stalled as relations between North Korea devolved due to the sinking of a South Korean warship earlier in the year.

In November 2010, a senior United States Department of State envoy, Stephen Bosworth, was in Asia on a trip aimed at reviving the multilateral negotiations. However, those efforts were placed on hold due to the Nov. 2010 shelling of Yeonpyeong Island (in South Korea's jurisdiction) by North Korea. By the close of the month, tensions on the Korean peninsula remained high, as South Korea and the United States carried out joint military exercises in the Yellow Sea, to the south of the disputed maritime border. North Korea said it viewed the previously -arranged military exercises as a provocation and warned of retaliation if there was any violation of its territorial waters. A statement from Pyongyang broadcast by the state-controlled KCNA news agency read as follows: "We will deliver a brutal military blow on any provocation which violates our territorial waters." But in December 2010, South Korea was taking a highly assertive position, warning that North Korea would face a harsh response, including air strikes, if it dared to act aggressively in the future.

With fears of renewed war on the Korean peninsula at hand, the landscape became even more complicated when in mid-December 2010, South Korea said that it suspected North Korea of secretly enriching uranium at locations beyond its main nuclear site at Yongbyon. South Korean Foreign Minister Kim Sung-hwan would not confirm a media report that North Korea was home to three more plants where uranium enrichment could take place, however, he admitted to having suspicions along these lines. During a news conference, he said, "It is a report based on what is still intelligence and let me just say that we have been following this issue for some time." Should this claim be proved correct, North Korea could conceivably possess material -- potentially for building more nuclear bombs. Moreover, such actions would fly in the face of renewed nuclear disarmament talks, which were already on a downward slide as a result of North Korea's latest aggressive actions (as discussed above).

Special Report: U.S. Policy on Afghanistan

This Special Report commences with a briefing on the new command structure for Afghanistan, following the exit of General Stanley McChrystal and the naming of his replacement, General David Petraeus. It includes an inquiry into counterinsurgency strategy for fighting the Taliban and al-Qaida, and its use of "human terrain teams." The report additionally considers accusations of the Pakistani intelligence agency's complicity with the Afghan Taliban. Also considered in this report are the politically-driven financial constraints at home in the United States related to the funding of the war effort. These issues collectively have influenced emerging questions about the United States' policy in Afghanistan and the timeline for continued engagement there.

New commander for Afghanistan: Petraeus in; McChrystal out --

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On June 23, 2010, United States President Barack Obama announced that General Stanley McChrystal, the commander of United States forces in Afghanistan, was relieved of his duties. The president also announced the nomination of General David Petraeus, commander of United States Central Command, to take over command of the war in Afghanistan against the resurgent Taliban and al-Qaida. President Obama explained that he had decided to replace Gen McChrystal "with considerable regret." The president explained that McChrystal failed to "meet the standard that should be set by a commanding general." President Obama additionally called on the Senate to quickly confirm Petraeus to his new position in Afghanistan.

The announcement came following a meeting between the president and his Afghanistan war advisers, and after McChrystal was summoned from Afghanistan to Washington D.C. McChrystal first met with Defense Secretary Robert Gates and then with President Obama at the White House. There was some suggestion that McChrystal would participate in the monthly strategy meetings of President Obama's Afghan war advisers, however, media reports indicated that he left the White House right after the meeting with the president. McChrystal apologized for controversial statements in a recent Rolling Stone article saying, "It was a mistake reflecting poor judgment and should never have happened." McChrystal also asserted in an official statement that he held a "desire to see the mission succeed."

President Obama said that the difficult decision to relieve McChrystal of his command duties was driven by the controversial remarks published in a Rolling Stone article written by journalist Michael Hastings. The remarks were attributed to McChrystal and his aides. In the article titled "Runaway General," McChrystal and his aides were reported as having made disparaging comments about the civilian control of the United States military and the war effort. Of note were mocking statements made about senior members of the Obama administration, including Vice President Joe Biden and National Security Adviser Jim Jones. McChrystal also said he felt betrayed by U.S. ambassador to Kabul Karl Eikenberry. McChrystal additionally complained about having to reply to electronic communication from United States special representative for the Afghan-Pak region, Richard Holbrooke. Furthermore, the article referenced pejorative statements made by McChrystal and his aides about foreign allies fighting the war in Afghanistan alongside the United States forces under NATO command. Notably, McChrystal decried a dinner meeting with the French allies.

President Obama cast aside the notion that he was making the decision to dismiss McChrystal for personal reasons saying, "I don't make this decision based on any difference in policy with General McChrystal... nor do I make this decision out of any sense of personal insult." Instead, the president and commander-in-chief said McChrystal's conduct did not meet the standards of a commanding general. President Obama also foreclosed criticism from potential opponents of this decision by saying, "War is bigger than any one man or woman, whether a private, a general, or a president."

The politics of the situation demanded that President Obama dismiss McChrystal, or, risk being viewed as a weak commander in chief. While some McChrystal stalwarts argued that he has simply indulged in inappropriate discourse and should be allowed to finish the mission, other analysts noted that McChrystal was barely short of violating the United States Military Code of Justice Article 88, which calls for consequences for military personnel on duty maligning the president and vice president. As such, President Obama warned that some of the sentiments expressed by McChrystal and his aides via the Rolling Stone article "undermines the civilian control of the military that's at the core of our democratic system." In this way, President Obama reminded the country of the requirement that the military ranks remain neutral in a democracy.

A week after the announcement about the dismissal of McChrystal, Petraeus was unanimously confirmed as the new commander of the Afghanistan war with a vote of 99-0. Petraeus, as expected, garnered praise from both Republicans and Democrats, irrespective of their core disagreements on the policy toward Afghanistan.

During confirmation hearings, Petraeus painted a grim picture of the war effort in Afghanistan, noting that an "industrial-strength insurgency" by the Taliban and al-Qaida elements were in the offing. As well, Petraeus warned that the fighting and violence would "get more intense in the next few months." That being said, he indicated that it was part of the counterinsurgency process. He said, "My sense is that the tough fighting will continue; indeed, it

may get more intense in the next few months. As we take away the enemy's safe havens and reduce the enemy's freedom of action, the insurgents will fight back."

Additionally, Petraeus did not foreclose the possibility of recommending that President Barack Obama extend United States' troops engagement in Afghanistan beyond the August 2011 timeline for redeployment .

President Obama's decision to name Petraeus as Chrystal's replacement was hailed positively by politicians on both sides of the proverbial aisle in the United States, as well as the Karzai government in Afghanistan, which was anxious about effects on the war effort. The selection of Petraeus -- a celebrated military figure, thanks to his stewardship of the "surge" in Iraq, as well as his notoriety as one of the key authors of United States modern counterinsurgency strategy in war zones -- clearly banished such anxieties. The president's assertion that there was "a change in personnel but not a change in policy" further augmented the widespread support for his decision. Indeed, the White House sought to show that the controversy ensconced within the Rolling Stone article, titled "Runaway General," did not overtly extend to dissonance over the policy itself. Certainly, McChrystal expressed support for President Obama's strategy in Afghanistan saying, "I strongly support the president's strategy in Afghanistan and am deeply committed to our coalition forces, our partner nations, and the Afghan people." As well, NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen affirmed that the Western military alliance's Afghan war strategy remained unchanged. Nevertheless, with the refocused attention on the war in Afghanistan came the refocused attention on the policy itself.

Costs and complications of counterinsurgency strategy and human terrain units --

It should be noted that the Afghan war strategy -- to fight resurgent Taliban and al-Qaida, improve security in Afghanistan, and develop governing stability in that country as an alternative to a culture of warfare -- is founded on the principles of counterinsurgency (COIN). The long-term objectives of COIN entail not only the clearing the field of insurgents by the military, but also political imperative of replacing the insurgent power base with more stable governance. Effective counterinsurgency strategies, therefore, require close collaboration of the military, political, economic and diplomatic spheres in the conflict zone. Clearly, puerile and openly-disdainful remarks about senior members of the Obama administration -- as uttered by McChrystal and his aides -- would not help the climate of effective cooperation, where support from the varying spheres would be critical to success of the mission.

Perhaps not surprisingly, President Obama emphasized the need for unity in the effort to secure and stabilize Afghanistan saying, "I won't tolerate division." Also not surprisingly, strong support for the selection of Petraeus as McChrystal's successor in Afghanistan, as discussed above, was regarded as a boon for the counterinsurgency strategy. But also as indicated above, the renewed focus on the war in Afghanistan brought with it fresh scrutiny of the policy itself.

One particularly key reason for a sense of skepticism about the war strategy and its associated timeline were matters of financial costs of the war, and the timeline attached to the Afghanistan strategy. That is to say, when President Obama first outlined his plan to deploy an additional 30,000 troops to Afghanistan, he also noted that the United States would begin a redeployment of those troops by 2011. With debt worries prevalent in the United States and other NATO countries (as discussed below), questions arose as to whether or not the continued war effort in Afghanistan was a financially feasible endeavor. That is to say, the war and counterinsurgency mission requires a substantial outlay of resources that few governments (including the United States) could realistically commit to for the long term.

Complicating matters further has been the rising death toll of NATO forces in a war that has continued for close to a decade. That increased death toll has contributed to decreasing support for the Afghanistan war effort.

Moreover, analysts have pointed to the fact that COIN involves the idea of clearing the landscape of insurgents, followed by the establishment of a government as an alternative to the war culture. But clearance in one area often results in the relocation of the terrorists elsewhere and a perpetual pursuit of the strategic enemy. Meanwhile, the establishment of more stable governance, which has seen some success in the more politically mature Iraq, cannot easily be transposed to the largely tribal cultural orientation of Afghanistan, which does not have a strong legacy of governmental authority.

With an eye on understanding that tribal cultural orientation of Afghanistan, the United States military has employed anthropologists in the war zone to garner a more granular understanding of the complicated social and cultural dynamics of Afghanistan. Anthropologists' command of ethnographic fieldwork may be uniquely positioned to map the complex social structure of the country, ultimately helping the military to draw Afghans away from the Taliban.

Known as the army-funded "Human Terrain System," as discussed in an article published in Time Magazine by Jason Motlagh, the idea has been the source of debate with no consensus on its success. Academia has frowned on anthropologists being actively involved in the war theater. As noted in a report by the American Anthropological Association, because human terrain teams are ultimately oriented toward the objectives of the military mission, there is an ethical question of whether such work is "a legitimate professional exercise of anthropology." Nevertheless, General Petraeus has been reported to be a strong supporter of the human terrain teams, suggesting that they would for the immediate future continue to be part of the broader counterinsurgency strategy.

That being said, most anthropologists would agree that more than a year of intensive fieldwork is needed before conclusions can be made; thus, the success of human terrain units in Afghanistan would require a longer timeline than currently expected for United States forces to remain "in country."

Financial Cost of the War in Afghanistan --

In late June 2010, legislators in the United States voted to cut almost \$4 billion in aid to the government of Afghanistan. The move was in response to allegations of corruption by the Afghan government, and in the aftermath of a report by the Wall Street Journal that significant funds had been flown out of the airport at Kabul. The report alleged that Afghan officials and their allies were diverting funds earmarked for aid and logistics to financial safe havens outside the country.

Explaining the Congress' decision to make these cuts, Congresswoman Nita Lowey, the chair of the subcommittee responsible for aid appropriations, said, "I do not intend to appropriate one more dime until I have confidence that US taxpayer money is not being abused to line the pockets of corrupt Afghan government officials, drug lords and terrorists." Lowey additionally called for an audit of the billions of dollars already expended in Afghanistan.

While the funding cuts would not directly affect military operations of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, it could very well affect infrastructure projects, which are part of the nation building efforts in Afghanistan. To this end, Congressman Mark Kirk, made note of Kandahar's electrical system; he said that obstacles to its construction, and other such infrastructure projects, could negatively affect the war, which included the effort to win the hearts and minds of the Afghan people.

The issue has evoked questions about the financial costs of the war at large at a time when debt worries plague not only in the United States, but also allied countries with troops operating in Afghanistan, as discussed in the section above.

As NATO countries, including the United States, have been forced to consider austerity measures at home, the financial costs of the war in Afghanistan have taken on added importance. In fact, that significance was apparent on July 1, 2010, when President Barack Obama requested \$33 billion in military funding to support the surge of 30,000 additional troops in Afghanistan.

Pakistan's complicity with Afghan Taliban raises questions about U.S. strategy in region --

Since June 2010, Afghanistan's geopolitical relationship with Pakistan has taken center stage. At issue were revelations that the Pakistani intelligence service, known by the acronym ISI, has been funding, training, and providing sanctuary to the Afghan Taliban. For several years, there have been suspicions about such a clandestine relationship between the two entities, however, the closeness and extensive nature of their ties was something of a revelation. Indeed, in a report issued by the London School of Economics support for the Afghan Taliban was described as "official ISI policy."

As noted by the author of the report, Matt Waldman of Harvard University, "This goes far beyond just limited, or occasional support. This is very significant levels of support being provided by the ISI." Waldman also asserted, "We're also saying this is official policy of that agency, and we're saying that it is very extensive. It is both at an operational level, and at a strategic level, right at the senior leadership of the Taliban movement."

The report also included references to interviews with Taliban field commanders who said that ISI agents attended Taliban council meetings. Shoring up the veracity of this claim was the following citation from the report: "These accounts were corroborated by former Taliban ministers, a Western analyst, and a senior United Nations official based in Kabul, who said the Taliban largely depend on funding from the ISI and groups in Gulf countries." Corroborating evidence was also available from a source unrelated to the LSE report. In an interview with Reuters, the head of Afghan intelligence, Amrullah Saleh, who had just resigned from that position, said the ISI was "part of the landscape of destruction" in Afghanistan and accused Pakistan of sheltering Taliban leaders in safe houses.

Some observers have noted that with the impending exit of foreign troops from Afghanistan expected in 2011, Pakistan's actions may be related to its desire to more deeply influence Afghanistan. However, ISI activities related to Islamic militant extremists are not recent developments in response to the current landscape. Indeed, the ISI has been accused of funding and training Islamic militant extremists in Afghanistan from as far back as the 1979 Soviet invasion. That being said, since the 2001 terror attacks in the United States, Pakistan has accepted billions of dollars in aid funding from the United States, supposedly for its support in the fight against terror enclaves like al-Qaida and its Taliban allies. Clearly, a continued relationship between the Pakistani ISI and the Afghan Taliban would run counter to its expressed objectives of helping the United States quell the threat of terrorism emanating from such entities in the Afghan-Pak region. As stated in the LSE report, "Pakistan appears to be playing a double-game of astonishing magnitude."

Update on the war in Afghanistan --

In July 2010, the Iceland-based website, known as Wikileaks, released six years worth of classified United States documents, numbering around 90,000, dealing with the war in Afghanistan. Several news organizations were given access to the documents prior to actual publication, although United States authorities have argued that the dissemination of classified information was a threat to national security, an act of gross irresponsibility, and quite possibly, imbued with illegality. From Afghanistan, President Hamid Karzai charged that the release of Wikileaks documents have endangered the lives of Afghan citizens who worked with NATO-led international forces. The Afghan leader said that the disclosure of the names of Afghans who cooperated with the NATO-led forces was "shocking" and "irresponsible." For its part, Wikileaks has defended the release of the documents, noting that it presented an unvarnished view of the war in Afghanistan since 2004.

Regardless of these competing views, the contents of the controversial documents have spurred debate about the United States' role in the war in Afghanistan, as well as the conduct of the war itself. To these ends, two Wikileaks revelations could raise questions about the Obama administration's broader "Afghan-Pak" strategy, which considers not only "ground zero" of the war effort -- Afghanistan -- but also Pakistan next door. While the strategy appropriately focuses on the region instead of one country, taking into consideration shared extremist Islamic influences, shared Pashtun culture, and a landscape on the borderland that is a stronghold for Taliban and al-Qaida, two Wikileaks revelations strong doubts on the effectiveness of the strategy.

Firstly, according to the document review by the New York Times, even as Pakistan receives funds from the United States to help combat Islamic extremists militants and the threat of terrorism, the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) was said to be helping the Taliban, even collaborating with them on terror attacks and assassination plots.

Secondly, the tactic of using drone attacks in the tribal border regions has been lauded by the Obama administration as a means of crushing the enemy and eliminating high value Taliban and al-Qaida targets. However, according the review by Der Spiegel, 38 Predator and Reaper drones crashed while on combat missions

in Afghanistan and Iraq, requiring "elaborate -- and dangerous -- salvage operations." On the ground, "in country," there are additional worries about the political costs of the civilian casualties caused by drone attacks.

The civilian costs provide a transition to discuss a third issue revealed by Wikileaks. According to the review by Marc Ambinder of The Atlantic, there were "at least 144 separate incidents" of civilian casualties that led to "cover-ups." Ambinder particularly took note of the unsuccessful attempt to kill Abu Layth Ali Libi, which resulted in the deaths of several civilians and that resulted in a "cover-up" by Afghan officials.

Finally, another key -- and bizarre -- revelation was that Osama Bin Laden -- the lynch pin of the extremist Islamic terror network, al-Qaida, has taken up the practice of gifting insurgents with wives. According to the associated report by The Guardian, an insurgent known to be an expert in radio-controlled improvised explosive devices (IEDs) was presented with an Arab wife by Bin Laden as an expression of thanks for his efforts in plotting terror attacks.

Conclusion --

Taken together, these issues both inform and fuel emerging questions about a timeline for continued engagement in Afghanistan. Indeed, these factors -- from financial costs to the strategic considerations -- have contributed to rising emphasis on a "date certain" exit from Afghanistan in 2011. Of course, on the other side of the equation, counterinsurgency advocates have argued that the objectives of the mission could require an extended timeline beyond 2011. With no consensus on the matter, the McChrystal fracas has revealed deeper questions about the strategy and mission in Afghanistan. Despite the aforementioned assertions from the Obama administration and military ranks that there would be no change in policy on Afghanistan, there were now emerging questions about the precise nature of that policy itself, which have only been intensified with the Wikileaks revelations. Indeed, can counterinsurgency succeed in Afghanistan? if so, what are the benchmarks for success? Can the United States and its allies afford to fund the mission, given the demands on the domestic front? And is Pakistan -- an apparent ally -- actually undermining the effort to succeed in Afghanistan?

Note that in late 2010, NATO announced its plans to exit Afghanistan and transfer control over the anti-Taliban struggle to Afghan forces by the close of 2014. Afghan President Karzai formalized the agreement by signing a long-term security partnership with NATO. At the heart of the matter was NATO's contention that the Taliban not be allowed to simply wait out the presence of foreign forces. As stated by NATO's Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the security bloc would remain committed to security and stability of Afghanistan. He said, "One thing must be very clear - NATO is in this for the long term." The NATO head then continued, "If the enemies of Afghanistan have the idea that they can wait it out until we leave, they have the wrong idea. We will stay as long as it takes to finish our job." For his part, Afghan President Karzai expressed gratitude for NATO's contributions to his country's interest but stated, "I also informed them of the concerns of the Afghan people with regard to civilian casualties, with regard to detentions, with regard to, at times, NATO's posture."

It should be noted that this decision by NATO did not necessarily coincide with an official decision by the United States on the duration of combat operations by its forces in Afghanistan.

On that latter consideration, there was some indication of the direction of the United States in December 2010 when a much-anticipated report dealing with United States President Barack Obama's strategy for the war in Afghanistan surfaced in the public purview. That report concluded that United States forces were on track to begin their withdrawal from Afghanistan in July 2011, as scheduled in the United States' president's war plan. This conclusion was reached despite the fact there were mixed reports of success in the field. On that matter, the summary of the report said that the United States forces continued to pursue and eliminate al-Qaida leadership figures, was successful in reducing the terror enclave's ability to carry out attacks from the Afghan-Pak region, and had halted the progress of the resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the summary noted that those gains were tenuous and could well be reversed in the future.

Special Report: U.S. ends combat operations in Iraq after seven and a half years

In the early hours of Aug. 19, 2010 (Iraq time) the last major combat brigade of United States forces left Iraq and crossed the border into Kuwait. They were protected from above by Apache helicopters and F-16 fighters, and on the ground by both American military and the very Iraqi armed forces that they helped to train. The exit of the United States forces ensued in a phased basis over the course of several days. The final convoy of the United States Army's 4th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, was carrying 14,000 United States combat forces in Iraq, according to Richard Engel of NBC/MSNBC News, who was embedded with the brigade. A small number of United States combat troops were yet to depart Iraq, and approximately 50,000 troops would remain in Iraq until the end of 2011 in a support role to train Iraqi forces. Indeed, by Aug. 24, 2010, less than 50,000 United States troops were reported to be "in country" -- the very lowest level since the start of the war in 2003.

While violence continued in Iraq -- even in the days after the last American combat brigade left Iraq -- it was apparent that the Obama administration in the United States would not be deterred from the schedule for withdrawal, these fragile and chaotic conditions on the ground in Iraq notwithstanding. This decision has been a source of consternation among some quarters. In fact, a top military official in Iraq has questioned the withdrawal of United States forces from Iraq, warning that local security forces were not able to handle the security challenges on their own for at least a decade. Echoing a similar tone, military officials from the United States said in an interview with the Los Angeles Times that it was highly unlikely that Iraqi security forces were capable of maintaining Iraq's fragile stability after the exit of United States troops from Iraq in 2010. Nevertheless, the citizenry in the United States was war-weary and concerned over the costs of war at a time of economic hardship, while President Barack Obama was intent on making good on his promises made while as a candidate and later, as president, to end the war.

The invasion of Iraq -- the defining policy decision of former President W. Bush in 2003 -- resulted in the ousting of former Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein, from office. The invasion of Iraq was criticized as a violation of international law by many, and condemned as ill-conceived foreign policy by others who argued that Iraq had nothing to do with the terror attacks of 2001, and that Iraq was not home to weapons of mass destruction -- the two expressed reasons for going to war in Iraq, according to the Bush administration. Analysts further warned that the unintended deleterious consequence of the war and the ousting of Saddam Hussein would be ethno-sectarian strife and a strengthened Iran. Of course, on the other side of the equation, the Bush administration insisted on the necessity of the war in the interests of national security. These competing viewpoints notwithstanding, the war in Iraq ultimately left more than 4,400 American soldiers and tens of thousands of Iraqis dead.

The withdrawal of the last major combat brigade was regarded with great symbolism as an end to the combat mission of the war in Iraq that has gone on for seven and a half years. It also made clear that President Obama was fulfilling his central campaign promise to end the war in Iraq -- a vow that was reiterated in 2009 when President Obama set the deadline for the end of the combat mission in Iraq as Aug. 31, 2010. To this end, President Obama was fulfilling this promise even though Iraq was yet to form a new government several months after its parliamentary elections. It should be noted that the withdrawal of United States forces from Iraq was set forth in the Status of Forces agreement signed two years ago. It should also be noted that the Obama administration has emphasized the fact that there will be no permanent military bases in Iraq -- even after the withdrawal of all remaining troops from Iraq in 2011. As well, as stated in the National Defense Authorization Act for 2010 passed by Congress and signed by President Obama on Oct. 28, 2009: "No funds appropriated pursuant to an authorization of appropriations in this Act may be obligated or expended ... to establish any military installation or base for the purpose of providing for the permanent stationing of United States Armed Forces in Iraq." That being said, Iraq is home to one of the United States' most significant embassies.

President Obama addressed the nation on August 31, 2010 regarding the end of the active phase of United States operations in Iraq. That was the official deadline set by President Obama for the exit of combat forces from Iraq and the end to the war.

In this address to the nation from the Oval Office, President Obama asserted: "Operation Iraqi Freedom is over, and the Iraqi people now have lead responsibility for the security of their country." President Obama paid tribute to the military who carried out their mission, saying that he was "awed" by the sacrifices made by the men and women in

uniform in service of the United States. President Obama additionally noted that the United States itself paid a high price for the Iraq War saying, "The United States has paid a huge price to put the future of Iraq in the hands of its people." The president noted that he disagreed with his predecessor, former President George W. Bush, on the very premise of the war, but urged the nation to "turn the page" on that chapter of recent history. To these ends, he said: "We have sent our young men and women to make enormous sacrifices in Iraq, and spent vast resources abroad at a time of tight budgets at home... Through this remarkable chapter in the history of the US and Iraq, we have met our responsibility. Now, it is time to turn the page."

For his part, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki noted that his country was "independent" and said that Iraqi security forces would now confront all the security threats facing the nation. Maliki said in his own address to the nation, "Iraq today is sovereign and independent. Our security forces will take the lead in ensuring security and safeguarding the country and removing all threats that the country has to weather, internally or externally." He also sought to reassure Iraqis that the security forces were "capable and qualified to shoulder the responsibility" of keeping Iraq safe and secure.

Special Report: Restarting the Middle East Peace Process --

In the third week of August 2010, Israeli and Palestinian officials were set to resume direct negotiations for the first time in 20 months and a decade after the last serious final status talks. United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas had been invited to Washington on Sept. 2, 2010, for the commencement of the talks. Both parties agreed to a one-year timeline on the direct negotiations. Speaking from the State Department, Secretary of State Clinton said that the two leaders had been invited by President Barack Obama to come to the United States to "re-launch direct negotiations to resolve all final status issues, which we believe can be completed within one year."

Certain core issues -- known as "final status issues" -- have continuously caused consternation by both sides, but would be taken up during the forthcoming meetings. These core issues included the status of Jerusalem, the construction of Jewish settlements in Palestinian territories, the borders of a future Palestinian state, as well as the right of return. Analysts have warned that the prospects of an actual deal arising from the talks were unlikely, given the intensity of these contentious differences. Nonetheless, the movement back to the negotiating table was being viewed as productive.

With an eye on keeping the process moving in a productive direction, Secretary of State Clinton said, "It is important that actions by all sides help to advance our effort, not hinder it." She continued, "There have been difficulties in the past, there will be difficulties ahead. Without a doubt, we will hit more obstacles. But I ask the parties to persevere, to keep moving forward even through difficult times and to continue working to achieve a just and lasting peace in the region."

Also invited to join the talks were the leaders Egypt and Jordan -- two Arab countries with relatively positive ties to Israel. To this end, Secretary of State Clinton said, "President Obama has invited President Mubarak of Egypt and King Abdullah of Jordan to attend, in view of their critical role in this effort. Their continued leadership and commitment to peace will be essential to our success." Also invited to join the meetings was former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, the special representative of the Middle East Peace Quartet, composed of the United States, the European Union, Russia and the United Nations." Excluded from the talks was the Islamic extremist group, Hamas, which controls the Gaza Strip.

Meanwhile, the United States envoy to the Middle East, George Mitchell, noted that if the two sides were unable to make progress, then the United States would be prepared to submit bridging proposals. Before such an end could transpire, there was a sense of cautious hope tinged with reality. Indeed, Prime Minister Netanyahu acknowledged, "reaching an agreement is a difficult challenge but is possible." Netanyahu's office issued a statement that read: "We are coming to the talks with a genuine desire to reach a peace agreement between the two peoples that will protect Israel's national security interests." Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said in an interview with the BBC: "I hope that Mr. Netanyahu will be our partner in peace... and we can do it."

Hamass attempts to derail the peace process --

Just ahead of the much anticipated peace talks, four Israelis were shot to death in the West Bank. Two Israeli men and two Israeli women died when their car came under gunfire as it traversed a road between the Palestinian settlement of Bani Naim and the Jewish settlement of Kyriat Arba, located near to the city of Hebron. The militant extremist Palestinian organization, Hamas, which has not been a player in peace negotiations, claimed responsibility for that attack. Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak characterized the killings as an act of sabotage, aimed at derailing the peace process, and warned of retribution for those responsible. Then, just as the peace talks were due to begin, another act of violence ensued when two Israelis were shot and wounded at the Rimonim Junction in the West Bank, close to the Jewish settlement of Kochav Hashahar. Again, Hamas claimed responsibility for this attack.

Nevertheless, even in the face of this tragic violence in the West Bank, peace talks commenced in the United States amongst the stakeholders. United States President Barack Obama, the host and main peace broker, encouraged the Israeli and Palestinians leaders to remain on the course of engagement and not allow the opportunity to build a lasting peace "slip away." Promising that the United States would not waver in its commitment to broker peace, President Obama said, "This moment of opportunity may not soon come again." The United States leader also condemned the aforementioned bloodshed in the west Bank at the hands of Hamas.

Commencement of Peace Negotiations --

On September 1, 2010 -- ahead of the commencement of actual talks -- President Obama convened a meeting between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, King Abdullah II of Jordan, and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. As noted above, that meeting was also included former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, the special representative of the Middle East Peace Quartet.

President Obama said that the impending negotiations were "intended to resolve all final status issues." The United States president explained that the talks, which were scheduled to last for a year, were aimed at ultimately forging a permanent settlement to the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians in the form of two democratic states -- one Israeli and one Palestinian -- living side by side in peace. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu struck a similar tone saying, "Our goal is to forge a secure and durable peace between Israelis and Palestinians." He continued, "We do not seek a brief interlude between two wars. We do not seek a temporary respite between outbursts of terror. We seek a peace that will end the conflict between us once and for all." For his part, Palestinian President Abbas said, "We will spare no effort and we will work diligently and tirelessly to ensure these negotiations achieve their cause." He also condemned the attacks on Israelis and called for an end to the bloodshed.

On September 2, 2010, the actual negotiations began between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, with United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton acting as the main arbiter. Opening the talks, Secretary of State Clinton said, "Mr. Prime Minister, Mr. President, you have the opportunity to end this conflict and the decades of enmity between your peoples once and for all." Secretary of State Clinton asserted that her country had "pledged its full support to these talks," and said, "We will be an active and sustained partner." However, she cautioned that Washington would not impose a solution on the Middle East. Secretary of State Clinton issued the following warning: "The core issues at the center of these negotiations - territory, security, Jerusalem, refugees, settlements and others - will get no easier if we wait, nor will they resolve themselves."

Both Netanyahu and Abbas seemed to be fully cognizant of the challenge of the task at hand. Prime Minister Netanyahu said, "This will not be easy. True peace, a lasting peace, will be achieved only with mutual and painful concessions from both sides." President Abbas said: "We do know how hard are the hurdles and obstacles we face during these negotiations -- negotiations that within a year should result in an agreement that will bring peace."

Meanwhile, the two leaders of Israel and the Palestinian territories appeared to have respectively enjoyed cordial relations during the talks, despite Abbas' insistence that Israel cease its settlement activity in Palestinian territories. At issue has been the expiration of a partial freeze on building homes for Jewish settlers. The matter has been the cause of much consternation with the Israeli saying that they might not renew the freeze, and Palestinians

threatening to walk away from the negotiating table if such the settlement activity resumed. But also of equal importance was Israel's demands that (1) any peace deal consider the particular and special security needs of Israel, and (2) that Palestinians recognize the unique identity of Israel as a Jewish state.

Nevertheless, by the close of the first round of talks, the United States deemed the exercise to be constructive. United States envoy to the Middle East, George Mitchell, characterized private talks between the two leaders -- Netanyahu and Abbas -- as "cordial" and observed that the meeting were conducted in a "constructive and positive mood." Moreover, Mitchell announced that both Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abbas agreed not simply to continue to work toward peace in the abstract, but to meet again in just two weeks in the Middle East. Mitchell said that the next talks would take place in mid-September 2010, with further negotiations to take place on a phased continuing basis every two weeks after that. One of the immediate goals was to arrive at a framework agreement on the contentious "final status" issues, effectively paving the way for a comprehensive peace treaty.

At that meeting in mid-September 2010 in Sharm-el-Sheik in Egypt, which was attended by Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, Palestinian Authority President Abbas, United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and United States envoy George Mitchell, all the relevant parties said that they were committed to the negotiations. Special Envoy Mitchell said that the Israeli and Palestinian leaders held "serious discussions on core issues." He also said that the objective of "two states for two peoples" remained at the heart of the matter, with efforts being expended to achieve a framework for that goal. Secretary of State Clinton noted this end result could not be achieved without ongoing dialogue. "It is a question of how can we work toward making these direct negotiations break through the clear and difficult obstacles that stand in the way toward achieving a comprehensive peace," she asserted.

The encouraging words aside, there appeared to be little resolution on the outstanding issue of Jewish settlements. Despite Palestinian threats to exit the negotiations in settlement activity resumed, and in the face of Secretary of State Clinton's call for Israel to extend its freeze on West Bank construction, Israel was not promising to extend its moratorium on settlement activity.

Still, Prime Minister Netanyahu appeared to be making some concessions by suggesting that while the ban on all construction would not be renewed at the end of September 2010, the plan for the construction of thousands of houses in the West Bank might not go forward. Chief Palestinian negotiator, Saeb Erakat, however, appeared unimpressed in an interview with the Associated Press. He said that "half solutions" by Israel were unacceptable.

Secretary of State Clinton suggested that the construction freeze -- a highly politicized issue in Israel -- could be made more palatable with assistance from the Palestinians. Moreover, she suggested that there were alternate ways of crossing "the hurdle posed by the expiration of the original moratorium. " In an interview with Agence France Presse, Secretary of State Clinton said: "Remember the goal is to work toward agreement on core issues like borders and territory that would, if agreed upon, eliminate the debate about settlements." Presumably, the United States' top diplomat was suggesting that rather than taking on the settlement issue outright as part of the peace process, the matter could be circumvented by focusing on finding agreement on long-term issues of borders and territory. Whether or not that proposal was feasible was yet to be determined.

Charting the Path for Peace --

The decision by the United States to commence an intensive diplomatic push for Middle East peace may be viewed as ambitious -- especially given the fact that it is a conservative, hardline Israeli government negotiating with the leader of the Palestinian Authority, while Hamas -- which controls Gaza -- has been left out of the equation. In fact, Palestinian President Abbas would be negotiating on behalf of all Palestinians despite the fact that he has held no effective power over Gaza for some time. Making matters more complicated, a conflict that had once been understood predominantly in territorial terms has increasingly taken on a more religious orientation in the current global arena. Clearly, resolving a conflict with religious undercurrents promised to be an even more challenging endeavor.

Indeed, even under theoretically more favorable circumstances, peace has eluded the region. Under the stewardship of former United States President Bill Clinton and then-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, a most promising peace deal between the Israelis and Palestinians collapsed at the hands of the Palestinian leader of the time, Yasser Arafat, despite much compromise by former Prime Minister Ehud Barack in 2000. In fact, the collapse of that deal ushered in a bloody period of violence known as the Intifada.

Now, in 2010, President Obama was trying to revitalize the peace process and find success in an arena that has bedeviled American presidents for generations. But President Obama seemed to be something of a realist amidst the ideals of Middle East peace. Along with the imposition of a deadline on peace talks, President Obama emphasized that success would ultimately be determined by the decision makers of Israel and the Palestinian Territories. He noted that his country -- the United States -- could not want peace more than Israelis and Palestinians. President Obama also warned that the peace process would be subject to the negative machinations of "extremists and rejectionists who, rather than seeking peace, are going to be seeking destruction." Whether the peace process would move in a generative -- rather than destructive -- direction was yet to be determined.

Special Report: Yemen Resurfaces as Emerging Base of Terrorism

In late October 2010, bombs were found hidden in cargo planes originating in Yemen and bound for Jewish synagogues in the city of Chicago in the United States. The devices containing pentaerythritol tetranitrate (PETN) and plastic explosives mixed with lead azide (used to detonate explosives) were inserted into printer cartridges and mailed via cargo shipment from Yemen.

In one case, a printer was found on a cargo plane in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates equipped with a circuit board linked to a mobile phone card. In another case, a explosive device was intercepted at the East Midlands Airport in the United Kingdom only after an initial search yielded no results. Authorities in the United Kingdom were then told that the explosives found in Dubai had been hidden in the printer, thus a more thorough secondary search, this time with positive results.

British Prime Minister David Cameron issued the disturbing news that the explosive device was designed to be detonated on the aircraft, although it was not known when it was intended to explode. In practical terms, this meant that it was unknown as to whether the bombs could be detonated remotely while airliners were in flight, or, when the packages were opened at their destinations in the United States. John Brennan, counter-terrorism adviser to United States President Barack Obama, warned that the bombs were "sophisticated" and "self-contained" devices, intended to be detonated by the terrorists according to their chosen schedules. Given the use of the particular explosives within the printer cartridges, it would have been difficult for any bomb-sniffing dogs or x-ray machines to discover them.

Both discoveries were made thanks to intelligence passed on from Saudi Arabian authorities as well as a British M16 agent working in Yemen. The Saudi-based intelligence was linked to a tip received from a repentant al-Qaida member, Jabr al-Faifi, once held at Guantanamo Bay. Blame was quickly placed on al-Qaida in Yemen, which has been known to attempt bomb attacks using PETN. Attention was also focused on a well-known al-Qaida explosives expert, Ibrahim Hassan al-Asiri, who was believed to be the bomb maker from Saudi Arabia now living in Yemen.

In that country, now regarded as an emerging base of radical jihadist Islamists such as al-Qaida, a female student was arrested in the Yemeni capital of Sanaa on suspicion of dispatching the explosives-laden packages. The woman's location was traced via the telephone number she furnished to the cargo company. Given the threat, local offices of the cargo firms, UPS and FedEx, shut down freight operations in Yemen, while several countries placed a halt on cargo transported from Yemen. Yemeni officials were additionally on the hunt for additional suspects believed to be involved in procuring forged documents and identification cards. Also under suspicion were two language institutions in Yemen believed to be linked with the orchestrator of the mail bomb plot.

Meanwhile, cargo airliners were not the only ones involved in what appeared to be thwarted terror attacks. News reports indicated that at least one of the packages containing a bomb traveled on passenger flights. To that end, one package was transported on a Qatar Airlines flight from Yemen to Qatar, and then transferred to another Qatar

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Airlines flight onto Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. This revelation raised questions about the safety of global travel, given the transportation of cargo in civilian airliners.

Under fire for yet another terrorist attempt emanating from his country, Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh said that his country would keep up its fight against al-Qaida "in co-operation with its partners." However, the Yemeni leader intimated that his country would balk at the notion of intervention by foreign powers saying, "But we do not want anyone to interfere in Yemeni affairs by hunting down al-Qaeda."

It was yet to be seen how foreign powers would respond to this call since in December 2009, a Nigerian national tried to detonate explosives on a flight destined for the American city of Detroit. That plot was thwarted by a vigilant passenger on the same flight but the plot was traced back to al-Qaida in Yemen.

For its part, the Obama administration in the United States was making it clear that it wanted to assist President Saleh in the fight against al-Qaida. Indeed, the United States government was sending inspectors to Yemen to investigate cargo security practices, given the ostensible assumption that further bombs could be transported in the same way as the two currently at issue. The United States was also reiterating its commitment to destroying the terror enclave, al-Qaida.

Russia and United States Sign New Arms Treaty

On Feb. 24, 2010, United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton urged her Russian counterpart, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, to move forward with efforts to finalize a new arms reduction treaty. During a briefing, State Department spokesman Philip Crowley said the United States' top diplomat "emphasized to the foreign minister that our negotiators are close to reaching an agreement and encouraged Russia to continue to move ahead, push hard so we can reach an agreement in the next couple of weeks." That timeline seemed to coincide with Russian expectations, since a Russian lawmaker, Konstantin Kosachyov, noted that discussions were underway on a new treaty to replace the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), which expired on Dec. 5, 2009.

In March 2010, Secretary of State Clinton was in Moscow for meetings with Foreign Minister Lavrov. From Moscow, Clinton and Lavrov noted that a new START would soon be finalized.

At a joint press conference with Lavrov, Clinton said, "The results of the latest negotiation rounds lead us to believe we'll be reaching a final agreement soon." At issue is a plan that would reduce the United States' stockpile of 2,000 strategic nuclear weapons, and Russia's stockpile of close to 3,000, be reduced to between 1,500 and 1,675 warheads respectively. There was, however, some dissonance on verification measures aimed at quantifying weapons and launch systems.

As progress was being made on a successor treaty to START, United States President Barack Obama called for a reduction in the number of nuclear weapons, as part of a changing national security strategy. To this end, he said: "The United States reaffirms our resolve to strengthen the non-proliferation regime to meet the challenges of the 21st century as we pursue our ultimate vision of a world without nuclear weapons." As President Obama marked the 40th anniversary of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, he intimated new post-Cold War policy, saying: "Our forthcoming Nuclear Posture Review will move beyond outdated Cold War thinking and reduce the number and role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy, even as we maintain a safe, secure and effective nuclear deterrent." President Obama also said he would work to seek ratification on the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, which was adopted by the United Nations in 1996, but which had yet to be enforced. These statements appeared to reify President Obama's vision of a nuclear-free world, which was laid out in a keynote speech in Prague in 2009. It also came ahead of a nuclear security summit, set to take place in Washington D.C. in April 2010.

Both President Obama and his Russian counterpart, President Dmitry Medvedev, were expected to sign the landmark accord, which provides for the reduction of long-range nuclear weapons on both sides, and sets the path for further disarmament in the future. The accord was illustrative of the new texture of bilateral relations, marked by an increased level of cooperation and trust between the United States and Russia in the last two years. "Measures

to Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms" was expected to be signed on April 8, 2010, in the Czech capital of Prague, symbolically marking President Barack Obama's call for a world without nuclear weapons in that very city a year earlier. The timing would also ensure that both the United States and Russia would be able to enter the forthcoming Summit on Nuclear Security with a joint claim of accomplishment. They would also have the moral high ground in their efforts to pressure Iran to abandon its nuclear ambitions.

Lauding the treaty as the most comprehensive weapons control accord in two decades, President Obama declared: "With this agreement, the United States and Russia - the two largest nuclear powers in the world - also send a clear signal that we intend to lead." He continued, "By upholding our own commitments under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, we strengthen our global efforts to stop the spread of these weapons, and to ensure that other nations meet their own responsibilities." Via his spokesperson, President Medvedev said the treaty "reflects the balance of interests of both nations." As well, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that the treaty marked a "new level of trust" between the two countries.

On April 8, 2010, President Obama and President Medvedev held private talks at Prague Castle ahead of the signing ceremony. Later, both leaders signed their names on the new document that would significantly reduce the arsenal of nuclear weapons held by their respective countries. The two leaders of the countries controlling 90 percent of the world's nuclear weapons made it clear that membership in the global nuclear club came with extraordinary responsibility, and a vision of non-proliferation. President Obama said, "This day demonstrates the determination of the United States and Russia... to pursue responsible global leadership. Together, we are keeping our commitments under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which must be the foundation of global non-proliferation." Meanwhile, President Medvedev said: "This is a win-win situation. No one stands to lose in this agreement. Both parties won ... the entire world community won." In effect, the fact that the two countries were able to find consensus on such a complex matter, and the two leaders were able to sign one of the most important treaties in decades, signaled the anticipated "re-setting" of United States-Russian relations sought by the Obama administration in the United States when it came to power.

The difficult process of forging and signing such a bilateral agreement would be followed by the equally challenging process of ratification in the United States Senate. With an eye on this process, President Obama met in the Oval Office with the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator John Kerry (D-Massachusetts) and the ranking republican, Senator Richard Lugar (R-Indiana) to discuss this imperative. To the end, Senator Kerry said, "A well-designed treaty will send an important message to the rest of the world that America is prepared to lead efforts with key stakeholders to reduce the threat of nuclear weapons." It should be noted that the new START would also have to be ratified by the Russian Duma. Nevertheless, ahead of a global security summit scheduled to take place in Washington, Russia and the United States would be able to claim the high ground on leadership and responsibility among nuclear-armed nation states.

In November 2010, President Obama was calling on the United States Senate to ratify the treaty. He characterized the need to do so as "a national security imperative" on Nov. 18, 2010, demanding that the upper chamber of Congress act affirmatively before departing at the close of the year. Bringing as much pressure to bear, President Obama drew upon support from former secretaries of states and secretaries of defense from both political parties in the United States -- Republican and Democratic -- to emphasize the urgency in ratifying the treaty. Speaking in the Roosevelt Room in the White House, the United States president said, "This is not a Democratic concept. This is not a Republican concept. This is a concept of American national security that has been promoted by Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and now my administration. We've taken the time to do this right." President Obama noted that his country would not "afford to gamble" with the matter. He emphasized that the United States could not risk alienating Russia, whose support would be needed in pressuring Iran, given that country's suspected program of nuclear proliferation. He continued, "This is not about politics. It's about national security. This is not a matter than can be delayed."

But delay was on the mind of Republican Senator Jon Kyl of Arizona who rejected the president's call for a review process during the Senate's lame duck session of the outgoing Senate. At least eight Republican votes would be needed by the outgoing Senate for ratification; in the newly-elected Senate, Democrats would have a tougher hill to

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climb as they would need the support of at least 14 Republicans. Recently re-elected Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, a Democrat of Nevada, expressed support for rapid action on the treaty, and said that he was "puzzled" by Kyl's desire to slow down action on a national security priority. Speaking to this issue, President Obama said: "Every month that goes by without a treaty means that we are not able to verify what's going on on the ground in Russia. And if we delay indefinitely, American leadership on nonproliferation and America's national security will be weakened." The president's stance had support from the other side of the aisle in the form of Senator Richard Lugar, Republican of Indiana, who said: "This is a situation of some national security peril."

In December 2010, ahead of the Senate vote on the treaty, the minority leader of the Senate, Republican Mitch McConnell, said he intended to vote against the deal, saying it would limit the United States missile defense options. This view, however, was in direct contrast to the bill at hand, which as President Obama noted, placed no restrictions on missile defense. Also joining the "no" vote chorus was Republican Senator John McCain of Arizona who has steadfastly voted against most of President Obama's agenda. The lack of support from the likes of McConnell and McCain notwithstanding, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid made clear that a vote would be scheduled for Dec. 21, 2010. He said, "It is time to move forward on a treaty that will help reverse nuclear proliferation and make it harder for terrorists to get their hands on a nuclear weapon." Reid continued that it would "come down to a simple choice: you either want to keep nuclear weapons out of the hands of terrorists, or you don't."

On Dec. 21, 2010, eleven Republicans joined the Democrats and Independents who caucus with the Democrats to end debate on the matter. The cloture was 67-28 and indicated that President Obama had overcome Republican opposition to secure overwhelming support for the new arms control treaty with Russia. As expected, Republicans such as McConnell, McCain, and Kyl, did not support the proxy vote; however, several Republicans broke ranks with the party leadership to do so.

A final vote on the bill was set for Dec. 22, 2010. Vice President Joe Biden presided over the Senate vote while Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton observed the procedure from the floor of the upper chamber of Congress. Speaking ahead of the final vote, Foreign Relations Senate Committee Chairman John Kerry of Massachusetts said, "The question is whether we move the world a little out of the dark shadow of nuclear nightmare." Not surprisingly, that final vote ended in overwhelming bipartisan support for the nuclear arms control treaty. Indeed, the final vote was 71-26, and the "yes" contingent included 13 Republicans (again breaking ranks with the party leadership), two Independents who caucus with the Democrats, and Democratic Senator Ron Wyden of Oregon who participated in the vote only two days after having cancer surgery.

The result was ratification of the new treaty to replace START -- and a significant foreign policy victory for President Obama. Lauding the bipartisan vote, President Obama characterized the treaty as the most important arms control pact in nearly two decades. At a news conference at the White House, he said: "This treaty will enhance our leadership to stop the spread of nuclear weapons and seek the peace of a world without them."

Two United States airmen killed in Germany

At the start of March 2011, two United States Air Force servicemen were killed by a gunman at the Frankfurt airport in Germany.

Two additional United States servicemen were injured in the same attack, one of whom was said to be in critical condition. According to authorities in Germany, the gunman became embroiled in an altercation at the airport before opening fire on the four servicemen. The gunman was identified as Arid Uka -- a man from Kosovo whose family migrated to Germany four decades earlier; Uka was arrested at the airport's Terminal 2 where the attack ensued

United States President Barack Obama condemned the attack, characterizing it as "outrageous" and calling for justice to be served. He also praised the service of the victims to the country saying, "I think the American people are united in expressing our gratitude for the service of those who were lost." German Chancellor Angela Merkel

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promised a full inquiry into the matter, saying, "I would like to assure you that the German government will do our utmost to investigate what happened."

President Obama calls for pre-1967 boundaries as basis for two state solution in Middle East

On May 19, 2011, during a speech at the United States Department of State outlining United States policy and the Middle East, President Barack Obama said that a future Palestinian state would be based on the 1967 borders.

The United States president said, "The borders of Israel and Palestine should be based on the 1967 lines with mutually agreed swaps, so that secure and recognized borders are established for both states." Although a long-standing tenet of Middle East negotiations (as discussed below), President Obama's statement yielded rebuke from hardliners who claimed he was abandoning Israel, and tensions with the Netanyahu administration. The controversy -- false though it might be -- over President Obama's policy stance on Middle East Peace was expected to carry over for several days. The president was scheduled to offer a speech at an American pro-Israel lobbying entity, AIPAC, at its annual conference. As well, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was in the United States for a visit and was scheduled to a joint session of the United States Congress.

Palestinians prepare unilateral bid for recognition at United Nations; Israel wants return to peace negotiations while United States promises veto at Security Council

Summary --

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas has sought full membership for a Palestinian state within the United Nations. He said that full status and recognition at the United Nations was a legitimate right for the Palestinian people, and that this cause would be taken up at the meeting of the United Nations. Of course, the unilateral measure has been opposed by Israel, which has cast the move as divisive and unlikely to help the peace process, which aims to achieve a two-state solution with an independent Israel and an independent Palestine living side by side in peace and security. For its part, the United States has echoed Israel's concerns and urged a return to the peace process and the negotiating table as the only legitimate path to achieving the two-state solution. The United States also warned the Palestinians that it would use its veto power at the United Nations Security Council to quell the Palestinians' unilateral bid for recognition. The unilateral bid for recognition at the United Nations by the Palestinians was expected to open the metaphoric "Pandora's box" of diplomatic tensions, with countries in the global community forced to take sides.

Political Background --

A key issue has been the Palestinians' call for recognition of a state consistent with the 1967 borders, which encompasses the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and the Gaza Strip. This terrain has been occupied by Israel since 1967 and has been a keystone issue in all discussions and peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. A peace plan advanced by United States President Barack Obama in May 2011 had called for pre-1967 boundaries (with swaps) as the basis for two-state solution in Middle East. The plan evoked anxiety on the part of the government of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, despite the fact that this has been the foundation for previous peace initiatives.

Indeed, the pre-1967 boundaries refers to the borders that existed before the six-day Middle East war in 1967 that extended Israeli control into the West Bank and Gaza with predominantly Palestinian populations. That terrain has constituted the literal and figurative grounds of contestation in Israel and the Palestinian territories since some 300,000 Israeli Jews have constructed settlements on the outlying areas. Settlement activity has raised the ire of Palestinians who believe that the encroachment will curtail their own rights to land for a future Palestinian state. The matter has been one of great consternation, and has resided at the heart of peace negotiations with Palestinians demanding a halt to settlement activity, always alongside Israelis' demands for an end to attacks by Palestinian militants.

To be precise, peace initiatives on the Middle East over the years have often rested on the notion of resorting to pre-1967 borders -- at the very least as a point from which to begin negotiations. Stated another way, while brokers of peace in the Middle East may not have overtly foregrounded the pre-1967 borders in the forthright manner of President Obama, the same principle has been cast as a "jumping off point" of sorts (and not the ultimate destination) of peace negotiations for decades. It is well known that Israel will not accept the wholesale notion of the pre-1967 borders, however, trade offs for other priority issues have always been part of the terms of peace negotiations. In this respect, President Obama's stance has differed little from predecessors in orientation, especially as he emphasized the notion of "mutually agreed swaps" of terrain for the creation of "a viable Palestine, and a secure Israel."

Nevertheless, President Obama's peace initiative earlier in the year set off a firestorm at home and abroad among right-leaning and hard line politicians. Republicans at home accused him of abandoning Israel, while Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was quick to note that the borders that existed prior to the 1967 war were "indefensible." The Israeli head of government was referring to settlements such as those in Judea and Samaria that would be left undefended beyond those territorial lines. Prime Minister Netanyahu also said that he appreciated President Obama's "commitment to peace" but that for peace to endure, "the viability of a Palestinian state cannot come at the expense of the viability of the one and only Jewish state." Prime Minister Netanyahu, therefore, called for President Obama to affirm the United States' 2004 commitment to Israel, in which then-President George W. Bush said that Israel would be able to hold on to substantial settlements as part of a future peace deal.

It should be noted that despite this sudden controversy erupting from President Obama's plan, in fact, a 2002 "land for peace" deal tabled by Saudi Arabia contained the very same "withdrawal to pre-1967 borders" provision and was seriously considered by Israel at the time.

Central to the Saudi "land for peace" plan was pan-Arab recognition of Israel in exchange for Israel's withdrawal from Arab lands captured in 1967 -- the West Bank, Gaza Strip, east Jerusalem and the Golan Heights. During its own tenure at the helm of government in the United States, the Bush administration appeared to entertain the Saudi "land for peace" plan as a worthy companion to its own "roadmap for peace" in the early 2000s. Moreover, by 2008, Israel -- then under the control of the centrist Kadima Party -- reportedly was reconsidering the dormant "land for peace" deal, albeit with reservations. Palestinian negotiators encouraged Israel to pursue this track at the time. That being said, members of the conservative Likud Party of Netanyahu rejected this proposal as a non-starter due to the aforementioned matter of leaving Jewish settlements vulnerable. Now in power, Prime Minister Netanyahu was unlikely to soften his position since he was in an uneasy alliance with the hard line party, Yisrael Beiteinu, which strenuously rejects any halt to settlement activity. Given the need to massage the interests of his coalition partner, the domestic political scene in Israel would underline Netanyahu's imperative to reject the 2008 "land for peace" deal and the 2011 position, as articulated by President Obama.

It should also be noted that foreign policy analysts could not interpret President Obama's speech as anything less than a strong affirmation of the United States' enduring relationship with Israel. Notably, President Obama offered Israel an exit strategy from peace negotiations with the Palestinians -- for the moment, unified in governance among Fatah and Hamas factions. Specifically, in pointing to Hamas' refusal to recognize the Jewish State of Israel, President Obama noted that it would be ludicrous for Israel to pursue serious talks with an entity that would not even acknowledge existential and geopolitical realities. Moreover, President Obama signaled that the United States would be siding with Israel should the Palestinians petition the United Nations for statehood and recognition later in 2011 without resolving the outstanding territorial issues.

The Scene Ahead of the Palestinians' Bid for Statehood --

At the start of August 2011, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he was prepared to discuss a peace plan with the Palestinians, based on United States President Obama's borders proposition. Netanyahu's announcement to Middle East power brokers appeared aimed at reinvigorating stalled peace talks. Months earlier in May 2011, Prime Minister Netanyahu excoriated President Obama for advancing a plan that called for pre-1967

boundaries as a basis for two-state solution in Middle East. Then, in August 2011, Prime Minister Netanyahu appeared to be accepting the pre-1967 borders as a starting point for discussions, although the prime minister's office refused to admit that it was reversing its earlier-stated objections to the terms put forth by President Obama. Prime Minister Netanyahu's office, though, said that any peace agreement would be contingent upon the recognition of Israel as a Jewish state -- a stance that has not found acceptance among Palestinian quarters.

It should also be noted that amid these moves by Israel was the impending decision by the Palestinian Authority to present its application for international recognition of statehood to the United Nations in September 2011.

The Palestinian Authority has made the claim that it does not wish to wait for independence via peace negotiations with Israel, thus the thrust to vitiate the peace process. However, with the United States -- an ally of Israel -- on the United Nations Security Council, it was inevitable that the Palestinian Authority's unilateral declaration of independence would be subject to veto. As noted above, United States President Barack Obama had already warned of such an outcome months earlier when he re-introduced the aforementioned terms of the peace process. Nonetheless, the Palestinian Authority was hoping that affirmative votes at the United Nations (United States excluded) would strengthen its hand in trying to achieve independence.

At the start of September 2011, in a last-ditch effort to avert a diplomatic showdown at the United Nations, the Obama administration in the United States circulated a proposal aimed at restarting peace talks. The proposal included a provision for the Palestinians to abandon the membership and recognition vote in the United Nations General Assembly, which was expected to take place on Sept. 20, 2011.

As Israel's closest ally, the United States had been hoping to shift the momentum, while realizing that it could not easily coalesce enough support from individual countries to block ratification of the Palestinians' aspirations at the United Nations General Assembly. Accordingly, it had advanced the aforementioned proposal aimed at restarting the peace process. Clearly, the United States was hoping to bring the Israelis and Palestinians back to the table -- to traverse the course of the peace process. The United States was also hoping that by providing an alternate pathway (i.e. distinct from the unilateral and inevitably controversial membership and recognition vote in the United Nations), several individual countries would opt to support the peace process option at a vote in the General Assembly.

As noted above, the Palestinians were hoping to bypass the peace process, and if not outright achieve independence via a vote at the United Nations, at least garner significant political power for the cause. Should the Palestinians ultimately decide to pursue this path at the United Nations, the United States warned the Palestinians that it would use its veto power at the United Nations Security Council to quell the Palestinians' unilateral bid for recognition.

Palestinians Bid for full UN membership --

On Sept. 16, 2011, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas said he would seek full membership for a Palestinian state at the anticipated meeting of the United Nations in New York, set to take place within days. As of 2011, Palestinians held permanent observer status at the United Nations and were represented by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). This move to pursue full membership could be understood as the desire to seek an upgrade in status, of sorts.

Abbas, who spoke from the Palestinian Authority headquarters in the West Bank city of Ramallah, said that full status and recognition at the United Nations was a legitimate right for the Palestinian people, and that this cause would be taken up at the meeting of the United Nations Security Council.

Note that this strategy involved a modest shift from the initial plan to pursue ratification at the United Nations General Assembly. Now, Abbas was opting to seek full membership at the United Nations Security Council. Speaking of this impending effort, Abbas said: "We are going to the United Nations to request our legitimate right, obtaining full membership for Palestine in this organization." He added, "We take with us all the suffering and hope

of our people to achieve this objective." Abbas also noted that more than 100 countries already recognized Palestine as a state and that the patience of the Palestinians people had been exhausted.

It should be noted that while Abbas was speaking on behalf of the collective Palestinian people, the extremist militant Islamist entity, Hamas, which controls Gaza, was not on board with the decision of the Palestinian Authority president. Instead, Hamas has said that the venture into the United Nation was a "risky" endeavor. Of course, Hamas has never endorsed the notion of a two-state solution since it does not recognize the right of existence for the Jewish state of Israel.

The unilateral measure by the Palestinians for statehood and United Nations membership has been strenuously opposed by Israel, which has cast the move as both divisive and provocative. Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon observed in dire terms, "A unilateral declaration by the Palestinians of independence or any UN decision will actually be a vote for friction and conflict over co-operation and reconciliation and I think that would be deplorable for many years."

Israel has further said it would undermine the peace process, which aims to achieve a two-state solution, characterized by an independent Israel and an independent Palestine living in peace and security beside one another. Israeli government spokesperson Mark Regev declined to offer an official response to Abbas' speech. That being said, Regev warned that the Palestinians' move would deleteriously affect the prospects for peace; he also emphasized that the two state solution would only be reached via direct negotiations in Ramallah and Jerusalem, rather than through the United Nations.

Israel has additionally accused the Palestinians of attempting to undermine its legitimacy in pursuing this path at the United Nations. In response, Abbas struck a somewhat more diplomatic tone, saying, "We are not heading there to de-legitimize Israel, no one can do this, it is a state with full membership at the UN. We want to de-legitimize the Israeli occupation and its measures on our territories." This stated objective notwithstanding, in fact, the vote would do nothing to end Israeli jurisdiction in certain spheres of control over the West Bank and Gaza.

For its part, the United States has echoed Israel's concerns and urged a return to the peace process and the negotiating table as the only legitimate path to achieving the two-state solution. While the United States was not keen to go down the path of halting the independence aspirations of the Palestinian people at a time of instability in the wider Middle East region, it was, nonetheless, maintaining its veto threat. Indeed, the Obama administration has made it very clear that if the Palestinians went through with their pursuit of full recognition and membership vote, the United States intended to wield its veto power at the United Nation Security Council. A veto by the United States would effectively render the membership and recognition aspirations of the Palestinians null and void.

Striking a diplomatic course, French President Nicolas Sarkozy was calling for a compromise in the form of enhanced status (as a non-member state) for the Palestinians at the General Assembly, with a timetable for negotiations on the road to a definitive agreement.

The French leader was anxious to see a showdown at the Security Council averted. But it seemed that this compromise found little resonance among the Palestinian leadership. Indeed, Palestinian Authority President Abbas asserted that he was pressing forward with that move.

Leaving no doubt of his course of action to be undertaken, President Obama reportedly told the Palestinian leader (Abbas) on Sept. 22, 2011 that he would veto his bid for United Nations membership. In an address to the United Nations, President Obama reiterated the United States' stance, emphasizing that a sovereign Palestinian state could only be achieved through direct negotiations with Israel. He said, of the road to achieving the two-state solution: "There is no short cut to the end of a conflict that has endured for decades."

On the other side of the equation, Abbas was apparently crafting his written application, which would be submitted to Secretary General Ban Ki-moon on Sept. 23, 2011. Pending approval by the Ban Ki-moon, the application would then be taken up by the Security Council and would require nine affirmative votes of the 15 members, and no vetoes, to pass. That vote, though, was not expected for several weeks. Of course, with a guaranteed veto by the

United States in the offing, the application was on the road to nowhere. That being said, Palestinians were claiming imminent victory, suggesting that they had successfully brought the matter of Palestinian independence onto the national agenda.

At the same time, the Netanyahu government in Israel -- not exactly an entity that has enjoyed warm relations with the Obama White House -- was praising President Obama for his country's stalwart support. President Netanyahu declared that the American president deserved a "badge of honor" for his defense of Israel. Indeed, Israel's friends and allies on this subject were limited in the context of the global community.

On Sept. 23, 2011, Palestinian Authority President Abbas formally requested full United Nations membership as a path toward statehood. Abbas conveyed the written request to United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and then delivered a speech to the annual gathering of the General Assembly. Following protocol, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon then passed on Abbas' request to the Security Council. A vote on the matter was not expected for several weeks.

Regardless of the outcome, it was clear that the Palestinian independence move was likely to metaphorically open a "Pandora's box" of diplomatic tensions with countries in the global community forced to take sides. Moreover, it could well inflame passions in the region of the Middle East, which was already experiencing historic upheaval, ever since the "season of unrest" began to sweep across the Arab world at the start of 2011.

President Obama makes history as first U.S. president to address British parliament

On May 25, 2011, United States President Barack Obama made history by becoming the first United States president to address the British parliament at Westminster Hall. In that speech, President Obama emphasized the strong and enduring bond between the two countries -- the United States and the United Kingdom -- characterizing the trans-Atlantic relationship as "one of the oldest and strongest alliances the world has ever known." President Obama also noted that the primacy of the West -- of the United States and allied European countries -- would be "indispensable" in the 21st century, given the ascendancy of new world powers, and the spread of democracy. Linking these two themes, President Obama said, "There are few nations that stand firmer, speak louder and fight harder to defend democratic values around the world than the United States and the United Kingdom."

British Prime Minister David Cameron, as well as former Prime Minister Tony Blair, former Prime Minister Gordon Brown, and Sir John Major, were in attendance for President Obama's address at Westminster Hall. The reception by British members of parliament and peers to President Obama was extraordinarily warm, with the United States leader receiving extended standing ovations at the start and at the close of the address respectively. The prior night, President Obama and Mrs. Obama were guests of the British monarch, Queen Elizabeth II, and her consort, Prince Phillip, at an official state dinner.

Special Report

Osama Bin Laden killed in targeted attack in Pakistan; U.S. President Obama says world "now a safer and better place"

On May 1, 2011, following a highly orchestrated operation ordered by United States President Barack Obama, it was announced that notorious global terrorist, Osama Bin Laden, was killed by United States special forces during a raid on a highly-fortified compound in Pakistan.

United States forces from the elite Navy Seal Team Six launched an attack on Bin Laden's mansion in Abbottabad, located about 60 miles to the northeast of the Pakistani capital of Islamabad. United States officials said that while Bin Laden could have been taken into custody alive by United States commandos, the terrorist leader was shot to death after resisting detainment and an ensuing gun battle. It was later revealed that Osama Bin Laden was not actually armed at the time of his shooting.

Foreign Policy United-States

Four other individuals -- one of Bin Laden's sons, two couriers, and a woman -- were killed in the raid, according to United States officials. There was some confusion as to whether the woman killed in the raid was one of Bin Laden's wives or a human shield (voluntarily placed there or otherwise). Subsequent reports indicated that the woman killed was a wife of one of the two couriers living in the compound. One of Bin Laden's wives was shot but not killed; she and two more of Bin Laden's wives were taken into custody by Pakistani authorities after the raid was complete and Bin Laden was dead.

United States President Barack Obama said that the death of the leader of the Islamic Jihadist terror enclave, al-Qaida, meant the world was now a safer and a better place. He said, "I think we can all agree this is a good day for America. Our country has kept its commitment to see that justice is done. The world is safer; it is a better place because of the death of Osama bin Laden."

United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that the successful special operation to kill or capture Bin Laden delivered a message to al-Qaida as well as the Taliban in the Afghan-Pak region. She issued a direct warning to the Taliban as follows: "You cannot wait us out, you cannot defeat us, but you can make the choice to abandon al-Qaida and participate in a peaceful political process." It should be emphasized that the Obama-Biden administration has dealt with the Taliban and remnants of al-Qaida in the region by addressing the matter as part of a broader Afghan-Pak strategy. Clearly, that strategy was now bearing fruit.

In an unprecedented statement praising the unilateral military action of a member state, the United Nations Security Council hailed the elimination of Bin Laden as a positive development for global security. The Security Council released the following statement: "The Security Council recognizes this critical development and other accomplishments made in the fight against terrorism and urges all states to remain vigilant and intensify their efforts in the fight against terrorism."

But the entire global community was not so sanguine about the news of Bin Laden's demise. In Pakistan, after the news broke of Bin Laden's death, about 100 people protested in the city of Quetta, burning United States flags and expressing anti-American views.

Not surprisingly, it was a different scene at home in the United States where thousands of people gathered outside the White House in Washington D.C., and at Ground Zero in New York, to celebrate what could well be characterized as a victory in the war on terrorism. These were boisterous gatherings with those present chanting "USA! USA! USA!" and singing the national anthem.

Former United States President George W. Bush issued his congratulations to President Obama and United States special forces as follows: "I congratulated him [President Obama] and the men and women of our military and intelligence community." Bush continued, "The fight against terror goes on but tonight the American people sent a message that no matter how long it takes, justice will be done. "

While President Obama gained praise from certain other Republicans, including former Vice President Dick Cheney, former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, he was also subject to attacks by the far left and the far right activist wings.

Elements of the political far right refused to attribute credit to President Obama and his national security team, and denounced President Obama's decision to end the use of "enhanced interrogation techniques," which they asserted were crucial in the interests of national security. Of course, the information that contributed to President Obama's decision to carry out the raid on the Pakistani compound was not actually gathered as a result of enhanced interrogation techniques championed by the Bush administration in the years immediately after the 2001 terror attacks. Instead, the intelligence on the identity of Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti -- the al-Qaida courier who led to the location of Bin Laden -- was obtained through standard and non-coercive means. This point was emphasized by Senator John McCain (R-Arizona) -- a rival of President Obama in the 2008 presidential race in the United States.

On the other side of the equation, those of the political far left railed against the killing of Bin Laden, even questioning the legality of such action. This view was echoed by the sons of Bin Laden who claimed that their father's death was a violation of international law. It should be noted that since Osama Bin Laden -- the commander

of al-Qaida, an enemy force -- declared war on the United States in the 1990s, his elimination cannot properly be classified as an assassination; instead, it is to be legally understood as the targeting of an enemy of the state during wartime. As noted by United States Attorney General Eric Holder in an interview with BBC News, the killing of the al-Qaida leader was "not an assassination." Holder said that the operation was legal under international law, which allows for the targeting of enemy commanders. Holder also emphasized the priority of acting under the aegis of jurisprudence saying, "I actually think that the dotting of the i's and the crossing of the t's is what separates the United States, the United Kingdom, our allies, from those who we are fighting."

United States officials have asserted that DNA tests confirm that one of the persons shot at the Pakistani compound was, indeed, Osama Bin Laden. The body of the man listed as the "most wanted man" in the world was given an Islamic funeral on the aircraft carrier, the USS Carl Vinson, in the northern Arabian Sea, according to the Pentagon, and then disposed of at sea. This line of action was apparently undertaken to prevent Bin Laden's body being placed in a location that could later become a shrine to be revered by extremist militants. It should be noted, though, that some Islamic clerics have decried the disposal of Bin Laden's body at sea saying that it ran counter to principles of Islamic law.

Politically, the successful elimination of Osama Bin Laden could hardly be interpreted as anything but a boon for President Obama. His predecessor, George W. Bush, staked his presidency on the anti-terrorism theme, even arguing that a war in Iraq was necessary in the effort against global terrorism. However, Bush was never able to apprehend Bin Laden. Bush was criticized by his political opponents for allowing Bin Laden to escape capture at Tora Bora in Afghanistan and for using questionable tactics -- including torture and extraordinary rendition -- to try to find and eliminate al-Qaida terrorists. Earlier efforts by former President Bill Clinton to target Bin Laden also ended in failure. Consequently, for years since his earliest forays into global terrorism, including the East Africa embassy bombings of the 1990s, Bin Laden evaded capture. In fact, he raised the ire of many in the world by regularly releasing taped messages encouraging attacks on the United States, Western interests, Western allies, and even fellow Muslims deemed to be enemies of his extremist doctrine.

Now, in 2011, President Obama had made good on a promise he made while a candidate -- to move immediately on actionable intelligence to either kill or capture Osama Bin Laden. Indeed, having received the intelligence that Bin Laden may have been hiding out in the aforementioned mansion in Pakistan, President Obama opted not for a drone attack; instead, he ordered a surgical strike, carried out by special forces, and left open the possibility of taking Bin Laden alive. It was a high risk calculation that could have ended in disaster. Instead, the operation ended with the world's most notorious terrorist dead, no deaths to Americans participating in the operation, no civilian casualties, and five deaths in total (as discussed above). Striking a patriotic tone, President Obama hailed the outcome saying, "Today we are reminded that as a nation there is nothing we can't do."

As more information surfaced over the week following Bin Laden's death, it became clear that the raid on Bin Laden's secret Pakistani compound was the culmination of years of painstaking intelligence and ended in a strategic and operational success.

A long period of coalescing intelligence related to a trusted courier of Bin Laden resulted in the discovery of the compound outside of the Pakistani capital. The elaborate nature of the house with high windows and limited entrances, and the secure surrounding compound with 12 foot high walls and a heavily fortified perimeter hinted toward inhabitants more important than a courier, and led to speculation that it housed Bin Laden or another high value terror target. Several months of assessment followed, which included highly technical intelligence analysis. Then, the Obama administration was able to determine with a high degree of probability that Bin Laden -- the man who claimed responsibility for ordering the 2011 terror attacks in the United States that left more than 3,000 people dead, as well as many other bloody and violent acts of terrorism -- was living secretly in that particular compound and not hiding in the harsh mountainous region bordering Afghanistan and Pakistan, as was the common myth.

The national security team of the Obama White House then discussed possible measures to be taken. President Obama was confronted with great disagreement, given the risks associated with either a raid or a drone bombing of the target. John Brennan, the United States' chief counter-terrorism official, explained that there was no overt consensus among the United States' national security team on which course of action to take. Still, in the end,

President Obama opted for this targeted strike. Brennan said of President Obama's decision-making: "One of the ... gutsiest calls of any president in recent memory."

Eventually, the decision made by President Obama to pursue the raid option, which would be carried out by the United States military but under the aegis of Central Intelligence Agency legal command, due to the United States' relationship with Pakistan (a country with which the United States is not at war). With the decision made by the president to go down this path, the elite Navy Seal special forces team were subject to extensive and laborious training exercises to practice the operation and be prepared for contingencies.

As recounted by President Obama himself in an interview on the CBS show, "60 Minutes," the risks were outweighed by the possibility of finally apprehending the world's most wanted man. He said, "But ultimately, I had so much confidence in the capacity of our guys to carry out the mission that I felt that the risks were outweighed by the potential benefit of finally getting our man." President Obama characterized the 40 minute raid by the elite Navy Seal unit on the Bin Laden compound in Pakistan as "the longest 40 minutes of my life." Throughout, President Obama said that he and his national security team were able to monitor the commando operation from the White House Situation Room but did not have clear information about what was taking place inside the compound.

As further details about the operation emerged, it was revealed that the assault team deployed to Pakistan was large enough to fight its way out of Pakistan, if confronted by hostile local police and security forces. Clearly, the Obama administration was willing to compromise its relationship with the United States' so-called ally, Pakistan, in order to kill or capture Bin Laden.

Senior Obama administration officials also said there were two teams of adjunct specialists on standby -- one to organize the burial of Bin Laden if he was killed during the operation, and another one made up of translators, interrogators and lawyers, should Bin Laden be captured alive. This revelation underlined the Obama administration's assertion that the commandos were under instruction to either kill or capture the terror leader. As noted by United States Attorney General Eric Holder in an interview with BBC News, Bin Laden was the subject of a "kill or capture mission" and United States commandos handled the raid "in an appropriate way." He said of the potential capture of Bin Laden, "If the possibility had existed, if there was the possibility of a feasible surrender, that would have occurred."

It should also be noted that documents uncovered during the raid by United States elite special forces on the Bin Laden compound revealed plans for further large scale attacks on the United States homeland, possibly due to take place on the 10th anniversary of the September 11, 2001, terror attacks. The documents further showed that Bin Laden was far more than a spiritual leader or symbolic figurehead of al-Qaida but instead was an active participant - even an orchestrator -- of terror attacks. As noted by National Security Adviser Donilon in an interview on ABC News, "I think the principal thing to take away is that he was engaged not just in being a symbolic leader of al-Qaida, but he was involved in the strategic and operational leadership."

Given the fact that Bin Laden was living in an elaborate mansion on a fortified compound in Pakistan, as discussed above, questions were therefore resting on the Pakistani authorities. How was it that Bin Laden could have been safely residing in a facility in a major Pakistani city -- in close proximity to the Pakistan Military Academy -- for all this time? How could the specially-designed mansion have been constructed in the neighborhood of the military academy without drawing the attention of all around?

To these ends, President Obama indicated that he would not rest in the effort against allies of Bin Laden, saying, "We're going to pursue all leads to find out exactly what type of support system and benefactors that Bin Laden might have had." Echoing a similar sentiment, chief counter-terrorism official John Brennan, said that it was "inconceivable" that Bin Laden was without a support system in Pakistan. A week after Bin Laden's capture, on NBC's "Meet the Press" television show, National Security Adviser Tom Donilon said of the Pakistani authorities, "I don't have any information that would indicate foreknowledge by the political, military or intelligence leadership." But he continued, "These questions are being raised quite aggressively." Weeks after the strike on Bin Laden's compound, Defense Secretary Robert Gates indicated that while the Pakistani leadership did not appear to have

known of the terrorist leader's presence within the country's borders, it was likely that others leading Pakistanis -- perhaps former members of the military -- may have been "in the know."

It should be noted that weeks prior to the strike on the Bin Laden compound, the United States top military officer Admiral Mike Mullen accused Pakistani's spy agency -- the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) -- of having links with extremist militants. While Pakistan maintains that there is no connection between its intelligence service and militants, the record appears to show a very different story. In the 1980s and 1990s, the Pakistani ISI was known to have fundraised for Islamic militants, as reported by international defense analysts as well as Pakistani military officials at home. More recently in mid-2010, Pakistan's reputation as a serious player in the efforts against global terrorism was severely hurt by revelations that ISI was funding, training, and providing sanctuary to the Afghan Taliban. For several years, there have been suspicions about such a clandestine relationship between the two entities, however, the closeness and extensive nature of their ties was something of a revelation. In a report issued by the London School of Economics (LSE), support for the Afghan Taliban was described as "official ISI policy."

Since the 2001 terror attacks in the United States, Pakistan has accepted billions of dollars in aid funding from the United States, supposedly for its support in the fight against terror enclaves like al-Qaida and its Taliban allies. Clearly, a continued relationship between the Pakistani ISI and extremist militants would run counter to its expressed objectives of helping the United States quell the threat of terrorism emanating from such entities in the Afghan-Pak region. Yet to be determined was the matter of the role of Pakistani authorities in the operation to eliminate Bin Laden. Already, it was known that Pakistan was notified of the operation to capture or kill Bin Laden only after United States forces had departed Pakistani airspace.

Certain Pakistani quarters were quick to assert that the country's sovereignty had been violated in the United States' operation to kill or capture Bin Laden. Accordingly, there were expectations that relations with the United States promised to become more tense. On the other hand, such claims were not likely to derail the prevailing questions about the culpability of Pakistani authorities over the presence of the world's most notorious terrorist on Pakistani soil. Husain Haqqani, the Pakistani ambassador to the United States, denied his country acted to protect bin Laden. He said of an impending investigation into the matter: "Heads will roll, once the investigation has been completed. Now, if those heads are rolled on account of incompetence, we will share that information with you. And if, God forbid, somebody's complicity is discovered, there will be zero tolerance for that, as well." Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani offered a less diplomatic explanation of the Bin Laden's presence on Pakistani soil. In an interview with Time Magazine, Gilani said that while there was certainly an intelligence failure at play, Bin Laden was not his responsibility as prime minister of Pakistan.

It was yet to be seen if the United States would easily accept this stance. Already, members of the United States Congress were calling for a reassessment of the country's relationship with Pakistan and a possible halt of United States aid to that country. Indeed, on May 17, 2011, Congressional Republicans and Democrats warned Pakistan that American aid could be curtailed, if not entirely cut, should Islamabad fail to intensify its offensive against Islamist extremist terrorists operating from within its borders deep inside Pakistan.

That being said, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator John Kerry (D-Mass), the ranking member, Senator Richard Lugar (R-Indiana), and President Obama himself have respectively expressed more reticence about such measures, perhaps with a broader eye on geopolitical stability. That is to say, even given the frustrations with the Pakistani authorities, a relationship with the power brokers would be preferable to no relationship at all with a nuclear power at the heart of Jihadist Islamic extremist movement.

Meanwhile, with al-Qaida possibly primed to carry out retaliatory attacks for the death of Bin Laden, the United States Department of State issued a worldwide travel warning for its citizens overseas, and put its embassies around the world on alert. The director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Leon Panetta, warned that al-Qaida would "almost certainly" seek revenge over the death of Bin Laden. At the same, the chief counter-terrorism official in the United States, John Brennan, warned that although Bin Laden's death would weaken the global Jihadist movement, al-Qaida, was still a danger to international security. He said, "It [al-Qaida] may be a mortally wounded tiger but it still has some life in it."

In a related development, with a rising threat against United States forces in the wake of Bin Laden's death, the Obama administration was working to increase security for the elite Navy Seal unit that carried out the raid on the Bin Laden compound. Threats by al-Shabab, the terror enclave of Somalia aligned with al-Qaida, were issued against President Obama's step-grandmother, Sarah Obama, in Kenya. Given Kenya's unhappy history as the target of a terror attack by al-Qaida in the 1990s, concerns were high and led to increased security by Kenyan authorities for the relative of the United States president.

Then, in mid-May 2011, suicide bombers attacked a Pakistani military academy in the northwestern town of Charsadda, killing at least 80 people, most of whom were military recruits. The Taliban in Pakistan quickly claimed responsibility for the attack and characterized it as part of the mission to avenge the death of Bin Laden, at the hands of elite United States forces. Ehsanullah Ehsan, a spokesperson for the Taliban, warned that this was only the initial attack in a mission of vengeance, saying: "There will be more." Terrorism analysts observed that typically, most Taliban attacks in recent years have had an internal ideological purpose (i.e. the undermining and toppling of the Western-backed government), rather than being of global Jihadist orientation. A revenge agenda on behalf of Bin Laden would cast the Taliban in Pakistan as having widened its objectives; however, it was not an inconceivable move given the militant Islamist Taliban's close ties with the notorious terror enclave, al-Qaida.

This attack coincided with the decision by a Pakistani cabinet defense committee to review cooperation on counter-terrorism with the United States. It was not known if this move was being made in response to United States President Barack Obama's decision to launch a raid on Pakistani soil to kill or capture Bin Laden. Regardless, a shift in counter-terrorism efforts between the two countries could have potential geopolitical ramifications. In the United States, though, the Obama administration made clear that it had no intention of scaling back its drone attacks in Pakistan's northwest region, which is a known hotbed of extremist Islamic militants.

By July 2011, given the growing outcry by United States policy-makers over Pakistan's questionable behavior in anti-terrorism efforts, the United States moved to withhold \$800m of military aid to Pakistan. At issue was about a third of the annual United States' security aid package to Pakistan and thus, the decision to limit aid to that country constituted a serious message from the Obama administration in the United States. Speaking on the news network, ABC, White House Chief of Staff, Bill Daley, explained that in recent times, Pakistan had "taken some steps that have given us reason to pause on some of the aid." Explaining the Obama administration's position, Daley also said, "It's a complicated relationship in a very difficult, complicated part of the world. Obviously, there's still a lot of pain that the political system in Pakistan is feeling by virtue of the raid that we did to get Osama Bin Laden, something that the president felt strongly about and we have no regrets over." He continued, "Until we get through these difficulties, we will hold back some of the money." Nevertheless, Daley did not foreclose a continuing relationship with Pakistan saying that bilateral ties "must be made to work over time."

Meanwhile, at the start of June 2011, a United States missile strike appeared to have killed one of the most notorious leaders of the terror enclave, al Qaida, in Pakistan. Several other people were killed in the strike in the tribal region of South Waziristan. While Pakistani authorities expressed confidence that the United States strike had reached its intended target, the death of Ilyas Kashmiri remained cloaked in a minor amount of doubt due to the fact that the drone strike made it impossible for a body to be retrieved. Still, there were hopes that some DNA or photographic evidence might provide confirmation. To that end, as reported by the BBC, a photograph of what was identified as Kashmiri's body was released by a militant group, Harakat-ul-Jihad al-Islami, while faxed statements confirming Kashmiri's death were sent to Pakistani journalists. The statement by the group's infamous "313 Brigade," noted that Kashmiri was martyred and promised that revenge attacks would rain down on the United States.

According to United States officials, Kashmiri was al-Qaida's military operations chief in Pakistan, and has been linked with the 2008 terror attacks in Mumbai (India); he was also suspected of orchestrating terror plots against Western interests, even being named a defendant in the plot to attack a Danish newspaper that entered the public purview years earlier when it published cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad.

On Aug. 27, 2011, it was reported that Atiyah Abd al-Rahman, the suspected operations chief of the Jihadist Islamist terror enclave, al-Qaida, was killed in Pakistan. According to international news media, Atiyah Abd al-Rahman actually died days earlier on Aug. 22, 2011, in the volatile Pakistani tribal region of Waziristan. The actual circumstances of his death were not immediately publicized by either Pakistani or United States authorities. However, the New York Times was soon reporting that Atiyah Abd al-Rahman was apparently killed in a drone attack by the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States. It should be noted that such drone attacks have been the preferred mode of the Obama administration in the United States in going after al-Qaida operatives.

Senior United States officials were asserting that the death of Atiyah Abd al-Rahman was a clear blow to al-Qaida since he had played an integral role in the orchestration and activation of terrorist activities of al-Qaida. The many documents discovered at the Pakistan compound of now-deceased al-Qaida overlord and mastermind, Osama Bin Laden, clearly showed that Atiyah Abd al-Rahman had been deeply involved in al-Qaida's operations over the years.

Indeed, he was believed to have brokered the alliance with the Algerian Salafists who morphed into al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb. Moreover, since the elimination of Bin Laden by United States special forces, Atiyah Abd al-Rahman had been playing a key support role to the new al-Qaida leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri.

A week after the elimination of Atiyah Abd al-Rahman, news reports emerged that another major al-Qaida figure had been detained along with two accomplices. Younis al-Mauritani was apparently arrested along with two aides, Abdul Ghaffar al-Shami and Messara al-Shami, in the suburbs of the Pakistani city of Quetta.

According to Pakistani authorities, Younis al-Mauritani was a significant player in al-Qaida's terror plots and reportedly orchestrated international operations. A statement released by Pakistani authorities read as follows: "Mauritani was tasked personally by Osama Bin Laden to focus on hitting targets of economical importance in United States of America, Europe and Australia."

The arrests of Mauritani and the other two individuals were the result of a joint operation between the intelligence agencies of Pakistan and the United States.

The news suggested somewhat improved relations between the two countries in the aftermath of the raid on the Bin Laden compound in Abbottabad months earlier. At the time, the United States looked with suspicion on Pakistani intelligence since the world's most notorious terrorist was living in relative luxury in a fortified compound close to the Pakistani military. But on the other side of the equation, Pakistan was angered over the invasion of its sovereignty by the United States in carrying out that operation. The successful conclusion to this joint operation (with Mauritani as the target) was being hailed as a small step in a more positive direction for already-damaged United States-Pakistani bilateral relations.

In mid-September 2011, a senior al-Qaida leader, Abu Hafs al-Shahri, was killed in Pakistan. According to United States officials, Shahri played a "key operational and administrative role" in al-Qaida and worked cooperatively with the Taliban to execute attacks in Pakistan. They further noted that Shahri was killed in the Waziristan tribal region -- an area where American drone strikes against Islamic militants has been prevalent. Only weeks earlier, Atiyah Abd al-Rahman, the suspected operations chief of al-Qaida, was killed in the same volatile tribal region of Waziristan as a result of an apparent CIA drone strike.

It should be noted that such drone attacks have been the preferred mode of the Obama administration in the United States in going after al-Qaida operatives. In the case of the elimination of Shahri, United States officials asserted that "a key threat inside Pakistan" had been removed. They further noted that the death of Shahri would "further degrade al-Qaida's ability to recover" from the death of Abd al-Rahman, since he had been viewed as a possible successor to the dead al-Qaida operations chief.

U.S. President Obama unveils withdrawal plan for troops serving in Afghanistan

Summary

This Special Report details the withdrawal and exit strategy plan for United States troops from Afghanistan. The Special Report includes an inquiry into counter-insurgency strategy for fighting the Taliban and al-Qaida. The report additionally considers accusations of the Pakistani intelligence agency's complicity with the Afghan Taliban. Also considered in this report are the politically-driven financial constraints at home in the United States related to the funding of the war effort. These issues collectively have influenced emerging questions about the United States' policy in Afghanistan and the timeline for continued engagement there. Finally, this report looks at the Afghanistan exit strategy as a jumping off point to consider the Obama doctrine of foreign policy.

Background

Almost exactly a year ago in June 2010, United States President Barack Obama announced that General Stanley McChrystal, the commander of United States forces in Afghanistan, was relieved of his duties. The president also announced the nomination of General David Petraeus, commander of United States Central Command, to take over command of the war in Afghanistan against the resurgent Taliban and al-Qaida. President Obama explained that he had decided to replace Gen McChrystal "with considerable regret." The president explained that McChrystal failed to "meet the standard that should be set by a commanding general." At issue were controversial statements by McChrystal that were recorded in a recent Rolling Stone article. The politics of the situation demanded that President Obama dismiss McChrystal, or, risk being viewed as a weak commander in chief. A week after the announcement about the dismissal of McChrystal, Petraeus was unanimously confirmed as the new commander of the Afghanistan war with a vote of 99-0 in the Senate. Petraeus, as expected, garnered praise from both Republicans and Democrats, irrespective of their core disagreements on the policy toward Afghanistan. Indeed, Petraeus was known as a celebrated military figure, thanks to his stewardship of the "surge" in Iraq, as well as his notoriety as one of the key authors of United States modern counterinsurgency strategy in war zones.

During confirmation hearings, Petraeus painted a grim picture of the war effort in Afghanistan, noting that an "industrial-strength insurgency" by the Taliban and al-Qaida elements were in the offing. As well, Petraeus warned that the fighting and violence would "get more intense in the next few months." That being said, he indicated that it was part of the counterinsurgency process. He said, "My sense is that the tough fighting will continue; indeed, it may get more intense in the next few months. As we take away the enemy's safe havens and reduce the enemy's freedom of action, the insurgents will fight back." Additionally, Petraeus did not foreclose the possibility of recommending that President Barack Obama extend United States' troops engagement in Afghanistan beyond the August 2011 timeline to begin redeployment.

Costs and complications of counterinsurgency strategy and human terrain units --

It should be noted that the Afghan war strategy -- to fight resurgent Taliban and al-Qaida, improve security in Afghanistan, and develop governing stability in that country as an alternative to a culture of warfare -- is founded on the principles of counterinsurgency (COIN). The long-term objectives of COIN entail not only the clearing the field of insurgents by the military, but also political imperative of replacing the insurgent power base with more stable governance. Effective counterinsurgency strategies, therefore, require close collaboration of the military, political, economic and diplomatic spheres in the conflict zone. While a respected strategy, with an exit timeline expected to be completed in 2014, there has been increased skepticism about the ongoing involvement in Afghanistan as the war has gone on for a decade.

One particularly key reason for a sense of skepticism about the war strategy and its associated timeline were matters of financial costs of the war, and the timeline attached to the Afghanistan strategy. That is to say, when President Obama first outlined his plan to deploy an additional 30,000 troops to Afghanistan, he also noted that the United States would begin a redeployment of those troops by 2011. With debt worries prevalent in the United States and other NATO countries (as discussed below), questions arose as to whether or not the continued war effort in Afghanistan was a financially feasible endeavor. That is to say, the war and counterinsurgency mission requires a

substantial outlay of resources that few governments (including the United States) could realistically commit to for the long term.

Complicating matters further has been the rising death toll of NATO forces in a war that has continued for close to a decade. That increased death toll has contributed to decreasing support for the Afghanistan war effort.

Moreover, analysts have pointed to the fact that COIN involves the idea of clearing the landscape of insurgents, followed by the establishment of a government as an alternative to the war culture. But clearance in one area often results in the relocation of the terrorists elsewhere and a perpetual pursuit of the strategic enemy. Meanwhile, the establishment of more stable governance, which has seen some success in the more politically mature Iraq, cannot easily be transposed to the largely tribal cultural orientation of Afghanistan, which does not have a strong legacy of governmental authority.

With an eye on understanding that tribal cultural orientation of Afghanistan, the United States military has employed anthropologists in the war zone to garner a more granular understanding of the complicated social and cultural dynamics of Afghanistan. Anthropologists' command of ethnographic fieldwork may be uniquely positioned to map the complex social structure of the country, ultimately helping the military to draw Afghans away from the Taliban.

Known as the army-funded "Human Terrain System," as discussed in an article published in Time Magazine by Jason Motlagh, the idea has been the source of debate with no consensus on its success. Academia has frowned on anthropologists being actively involved in the war theater. As noted in a report by the American Anthropological Association, because human terrain teams are ultimately oriented toward the objectives of the military mission, there is an ethical question of whether such work is "a legitimate professional exercise of anthropology." Nevertheless, General Petraeus has been reported to be a strong supporter of the human terrain teams, suggesting that they would for the immediate future continue to be part of the broader counterinsurgency strategy.

That being said, most anthropologists would agree that more than a year of intensive fieldwork is needed before conclusions can be made; thus, the success of human terrain units in Afghanistan would require a longer timeline than currently expected for United States forces to remain "in country."

Financial Cost of the War in Afghanistan --

In late June 2010, legislators in the United States voted to cut almost \$4 billion in aid to the government of Afghanistan. The move was in response to allegations of corruption by the Afghan government, and in the aftermath of a report by the Wall Street Journal that significant funds had been flown out of the airport at Kabul. The report alleged that Afghan officials and their allies were diverting funds earmarked for aid and logistics to financial safe havens outside the country.

Explaining the Congress' decision to make these cuts, Congresswoman Nita Lowey, the chair of the subcommittee responsible for aid appropriations, said, "I do not intend to appropriate one more dime until I have confidence that US taxpayer money is not being abused to line the pockets of corrupt Afghan government officials, drug lords and terrorists." Lowey additionally called for an audit of the billions of dollars already expended in Afghanistan.

While the funding cuts would not directly affect military operations of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, it could very well affect infrastructure projects, which are part of the nation building efforts in Afghanistan. To this end, Congressman Mark Kirk, made note of Kandahar's electrical system; he said that obstacles to its construction, and other such infrastructure projects, could negatively affect the war, which included the effort to win the hearts and minds of the Afghan people.

The issue has evoked questions about the financial costs of the war at large at a time when debt worries plague not only the United States, but also allied countries with troops operating in Afghanistan, as discussed in the section above.

As NATO countries, including the United States, have been forced to consider austerity measures at home, the financial costs of the war in Afghanistan have taken on added importance. In fact, that significance was apparent on July 1, 2010, when President Barack Obama requested \$33 billion in military funding to support the surge of 30,000 additional troops in Afghanistan.

Pakistan's complicity with Afghan Taliban raises questions about U.S. strategy in region --

Since June 2010, Afghanistan's geopolitical relationship with Pakistan has taken center stage. At issue were revelations that the Pakistani intelligence service, known by the acronym ISI, has been funding, training, and providing sanctuary to the Afghan Taliban. For several years, there have been suspicions about such a clandestine relationship between the two entities, however, the closeness and extensive nature of their ties was something of a revelation. Indeed, in a report issued by the London School of Economics support for the Afghan Taliban was described as "official ISI policy."

As noted by the author of the report, Matt Waldman of Harvard University, "This goes far beyond just limited, or occasional support. This is very significant levels of support being provided by the ISI." Waldman also asserted, "We're also saying this is official policy of that agency, and we're saying that it is very extensive. It is both at an operational level, and at a strategic level, right at the senior leadership of the Taliban movement."

The report also included references to interviews with Taliban field commanders who said that ISI agents attended Taliban council meetings. Shoring up the veracity of this claim was the following citation from the report: "These accounts were corroborated by former Taliban ministers, a Western analyst, and a senior United Nations official based in Kabul, who said the Taliban largely depend on funding from the ISI and groups in Gulf countries." Corroborating evidence was also available from a source unrelated to the LSE report. In an interview with Reuters, the head of Afghan intelligence, Amrullah Saleh, who had just resigned from that position, said the ISI was "part of the landscape of destruction" in Afghanistan and accused Pakistan of sheltering Taliban leaders in safe houses.

Some observers have noted that with the impending exit of foreign troops from Afghanistan expected in 2011, Pakistan's actions may be related to its desire to more deeply influence Afghanistan. However, ISI activities related to Islamic militant extremists are not recent developments in response to the current landscape. Indeed, the ISI has been accused of funding and training Islamic militant extremists in Afghanistan from as far back as the 1979 Soviet invasion. That being said, since the 2001 terror attacks in the United States, Pakistan has accepted billions of dollars in aid funding from the United States, supposedly for its support in the fight against terror enclaves like al-Qaida and its Taliban allies. Clearly, a continued relationship between the Pakistani ISI and the Afghan Taliban would run counter to its expressed objectives of helping the United States quell the threat of terrorism emanating from such entities in the Afghan-Pak region. As stated in the LSE report, "Pakistan appears to be playing a double-game of astonishing magnitude."

Developments in 2010 on the war in Afghanistan --

In July 2010, the Iceland-based website, known as Wikileaks, released six years worth of classified United States documents, numbering around 90,000, dealing with the war in Afghanistan. Several news organizations were given access to the documents prior to actual publication, although United States authorities have argued that the dissemination of classified information was a threat to national security, an act of gross irresponsibility, and quite possibly, imbued with illegality. From Afghanistan, President Hamid Karzai charged that the release of Wikileaks documents have endangered the lives of Afghan citizens who worked with NATO-led international forces. The Afghan leader said that the disclosure of the names of Afghans who cooperated with the NATO-led forces was "shocking" and "irresponsible." For its part, Wikileaks has defended the release of the documents, noting that it presented an unvarnished view of the war in Afghanistan since 2004.

Regardless of these competing views, the contents of the controversial documents have spurred debate about the United States' role in the war in Afghanistan, as well as the conduct of the war itself. To these ends, two Wikileaks revelations could raise questions about the Obama administration's broader "Afghan-Pak" strategy, which considers not only "ground zero" of the war effort -- Afghanistan -- but also Pakistan next door. While the strategy appropriately focuses on the region instead of one country, taking into consideration shared extremist Islamic

influences, shared Pashtun culture, and a landscape on the borderland that is a stronghold for Taliban and al-Qaida, two Wikileaks revelations strong doubts on the effectiveness of the strategy.

Firstly, according to the document review by the New York Times, even as Pakistan receives funds from the United States to help combat Islamic extremists militants and the threat of terrorism, the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) was said to be helping the Taliban, even collaborating with them on terror attacks and assassination plots.

Secondly, the tactic of using drone attacks in the tribal border regions has been lauded by the Obama administration as a means of crushing the enemy and eliminating high value Taliban and al-Qaida targets. However, according to the review by Der Spiegel, 38 Predator and Reaper drones crashed while on combat missions in Afghanistan and Iraq, requiring "elaborate -- and dangerous -- salvage operations." On the ground, "in country," there are additional worries about the political costs of the civilian casualties caused by drone attacks.

The civilian costs provide a transition to discuss a third issue revealed by Wikileaks. According to the review by Marc Ambinder of The Atlantic, there were "at least 144 separate incidents" of civilian casualties that led to "cover-ups." Ambinder particularly took note of the unsuccessful attempt to kill Abu Layth Ali Libi, which resulted in the deaths of several civilians and that resulted in a "cover-up" by Afghan officials.

Analysis of Afghan Strategy by late 2010 --

Taken together, these issues both inform and fuel emerging questions about a timeline for continued engagement in Afghanistan. Indeed, these factors -- from financial costs to the strategic considerations -- have contributed to rising emphasis on a "date certain" exit from Afghanistan, starting in 2011 and to end in 2014. Of course, on the other side of the equation, counterinsurgency advocates have argued that the objectives of the mission could require an extended timeline.

There were also been emerging questions about the precise nature of that policy itself, which have only been intensified with the Wikileaks revelations. Indeed, can counterinsurgency succeed in Afghanistan? If so, what are the benchmarks for success? Can the United States and its allies afford to fund the mission, given the demands on the domestic front? And is Pakistan -- an apparent ally -- actually undermining the effort to succeed in Afghanistan?

Note that in late 2010, NATO announced its plans to exit Afghanistan and transfer control over the anti-Taliban struggle to Afghan forces by the close of 2014. Afghan President Karzai formalized the agreement by signing a long-term security partnership with NATO. At the heart of the matter was NATO's contention that the Taliban not be allowed to simply wait out the presence of foreign forces. As stated by NATO's Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the security bloc would remain committed to security and stability of Afghanistan. He said, "One thing must be very clear - NATO is in this for the long term." The NATO head then continued, "If the enemies of Afghanistan have the idea that they can wait it out until we leave, they have the wrong idea. We will stay as long as it takes to finish our job." For his part, Afghan President Karzai expressed gratitude for NATO's contributions to his country's interest but stated, "I also informed them of the concerns of the Afghan people with regard to civilian casualties, with regard to detentions, with regard to, at times, NATO's posture."

It should be noted that this decision by NATO did not necessarily coincide with an official decision by the United States on the duration of combat operations by its forces in Afghanistan.

On that latter consideration, there was some indication of the direction of the United States in December 2010 when a much-anticipated report dealing with United States President Barack Obama's strategy for the war in Afghanistan surfaced in the public purview. That report concluded that United States forces were on track to begin their withdrawal from Afghanistan in July 2011, as scheduled in the United States' president's war plan. This conclusion was reached despite the fact there were mixed reports of success in the field. On that matter, the summary of the report said that the United States forces continued to pursue and eliminate al-Qaida leadership figures, was successful in reducing the terror enclave's ability to carry out attacks from the Afghan-Pak region, and had halted the progress of the resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the summary noted that those gains were tenuous and could well be reversed in the future.

June 2011 Update: President Obama unveils Afghan exit strategy

On June 22, 2011, President Barack Obama was scheduled to unveil his exit strategy from Afghanistan. At issue was the number of United States troops expected to leave Afghanistan and the associated pace of withdrawal from that country.

Ahead of the president's much-anticipated address regarding the Afghanistan exit strategy, speculation abounded about whether or not the more hawkish advisers in government would prevail, and only a nominal number of troops would be withdrawn, along with a vague exit date. They pointed to the need for enough forces on the ground as the region entered its summer fighting season. As well, many military commanders argued that a premature withdrawal would result in a reversal of the fragile military gains made against the Taliban and al-Qaida in Afghanistan.

Among these elements advocating only a modest "draw down" of forces, and at a slow pace of withdrawal, were outgoing Defense Secretary William Gates and the United States commander in Afghanistan, General David Petraeus, who was expected to soon come home to the United States to take the position of the head of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

Outgoing CIA director, Leon Panetta, was to take on the defense portfolio in the wake of Gates; it was not known if this shift in personnel was imbued with a hint of a shift in strategy.

At the other end of the philosophical spectrum was a cadre of advisers who were against the initial surge strategy in Afghanistan, favoring instead targeted attacks in the Afghan-Pak region. This camp, led by vice President Joseph Biden, has been lobbying for a significant "draw down" of the troops from Afghanistan as early as mid-2011, with a steady ongoing withdrawal from that point, culminating in a date-certain exit, preferably by a 2014 deadline.

The Biden-led camp has argued that the security gains in Afghanistan to date, in combination with the disruption of the al-Qaida network in that country, and the death of Osama bin Laden in neighboring Pakistan at the hands of United States special forces in May 2011, collectively pave the way for the United States to declare victory and begin the process of ending the war.

It should be noted that the American citizenry was war-weary after a decade of combat operations across the world. Indeed, a recent survey by the Pew Institute showed that as many as 56 percent of respondents favored an end to the war in Afghanistan as soon as possible. Even outgoing Defense Secretary Gates, who has stood on the side of the generals in favoring only a modest withdrawal of Afghanistan, was cognizant of the public support conundrum.

To that end, Gates acknowledged during a new conference to the State Department that President Obama would have to consider the concerns of the American people in his decision regarding the war in Afghanistan. Gate said, "It goes without saying that there are a lot of reservations in the Congress about the war in Afghanistan and our level of commitment. There are concerns among the American people who are tired of a decade of war."

The United States Congress was itself growing increasingly anxious about the costs of constant warfare at a time when debt concerns dominated the domestic political spectrum. A bipartisan group of United States senators dispatched a letter to President Obama calling for a shift in the Afghanistan war strategy and advocating a substantial withdrawal of United States troops from that country. The letter included the following statement: "Given our successes, it is the right moment to initiate a sizable and sustained reduction in forces, with the goal of steadily redeploying all regular combat troops. The costs of prolonging the war far outweigh the benefits."

That being said, there was an equally vocal coterie of senators expressing the opposite view, urging instead that the president heed the generals and hold steady in Afghanistan. Of note was Senator John McCain, a Republican from Arizona who was President Obama's rival in the 2008 presidential election. McCain said during an interview with ABC News' "Good Morning America," that his views lined up with Gates in calling for only a modest "draw down" since he did not want to see a reversal of the fragile gains already made. McCain also suggested that a

continued full throttle effort could potentially end in success saying, "I believe that one more fighting season and we can get this thing pretty well wrapped up."

Ahead of the June 22, 2011 national address, White House spokesperson, Jay Carney, confirmed that President Obama had made a decision on the withdrawal plan and was in the process of informing the national security team. Without disclosing the details, Carney noted that the "draw down" of the troops would commence in July 2011, on a phased basis, with a complete withdrawal by 2014. While the president himself has been on the record saying that he would favor a "significant" withdrawal of United States troops from Afghanistan, the actual meaning of the term "significant" was yet a matter of interpretation.

To be clear, since coming to office, President Obama tripled the number of United States forces operating in Afghanistan, for a total of about 100,000 troops "in country." Included in this 100,000 number were the 30,000 troops that were added as part of the "surge" aimed at providing reinforcements in the mission to reverse the Taliban's battlefield momentum. At the time, President Obama had said that he would begin to redeploy United States forces in mid-July 2011. Carney's aforementioned statement indicated that the president intended to abide with the promised timeline; the main question rested on the number of troops to be withdrawn along with the actual pace.

On June 22, 2011, in keeping with his pledge made in late 2009, President Obama unveiled a plan to redeploy United States troops from Afghanistan and effectively end its commitments in that country that had now lasted a decade. Explaining that al-Qaida was under pressure, with as much as half of the al-Qaida leadership, including Bin Laden killed, and serious losses inflicted upon the Taliban, the United States was well-positioned to begin to close out the war in Afghanistan.

To that end, President Obama ordered the withdrawal of 10,000 United States troops from Afghanistan in 2011, with another 23,000 troops to be redeployed the following year. This "draw down" of 33,000 United States forces from Afghanistan would essentially end the aforementioned surge by the summer of 2012. Remaining "in country" would be the rest of the troops -- about 67,000 in total -- which would themselves undergo a steady pace of phased withdrawal to end by a final deadline of 2014. It was expected that commanders on the ground in Afghanistan would be given the autonomy to sort out the "battlefield geometry" and decide on what types of troops would be needed in certain capacities from special forces, to trainers, intelligence officers, and combat troops.

President Obama explained that the withdrawal plan would take time, saying, "This is the beginning -- but not the end -- of our effort to wind down this war." That being said, President Obama told the American people that they should take comfort in knowing that the tide of war was receding. To that end, he noted that combat operations were over in Iraq, and "light was to be seen in distance" in Afghanistan.

According to the president, the specific mission in Afghanistan going forward was to be: "No safe-haven from which al-Qaida or its affiliates can launch attacks against our homeland, or our allies. We will not try to make Afghanistan a perfect place. We will not police its streets or patrol its mountains indefinitely. That is the responsibility of the Afghan government, which must step up its ability to protect its people."

In this way, the president was not only putting the Afghan authorities on notice that they had to take responsibility for their own country, he was simultaneously emphasizing a circumscribed role for the United States in Afghanistan. With an eye on handing over security control in Afghanistan, President Obama announced that the United States would play host to a summit in 2012, which would include NATO allies, and would focus on transitioning Afghanistan to a new future. The president noted that a peaceful future for Afghanistan would entail a political solution and accordingly, the United States would "join initiatives that reconcile the Afghan people, including the Taliban." In this way, the president -- for the first time -- appeared to back the notion of talks with the Taliban, pending that group's renunciation of violence and separation from al-Qaida.

All told, the new mission would transition from that of comprehensive counter-insurgency (COIN) strategy to a focused and targeted counter-terrorism strategy, aimed at capturing and killing terrorists and insurgents. There would also be a clear "date-certain" exit deadline. Borrowing from the experience in Iraq, the Obama administration

believed that it was vital that the Afghan government be pressured towards taking full responsibility for the country's security, and the United States Congress needed to have clear targets to be used as mileposts for evaluation.

This plan would fall within the parameters of the Biden camp as the troop reductions were deeper than initially anticipated; it also included a faster redeployment schedule than recommended by the military advisers. According to the New York Times, the plan was a validation of Vice President Biden's position. As expected, the plan was not easily endorsed by General Petraeus, who wanted to see United States forces remain in place for a longer time horizon. The president was expected to draw attention to the success of a more limited counter-terrorism strategy, as exemplified by the capture and killing of Bin Laden.

At a broader level, President Obama used the exit strategy from Afghanistan to craft his own vision of United States foreign policy. Indeed, the president said that while the United States would not retreat from its role as a global power, the country had to chart a new pragmatic and strategic course as regards international engagement. President Obama said, "Already this decade of war has caused many to question the nature of America's engagement around the world. Some would have America retreat from our responsibility as an anchor of global security, and embrace an isolation that ignores the very real threats that we face. Others would have America over-extend ourselves, confronting every evil that can be found abroad."

Rather than selecting from this dyad, President Obama opted for a third way, which he characterized as "a more centered course." He said, "Like generations before, we must embrace America's singular role in the course of human events. But we must be as pragmatic as we are passionate; as strategic as we are resolute. When threatened, we must respond with force — but when that force can be targeted, we need not deploy large armies overseas. When innocents are being slaughtered and global security endangered, we don't have to choose between standing idly by or acting on our own. Instead, we must rally international action, which we are doing in Libya, where we do not have a single soldier on the ground, but are supporting allies in protecting the Libyan people and giving them the chance to determine their destiny."

In this one paragraph, one finds something of an Obama doctrine that embraces: (1) strategic pragmatism, reliant more on intelligence and targeted operations than excessive boots on the ground, (2) multilateralism, in which an engaged United States of America works within an international framework to solve global problems; and (3) fidelity to democratic ideals, in which the United States would support self-determination of freedom-seeking people, while eschewing the notion of American hegemony and empire.

President Obama ended his address to the nation by stating that the time had come for the United States to concentrate on nation building in the domestic sphere, emphasizing that the costs of war had been high, and the time had come to focus on the plight of the American people at home. Clearly, the president was responding to the political climate at home, which was growing increasingly frustrated with economic strife at home and its concomitant link to the heavy price tag of war abroad.

Reaction --

President Obama's plan found conflicting resonance among political quarters. Liberal members of the president's Democratic Party, such as Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi were pleased that the war was finally ending, but disappointed that the process would not be immediate. She said, "Tonight, President Obama made it clear: we are now beginning the process of bringing our troops home and ending the war in Afghanistan. It has been the hope of many in Congress and across the country that the fulldraw-down of U.S. forces would happen sooner than the President laid out — and we will continue to press for a better outcome." There was something of a Republican split. House Speaker John Boehner warned that Congress would pressure the Obama administration against a withdrawal, if there was a security risk. He said, "It is my hope that the President will continue to listen to our commanders on the ground as we move forward. Congress will hold the Administration accountable for ensuring that the pace and scope of the draw-down does not undermine the progress we've made thus far." A potential 2012 Obama rival for the presidency, Mitt Romney, expressed displeasure with the president's "date certain" exit schedule saying, "We all want our troops to come home as soon as possible, but we shouldn't adhere to an arbitrary timetable on the withdrawal of our troops from Afghanistan."

Update --

On Aug. 7, 2011, an apparent rocket-propelled grenade attack by the Taliban on a Chinook helicopter in Afghanistan, left 30 United States troops and eight Afghan commandos dead. Several of the American troops who died in the incident were members of the vaunted elite Seal Team Six, which carried out the raid into Pakistan, which eliminated al-Qaida leader, Osama Bin Laden. United States authorities said that the attack did not demonstrate gains for the Taliban and would not affect ongoing policy on Afghanistan.

On Sept. 10, 2011, a suicide truck bomb targeted United States troops at a military base in the eastern Wardak province of Afghanistan. Two Afghan civilians died as a result of the attack, while 80 United States troops were injured. The day also saw a United States base in Bagram attacked by rockets. Both attacks coincided with the 10th anniversary of the terror attacks by al-Qaida in the United States a decade earlier on Sept. 11, 2001.

The Taliban quickly claimed responsibility and said that they were seeking revenge for the continued presence of United States troops in Afghanistan. Indeed, the Taliban accused the United States of using the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks as justification for invading Afghanistan. Of course, it was those terror attacks, and the alliance between the Afghanistan-based Taliban and al-Qaida, which had spurred the war in Afghanistan.

Ousted from power as a result of the war in Afghanistan, the Taliban has been carrying out an insurgency for years, aimed at repelling international forces and ending rule by the new government.

For their part, United States forces have stayed in Afghanistan to fight the resurgent Taliban despite decreased popularity among both Afghans and Americans for the long-running war. Speaking to this issue, United States Ambassador Ryan Crocker said the United States troops needed to remain in Afghanistan to prevent extremists from using Afghan territory to plan another catastrophic terror attack. In an interview with Agence France Presse, he said, "We're here so there is never again another 9/11 coming from Afghanistan's soil."

While these attacks were also linked with the 10th anniversary of the Sept. 11, 2001 terror attacks in the United States, according to NATO, they were also aimed at derailing the effort to handover security to Afghan-led forces during a phased withdrawal schedule beginning in the next year. Indeed, 2011 has seen the most bloodshed in Afghanistan since December 2011 when United States-led forces toppled the rule of the Taliban in that country. Nevertheless, NATO appeared undeterred by this latest bout of violence and asserted its intent to stay the course. As noted by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, "We have confidence in the Afghan authorities' ability to deal with this situation. Transition is on track and it will continue."

Islamic militants carried out a complicated siege of the Kabul -- the capital of neighboring Afghanistan -- on Sept. 13, 2011. Particular targets of the siege included the United States embassy, NATO headquarters, and police stations in Kabul.

Although suspicion immediately fell on the Taliban, it soon shifted.

United States Ambassador to Afghanistan, Ryan Crocker, said that it was the Pakistan-based Haqqani network that had orchestrated the siege of Kabul. Of course, the Haqqani network has been closely allied with the Taliban and al-Qaida both in terms of extremist Islamic ideology and in terms of its brutal use of terrorism. Subsequently, Cameron Munter, the United States ambassador to Pakistan asserted that there were links between the Haqqani network and the Pakistani government. During an interview with Radio Pakistan, Ambassador Munter said that there was evidence linking the Haqqani militant network to Pakistan's government. "The attack that took place in Kabul a few days ago was the work of the Haqqani network, and the fact that, as we have said in the past, that there are problems, there is evidence linking the Haqqani network to the Pakistan government, this is something that must stop," said Munter. Soon thereafter, outgoing United States chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral

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Mike Mullen, suggested that the Pakistan's intelligence agency helped the terrorist who attacked his country's embassy in Kabul, according to a report by the New York Times.

Already, the United States government warned that if Pakistani authorities failed to take action against the Pakistan-based Haqqani network for its attack on the United States embassy and NATO headquarters in Kabul, then it would retaliate. For its part, Pakistani authorities have continued to deny any connection to militant groups, the manifold evidence linking Pakistani intelligence to the Taliban notwithstanding.

Meanwhile, Ambassador Crocker asserted that the plague of violence in Afghanistan ten years after the 2001 terror attacks in the United States, which spurred the war in Afghanistan, would not change his country's plans. Earlier, in the aftermath of the attack by the Taliban on United States bases in Afghanistan, Crocker said the United States troops needed to remain in Afghanistan to prevent extremists from using Afghan territory to plan another catastrophic terror attack. But Crocker on Sept. 14, 2011 was also adamant about the fact that the actions of militant extremists would not deter the United States from its transition schedule -- including the transfer of security duties from coalition forces to Afghan forces, and the phased exit of United States troops from Afghanistan.

Note: Of the 100,000 United States troops in Afghanistan, about 33,000 were due to be redeployed in 2012. A full withdrawal of foreign combat troops was scheduled to take place in 2014.

Other Foreign Policy Developments

Talks between United States and North Korea deemed "constructive"

In late July 2011, even as domestic politics in the United States were mired in chaos over the debt ceiling and concomitant default, some good news was brewing in the realm of foreign relations. The United States and North Korea completed a set of exploratory discussions, which North Korea's envoy, Vice Foreign Minister Kim Kye Gwan, characterized as positive. Speaking of his meetings with United States Ambassador Stephen Bosworth, the Obama administration's leading representative on North Korean affairs, Kim Kye Gwan said, "Yesterday and today we discussed comprehensively, with Mr. Bosworth, matters of mutual interest. The talks were very constructive and businesslike and we continue to maintain contacts." For his part, Ambassador Bosworth said, "These discussions are designed to explore the willingness of North Korea to take concrete and irreversible steps toward denuclearization." These bilateral talks were intended to be a precursor to the resumption of multilateral denuclearization negotiations. To that end, Ambassador Bosworth said that his country would enter consultations with South Korea and other countries involved multilateral negotiations that have been ongoing for years, to consider how to proceed further with North Korea.

Special Entry

Drone strike kills al-Qaida in Yemen terrorist orchestrator, U.S.-born al-Alwaki.

At the close of September 2011, it was reported in the international media that a United States drone strike had killed Anwar al-Alwaki -- a United States-born terrorist orchestrator and propaganda communicator for al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). The Yemeni Defense Ministry confirmed the deaths of Alwaki and a number of his associates in the Yemeni province of Jawf.

As an English-speaking United States citizen, Alwaki used his command of language and biculturalism, along with modern media, to reach out to young Muslims in across the world with the objective of radicalizing them and urging them to turn to terrorism. He was also believed to have been responsible for orchestrating a number of attempted attacks, including the recruitment of infamous Nigerian "underwear" bomber, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who tried but failed to blow up a United States-bound airliner on Christmas Day in 2009. Alwaki was also blamed for inspiring United States Major Nidal Malik Hasan to carry out a 2009 attack on an army base in Texas that left more than a dozen people dead. He was additionally linked with the failed bombing in New York's Times Square in 2010.

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United States President Barack Obama hailed the death of Awlaki in Yemen as a "major blow" to the terror enslave, al-Qaida. President Obama said that the AQAP figure was instrumental in the "planning and directing efforts to murder innocent Americans" and was "directly responsible for the death of many Yemeni citizens."

President Obama also used the occasion to emphasize the United States' commitment to fighting terrorism. He said, "This is further proof that al-Qaida and its affiliates will find no safe haven anywhere in the world."

At home in the United States, there were some challenges to the legitimacy of eliminating a United States citizen without a trial. That being said, the United States government could well argue that it was operating within legal bounds by targeting an enemy of the state, and a leader of a terror enclave that had declared war on the United States.

Special Report:

U.S uncovers plot by Iranian agents to assassinate Saudi envoy and bomb Saudi and Israeli embassies

Summary:

U.S. law enforcement and intelligence agencies uncovered a conspiracy plot by Iranian agents working on behalf of the elite Iranian Quds Force. The plot included plans to assassinate the Saudi Arabian ambassador to the United States, and to bomb the Saudi and Israeli embassies in Washington D.C. and Buenos Aires. The White House has promised to hold Tehran responsible for its involvement in this elaborate plot of assassination and terrorism. Meanwhile, a connection between the Iranian agents and Mexican drug cartels has been uncovered, effectively complicating the already-tangled web of complex geopolitics. The U.S. wasted no time in attempting to leverage these allegations to isolate Iran and place pressure on that country's nuclear development program.

In detail:

Federal law enforcement authorities and intelligence agencies in the United States have reportedly uncovered and foiled a plot by Iranian agents to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the United States, Adel Al-Jubeir, and to bomb the embassies of Saudi Arabia and Israel in Washington D.C. United States officials indicated there were discussions about extending the bombing targets to the Saudi and Israeli embassies in Buenos Aires -- the capital of Argentina.

According to court documents filed in federal court in the Southern District of New York, the individuals accused of conspiring to carry out this plot were two men of Iranian origin -- Manssor Arbab Arbabsiar and Gholam Shakuri. One of the men, Arbabsiar, was a naturalized United States citizen holding passports from both the United States and Iran. He was arrested on Sept. 29, 2011, and was said to be in United States custody and cooperating with American authorities. Indeed, Arbabsiar confessed his involvement in the plot, according to media reports. The other man, Shakuri, was apparently still at large, presumably in Iran where he was reported to be a member of Iran's Quds Force -- an elite division of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps.

Both defendants were charged with conspiracy to murder a foreign official; conspiracy to use a weapon of mass destruction (explosives); and conspiracy to commit an act of international terrorism transcending national boundaries. Arbabsiar was further charged with an additional count of foreign travel and use of interstate and foreign commerce facilities in the commission of murder-for-hire. Arbabsiar was due to appear in a federal court in New York; if convicted of all charges, he would face life imprisonment.

In a news conference on Oct. 11, 2011, Attorney General Eric H. Holder Jr. said: "The criminal complaint unsealed today exposes a deadly plot directed by factions of the Iranian government to assassinate a foreign Ambassador on United States soil with explosives." He continued, "Through the diligent and coordinated efforts of our law enforcement and intelligence agencies, we were able to disrupt this plot before anyone was harmed. We will continue to investigate this matter vigorously and bring those who have violated any laws to justice."

Attorney General Holder explained that while payment for the operation had already been transferred via a New York bank, the conspiracy had not yet progressed to the point of the suspects acquiring explosives for the bombing aspect of the operation. Attorney General Holder also confirmed reports that Arbabsiar and Shakuri were connected to the Quds Force -- the elite division of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, which has been accused of being responsible for operations in other countries, and which has been a major player in Iran's controversial nuclear development program. Attorney General Holder additionally made it clear that the plot was "conceived" in Iran by the Quds force, effectively drawing a clear line of connection to Iran's power base.

Attorney General was unrestrained in his characterization of the plot, which he said had been orchestrated from the spring of 2011 to October 2011. He emphatically asserted that the conspiracy was "conceived, sponsored and directed by Iran," and warned that the White House would hold Tehran accountable for its alleged involvement in an elaborate plot of assassination and terrorism. It should be noted that United States officials were tying the plot to high levels of the Iranian government, albeit not directly to the Iranian president or ayatollah. It should also be noted that the United States Department of State has listed Iran as a "state sponsor" of terrorism since 1984; now in 2011, this latest revelation of an international conspiracy would no doubt reify that classification.

A Justice Department report detailed Arbabsiar's recruitment by senior officials in Iran's Quds Force, which reportedly funded and directed the elaborate assassination and terror plot. Extracts from that Justice Department report also indicated that Arbabsiar had gone so far as to discuss a Washington D.C. restaurant frequented by the Saudi ambassador and United States senators, as a possible venue for the target of the assassination. Those extracts suggested that high level Iranians were unconcerned about the additional collateral damage to American politicians or civilians in carrying out such an attack. As the trusted and long-serving envoy of Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah, the assassination of United States-educated Adel Al-Jubeir, along with potential deaths of United States citizens, would undoubtedly cause international furor.

There was an additional international trajectory, reminiscent of a Hollywood movie script, as the Iranian agents were trying to secure the assistance of Mexican drug cartels in carrying out the assassination element of the plot. Indeed, Arbabsiar was arrested as he attempted to travel to Mexico to meet with a Mexican drug cartel operative, allegedly to move forward with this plan. The Mexican informant was, in fact, working on behalf of the United States Drug Enforcement Agency. The involvement of Iranian agents, Mexican drug cartels, and terror targets on United States and Argentine soil, belonging to Israeli, and Saudi interests, effectively complicated the already-tangled web of complex geopolitics and international intrigue.

The mechanics of the plot notwithstanding, there would no doubt be questions about the motivation for the Iranian Quds Force to act against Saudi and Israeli interests on United States and Argentine soil. Of course, Iran's government has never restrained its expression of enmity for Israel; its antagonism towards Saudi Arabia is more opaque.

In fact, the Middle East has become the terrain of an ethno-sectarian power struggle between Sunni Islamic Saudi Arabia and Shi'a Iran in regional countries with mixed and complicated demographic mixtures of Sunnis and Shi'ites. According to United States authorities, Iranian-backed militias have been responsible for the upsurge in sectarian violence in post-invasion Iraq, where Shi'a Iran hopes to extend its influence. United States authorities have also alleged that the Iranian Quds Force has been instrumental in attacking American troops in Iraq.

Likewise, in Bahrain, which has a similar Shi'a-Sunni demographic composition as Iraq, and which has seen its own episode of unrest in the so-called 2011 "Arab Spring," Iran's desire to extend its influence was apparent. Specifically, as Saudi Arabian troops aided the Bahraini government in cracking down on the predominantly Shi'a opposition in Bahrain, Iran was quick to condemn the presence of foreign forces there. The scenario was a clear manifestation of the prevailing power struggle between the two sectarian power houses of the region -- Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shi'a Iran. Thus, it was quite possible that this 2011 assassination and terror plot was another such manifestation of these tensions.

There was little doubt that the matter would be taken to the United Nations Security Council, where veto-wielding permanent seat holders, China and Russia, have been reluctant to take strong measures against Iran in regard to

that country's controversial nuclear development program and its failure to abide with international conventions. Indeed, concurrence by China and Russia on the 2010 United Nations Security Council resolution against Iran was only reached due to Iran's unambiguous failure to comply with the standards imposed by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and the revelations about clandestine nuclear sites. Now, in 2011, with news of this assassination and terrorism plot, and the implicating of the Iranian regime, heavy pressure would be placed on China and Russia to again act in concert with the broader international community.

At the diplomatic level, the Saudi embassy in the United States released a strong statement of appreciation for the United States government for uncovering and foiling the plot. As well, during a news conference on Oct. 11, 2011, United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton delivered a vociferous warning to Tehran that her country would be working with the international community to isolate Iran, and to ensure that it would be held accountable for its actions in violation of international norms. Days later, United States President Barack Obama fortified his country's **stance** by confirming that Iran would pay a price for its involvement in this assassination and terrorism plot. "We're going to continue... to mobilize the international community to make sure that Iran is further and further isolated and pays a price for this kind of behavior," President Obama said. The United States leader stopped short of accusing the uppermost leadership echelon of the Iranian government of being involved in the alleged plot; however, he noted that even if Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei or President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad did not possess operational knowledge of the plot, "there has to be accountability with respect to anybody in the Iranian government engaging in this kind of activity."

For its part, the Iranian government has mocked any claims of its complicity in the conspiracy, suggesting that the entire situation had been a sensationalized scheme fabricated by the United States. It should be noted that the Revolutionary Guards holds control over Iran's nuclear program, as well as being the over-arching authority at the helm of the Quds Force -- the very group believed to behind the assassination and terrorism plot discussed here.

By the middle of October 2011, the United States was looking to parlay the allegations of attempted assassination and terrorism against the Iranian Quds Force into international action against Iran's nuclear development program. To this end, President Obama was pressuring IAEA inspectors to release classified intelligence information illuminating Iran's continuing efforts to develop nuclear weapons technology.

There have been some hints of the evidence against Iran available via the claims of IAEA director, Yukiya Amano, who suggested in September 2011 that Iran was working on nuclear triggers and warheads. According to the New York Times, insiders familiar with the findings of the classified IAEA report have intimated that Iran has made efforts to develop specific technologies related to the design and detonation of a nuclear device, including the mechanisms for creating detonators, the method for turning uranium into bomb fuel, and the formulas for generating neutrons to spur a chain reaction, and also casting conventional explosives in a shape that could set off a nuclear explosion.

Clearly, coming after the revelations about the assassination and terrorism plot linked to the Iranian Quds Force, the move to declassify the IAEA's report was oriented toward isolating Iran, now with accentuated political ammunition, and aimed at arguing the point that Iran was a grave threat to global security, therefore, the need to halt work on Iran's suspected weapons program was imminent. To this end, Tommy Vietor, a spokesperson for the National Security Council, said: "The United States believes that a comprehensive assessment would be invaluable for the international community in its consideration of Iran's nuclear program and what to do about it."

Of course, one of the risks of disclosing the findings of the classified report was that Iran could move to eject IAEA inspectors from that country, effectively foreclosing one of the few avenues available to the international community to monitor Iran's nuclear activities.

Meanwhile, among the punitive measures being advocated by senior White House officials was a prohibition on financial transactions with Iran's central bank. Another punitive measure under consideration was the expansion of the prevailing ban on the purchase of petroleum products sold by Iranian companies under the control of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps.

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These options have not, in the past, gained traction due to objections by China among other Asian countries. In the case of China, as a significant buyer of Iranian oil, that country's energy interests could be affected. At the same time, key United States allies, such as Japan and South Korea, are also buyers of Iranian oil but additionally handle transactions via the Iranian Central Bank. Complicating the scenario even further, oil and financial sanctions carry with them the threat of spiking the price of oil at a time when the economies of the United States, the European Union, and several other major global players, were enduring sluggish growth.

That being said, the case against Iran was bolstered by a November 2011 report by United Nations weapons inspectors, indicating a "credible" case that "Iran has carried out activities relevant to the development of a nuclear device" and arguing that such activities could well be ongoing. United Nations nuclear inspectors gave no estimate of how long it would be until Iran would be able to produce a nuclear weapon; however, they confirmed the aforementioned claim that Iran had created computer models of nuclear explosions in 2008 and 2009, and conducted experiments on nuclear triggers. The IAEA then passed a resolution expressing "deep and increasing concern" about Iran's nuclear program, and demanded that Iran clarify outstanding questions related to the country's nuclear capabilities.

While Iran was not on the verge of a declaration of its nuclear breakout capability, clearly, these revelations would serve to reinvigorate the debate about what method could be used to stop Iran from accessing a nuclear weapon. Under consideration would be options ranging from sanctions, to sabotage and military action. Despite Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's assertion that the report made clear the need for global action to stop Iran from developing nuclear weapons, Russia wasted no time in foreclosing the possibility of its support for fresh sanctions. With United Nations sanctions unlikely, on Nov. 21, 2011, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada slapped fresh sanctions on Iran's financial and energy sectors.

With international pressure being intensified against Iran, the Iranian regime appeared to be reacting by lashing out at the Western world. With hostilities already high between Iran and the United States, Tehran appeared to be taking aim at the United Kingdom.

Nov. 29, 2011 saw militant students aligned with the hard line conservative government in Tehran storm the British embassy compound. This action appeared to be part of a violent demonstration against the government of the United Kingdom, which joined the United States in issuing new financial sanctions against Iran.

There were serious allegations mounting that the assault on the British embassy compounds had taken place with approval from Iranian authorities. The scenario disturbingly recalled the shocking assault on the American Embassy in 1979 following Iran's Islamic Revolution.

The United Kingdom was backed by the 15-nation United Nations Security Council, which condemned the attack "in the strongest terms." Separately, United States President Barack Obama called for the Iranian government to ensure those responsible faced justice.

Other Significant Foreign Policy Developments of 2011/2012 --

President Obama authorizes 100 troops to help Uganda deal with notorious LRA rebels

In mid-October 2011, United States President Barack Obama authorized the deployment of approximately 100 combat-equipped forces to Uganda to assist regional forces in dealing with the notorious Lord's Resistance Army. The precise mission was the "removal from the battlefield" -- meaning capture or killing of -- LRA leader, Joseph Kony, and other senior leadership. The forces would be working in a cross-border zone encompassing Uganda, South Sudan, Central African Republic (CAR), and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and would be operating with the consent of the participating African countries.

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In a letter dispatched to House Speaker John Boehner, Republican of Ohio, President Obama explained that "although the U.S. forces are combat-equipped, they will only be providing information, advice, and assistance to partner nation forces, and they will not themselves engage LRA forces unless necessary for self-defense." Of course, the action was consistent with prevailing legal norms in the United States, due to legislation passed unanimously by Congress more than a year earlier in May 2010, called the "Lord's Resistance Army Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act," which expressed congressional support "for increased, comprehensive United States efforts to help mitigate and eliminate the threat posed by the LRA to civilians and regional stability." President Obama also noted that this deployment in 2011 would advance "United States national security interests and foreign policy, and will be a significant contribution toward counter-LRA efforts in central Africa."

The LRA is one of the most brutal entities operating in the world today. During the 20-year long conflict between the LRA and the Ugandan government, tens of thousands of people have died and two million have been displaced. Despite periodic peace overtures by the government, and in defiance of their own ceasefire declarations, the LRA has gone on to repeatedly carry out violent attacks on civilian populations in Uganda and surrounding border zones. Indeed, the LRA has operated across borders in an area that traverses several countries, compelling a joint-offensive by regional powers in an effort to stamp out the rebels. Nevertheless, by 2010, the United States-based human rights and anti-genocide group, Enough Project, said that the LRA had found safe haven in Sudan and was operating in Sudan's western Darfur region.

The LRA gained notoriety for its gross violations of human rights, such as rape, torture, murder, abduction of children for the purpose of making them either child soldiers or sex slaves, and vicious mutilation. United Nations Humanitarian Affairs head, Jan Egeland, has described the LRA's activities as being akin to the worst form of terrorism in the world. He has also characterized the situation in Central Africa as a horrific humanitarian crisis.

In 2004, the International Criminal Court of the United Nations commenced a war crimes investigation into the atrocities committed by the LRA. A year later in 2005, the ICC completed the inquest and issued the indictments of the group's five senior leaders. The war crimes charges included murder, rape, and forcible enlistment of children. The five individuals indicted included Kony, the leader of the LRA, as well as Raska Lukwiya, Vincent Otti, Okot Odhiambo and Dominic Ongwen. All five were yet to be apprehended. According to the ICC, it would be Uganda's responsibility to ensure that all five individuals were brought into custody to face trial.

In 2006, with no progress on the apprehension of the LRA leadership by Ugandan authorities, the international police agency, INTERPOL, issued wanted notices for the five indicted individuals (including Kony) on behalf of the ICC.

President Obama's multilateral foreign policy is bolstered in Libya

Coming on the heels of the successful "Jasmine Revolution" in Tunisia and the "Nile Revolution" in Egypt, protests by thousands of pro-democracy demonstrators in Libya resulted in the liberation of the eastern part of the country. As part of a brutal crackdown aimed at shoring up power in the government's center of Tripoli, the Qadhafi regime opened fire on anti-government protesters before commencing a brutal military offensive against opposition strongholds to the east. Unapologetic for his ruthless tactics and in the face of worldwide condemnation, Qadhafi called for the crushing of the resistance movement by all means necessary and "without mercy."

In response to the audacious move by Qadhafi to attack and kill his own people, the United Nations Security Council, on Feb. 26, 2011, voted unanimously to impose sanctions on Libya and to refer the Qadhafi regime to the International Criminal Court for alleged crimes against humanity. Then, on March 17, 2011, the United Nations Security Council authorized a "no fly zone" against Libya, with an international coalition commencing air strikes on military targets in that country, with an eye on protecting the Libyan people from the Qadhafi regime. By the close of March 2011, NATO had taken control of the operation, the rebels were reconstituting their efforts at taking control of eastern towns, and the Qadhafi regime said it welcomed an African Union plan for a ceasefire and resolution. The United States, in concert with its NATO allies, was providing a support role to the rebels of Libya as they carried out their fight against one-time terrorist sponsor, Qadhafi.

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Months later, Tripoli had fallen and the Qadhafi regime was being isolated. Only two remaining pro-Qadhafi strongholds remained: Qadhafi's hometown of Sirte and Bani Walid. Fierce fighting was reported in these two areas, with a special emphasis on Sirte, where Qadhafi -- still evading captivity -- was believed to be hiding. As rebels took control over the airport at Sirte, NATO forces were targeting command and control facilities in Sirte.

At the diplomatic level, the United States and allied Western nations wasted no time in recognizing the Transitional National Council (TNC) as the legitimate authority in Libya while the United Nations General Assembly had voted overwhelmingly to transfer control over Libya's seat at the international body to the interim Libyan authority.

In New York, the interim Libyan leader, Mustafa Abdel-Jalil, attended the meeting of the United Nations General Assembly and also met with President Barack Obama. President Obama, along with other Western leaders -- British Prime Minister David Cameron and French President Nicolas Sarkozy -- were being hailed as heroes in Libya for their stewardship of NATO's efforts to support the rebel effort in that country.

Finally, in October 2011, Libyan transitional authorities declared that Sirte -- the final pro-Qadhafi stronghold -- had fallen, Qadhafi had died, and Libya's national liberation was at hand. Indeed, it appeared that the rebels' brazen prediction was coming to pass: "Zero Hour" was finally descending on the Qadhafi regime in Libya.

On Oct. 23, 2011, Libya's transitional government declared the national liberation of the country before a rejoicing crowds at a venue now called "Victory Square" in the eastern city of Benghazi, where the anti-Qadhafi revolt began months earlier. He paid homage to Libyan martyrs who gave their lives for the cause of freedom and profusely thanked NATO countries for their support.

Faced with the objective of providing stabilizing support for the Libyan people's hard-fought victory, while at the same time ensuring that the Libyan story was ultimately written by the Libyan people, United States President Barack Obama said: "The United States is committed to the Libyan people. You have won your revolution." He continued, "The Libyan people now have a responsibility to build an open democratic Libya that stands as a great rebuke to Qadhafi's dictatorship." Following the declaration of national liberation, President Obama congratulated Libyans, saying: "After four decades of brutal dictatorship and eight months of deadly conflict, the Libyan people can now celebrate their freedom and the beginning of a new era of promise."

The death of Qadhafi -- the world's most wanted man in the aftermath of the elimination of terrorist leader Osama bin Laden -- could well be viewed as a vindication of United States President Barack Obama's foreign policy. That foreign policy has been characterized by limited military engagement within a multilateral framework of international structures, combined with the judicious use of refined geopolitical and military intelligence. It was a position the Obama administration wasted no time in claiming with great enthusiasm. As stated by Vice President Joseph Biden in an apparent contrast to the previous Bush administration's invasion of Iraq: "In Libya, the United States only spent two billion dollars and lost not one American life."

See below for the ongoing controversy involving a terror attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya.

Iran arrests 12 "CIA spies" said to be targeting nuclear program; Hezbollah informants at risk in Lebanon

On Nov. 24, 2011, according to the state-run IRNA news agency, Iran announced it had broken up an American spy network and that 12 individuals had been arrested. Iranian officials claimed that the 12 individuals were "spies" working on behalf of the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to undermine the country's military and its nuclear program. No information was available about the identity or nationality of the dozen so-called agents. Parviz Sorouri, an influential member of the National Security and Foreign Policy Committee in the Iranian parliament, was reported to have said that the agents were working cooperatively with Israel's Mossad. He was quoted in international media having said, "The US and Zionist regime's espionage apparatuses were trying to use regional intelligence services, both inside and outside Iran, in order to deal a strong blow to our country. Fortunately, these steps failed due to the quick measures taken by Intelligence Ministry officials." Iranian officials have further alleged that the United States has recruited spies from diplomatic missions in Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and Malaysia.

This news came on the heels of reports that the militant extremist Islamic organization, Hezbollah, uncovered a CIA spy ring in Lebanon. Months earlier, a Hezbollah member of parliament, Hassan Fadlallah, confirmed in an interview with Agence France Presse that "Lebanese intelligence vanquished U.S. and Israeli intelligence in what is now known as the intelligence war." A report by the Associated Press reflected the same claims with acknowledgment from officials in the United States. Of course, the dynamics of the respective governments notwithstanding, the lives of the individuals accused of spying were now broadly regarded to be at risk.

U.S. policy as regards Iran

As the year 2011 drew to a close, bilateral relations between the United States and Iran -- already dismally bad -- sunk even lower as an American drone was reported to be in Iranian hands. The official account was that the American drone had been flying in -- or close to -- Iranian air space, and somehow crashed. The drone, with its sensitive intelligence information, was then taken by Iranian authorities. But a report by the Christian Science Monitor suggested that Iran's possession of the drone may not have been the result of an accidental crash. Instead, according to an Iranian engineer, the country hijacked the drone and was able to technically take control of the aircraft by jamming the control signals, ultimately forcing it into autopilot mode. The Iranians then vitiated the GPS tracking by reconfiguring the GPS coordinates, effectively "fooling" the drone into landing in Iran, rather than in Afghanistan, which was where it was programmed to land. The images of the American drone in Iran's possession depict an aircraft remarkably intact -- rather than being subject to crash -- thus bolstering the credibility of the report by the Christian Science Monitor.

In December 2011, Iran successfully test-fired a medium-range surface-to-air missile during military exercises in the Persian Gulf.

The test occurred only a day after Iranian naval commander Mahmoud Mousavi denied media reports that his country had test-fired long-range missiles. Now, however, Mousavi was lauding the operation, noting that the missile was equipped with the "latest technology" and "intelligent systems." Mousavi also noted that further missile launches would be carried out in the near future as part of Iran's naval exercises in international waters close to the strategic Strait of Hormuz.

On Jan. 2, 2011, a day after testing a medium-range missile, Iran reportedly test-fired long-range missiles in the Persian Gulf. Making good on his previously-made vow that Iran would continue this path, Mousavi said on behalf of the Iranian government, "We have test fired a long-range shore-to-sea missile called Qader, which managed to successfully destroy predetermined targets in the gulf."

This news by Mousavi was followed by a disclosure by the Iranian Atomic Energy Organization that its scientists "tested the first nuclear fuel rod produced from uranium ore deposits inside the country." This news served only to bolster Western fears that Iran has made important progress in its nuclear development, augmenting anxieties that Iran's ultimate ambition is to enrich uranium at the 90 per cent level necessary to create a nuclear bomb.

This news from Iran came after several Western countries indicated their to impose further sanctions on Iran's oil and financial sectors, to register discontent over that country's continued nuclear ambitions. Indeed, the United States wasted no time in taking action and on Dec. 31, 2011, President Barack Obama signed legislation authorizing a package of sanctions

Iran's central bank and financial sector. These new sanctions by the United States aimed to intensify the pressure on Iran's oil sales, most of which are processed by the central bank. Essentially, they would force multinational companies to choose whether to do business with Iran or the United States. Perhaps not surprisingly, the Iranian currency -- the rial -- slipped in value to a record low as a result of the news.

Iran was increasingly slipping into a state of isolation. China and Russia -- typically antagonists to the notion of increased pressure on that country -- seemed to be distancing themselves from Iran. China was reportedly seeking alternative sources of oil, while Russia was expressing "regret" over Tehran's decision to start work at the new

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Fordow uranium enrichment plant near Qom. Russia went further by saying that Iran should commence "serious negotiations ... without preconditions" or face the reality of consequences.

Meanwhile, on Jan. 5, 2012, the United States (U.S.) Pentagon announced that the U.S. Navy rescued 13 Iranian fishermen being held by pirates in the Arabian Sea. According to the Pentagon, the U.S. Navy responded to a distress call from an Iranian fishing vessel, which had been boarded by pirates several weeks prior. The U.S. Navy was able to apprehend 15 suspected pirates on that fishing vessel and release the Iranian fishermen whom the Pentagon described as having been held hostage under harsh conditions. A spokesperson for the U.S. Navy said that after the rescue of the Iranian fishermen, navy personnel went out of their way to treat the fishing crew "with kindness and respect."

The incident occurred at a time when tensions between Iran and the West were elevated. Several Western countries had recently indicated their intent to impose further sanctions on Iran's oil and financial sectors, for the purpose of registering discontent over that country's continued nuclear ambitions. Iran warned that it might retaliate against international pressure by closing the Strait of Hormuz through which a significant amount of oil is transported.

Only days after the U.S. Navy rescued the Iranian fishermen (as discussed here), the Iranian Revolutionary Court sentenced an American national of Iranian descent to death sentence for spying in behalf of the United States spy agency, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The family of Amir Mirzai Hekmati said that he was in Iran to visit his grandparents; however, the Iranian authorities claimed that Hekmati was guilty of "co-operating with a hostile nation," "holding membership in the CIA," and "trying to implicate Iran in terrorism." For his part, Hekmati -- who had served in the Marines as an Arabic translator -- was shown on television admitting that he had been sent to Iran by the CIA and was tasked with infiltrate Iran's intelligence agencies. Of course, the United States Department of State has asserted that Hekmati's so-called confession was likely coerced and that the U.S. citizen had been falsely accused.

Hekmati would have the opportunity to appeal his sentence; it was yet to be seen if Iranian authorities were willing to damage already-hostile bilateral relations with the United States by executing a U.S. citizen. Such a move would not help Iran in the public relations game on the international scene, given the fact that the U.S. Navy had rescued the aforementioned Iranian fishermen from pirates.

For its part, Iran has warned that it might retaliate against international pressure by closing the Strait of Hormuz through which a significant amount of oil is transported. Indeed, Iranian Vice President Mohammad Reza Rahimi promised that "not a drop of oil will pass through the Strait of Hormuz" if further sanctions were imposed. That being said, analysts have noted that such a drastic step by Iran might serve primarily to hurt the Iranian economy, and imperil relations with Russia and China. Accordingly, the threat was being regarded with skepticism.

Moreover, United States Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta warned that a closure of the strait would yield consequences. Specifically, Defense Secretary Panetta said the United States would "not tolerate" the blocking of the Strait of Hormuz, and warned that was a "red line" for his country, to which there would be a response.

According to the New York Times, the Obama administration in the United States reportedly dispatched a message via alternative communications channels to Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei warning him that the closure of the Strait of Hormuz would not be tolerated. In a separate report on CBS News, the United States Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman General Martin Dempsey appeared to underline the potential response by his country, saying that the United States would "take action and re-open the strait." Of course, the general consensus was that the re-opening of the Strait of Hormuz could only be achieved by military means.

Clearly, the missile launch, the nuclear development news, the sanctions, the threats regarding the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, collectively raised the stakes in a burgeoning confrontation between Iran and the wider international community. As January 2012 was coming to a close, attention was on the question of what form that confrontation would take.

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Going the route of "soft power" rather than military might, the West wasted no time in intensifying the sanctions regime against Iran in a bid to place pressure on the Islamic Republic's regime to curtail its controversial nuclear development moves. Specifically, the European Union was imposing a phased ban on oil purchases from Iran, while the United States was expanding its sanctions on Iran's banking sector.

According to a statement issued in Belgium, the countries of the European Union would not sign on to new oil contracts with Iran and would terminate any existing contracts by mid-2012. Since the European market has made up a full fifth of Iran's oil exports, this sweeping oil embargo would constitute a crushing blow. Making matters worse for Iran was the news that the European Union would also freeze the assets of the Iranian Central Bank and it would prohibit transactions involving Iranian diamonds, gold, and precious metals.

Expressing marked disapproval for Tehran's lack of transparency regarding its nuclear program, British Prime Minister David Cameron, French President Nicolas Sarkozy, and German Chancellor Angela Merkel said that Iran had "failed to restore international confidence in the exclusively peaceful nature of its nuclear program."

Meanwhile, the United States' harsh sanctions regime against Iran would become even more targeted as it focused on the Bank Tejarat for its alleged role in (1) financing Iran's nuclear program, and (2) helping other banks evade international sanctions. In December 2011, United States President Barack Obama ordered a prohibition on any involvement with Iran's central bank. Now, a month later, the United States Treasury was asserting that the new sanctions against Bank Tejarat would target "one of Iran's few remaining access points to the international financial system."

Already diplomatically-isolated, Iran was now well on its way to being seriously financially isolated in the global marketplace. As noted by the United States Treasury Undersecretary for Terrorism David Cohen, "The new round of sanctions will deepen Iran's financial isolation, make its access to hard currency even more tenuous and further impair Iran's ability to finance its illicit nuclear program." Indeed, the rial -- Iran's currency -- was being deleteriously affected as it underwent a massive downward slide in value.

In apparent reaction to the measures by the United States and the European Union, Tehran again threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz.

The level of brinkmanship reached new heights as the United States Ambassador to NATO, Ivo Daalder, promised that his country and its allies would use any necessary measures to ensure that the crucial marine thoroughfare to the Persian Gulf remained open. In an interview with BBC News, Daalder said, that the Strait of Hormuz "needs to remain open and we need to maintain this as an international passageway. We will do what needs to be done to ensure that is the case." He continued, "Of this I am certain -- the international waterways that go through the Strait of Hormuz are to be sailed by international navies, including ours, the British and the French and any other navy that needs to go through the Gulf. And second, we will make sure that that happens under every circumstance."

Daalder did not foreclose the possibility of a diplomatic solution, saying that the countries of the West stood "ready at any time to sit down and have a serious conversation with [Iran] to resolve this [nuclear] issue with negotiations."

Just days after the war of words was being ratcheted upward, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad declared that Tehran was prepared to return to negotiating table as regards its nuclear program. On Jan. 26, 2012, Ahmadinejad said that he was open to the idea of reviving multilateral talks in order to show that Iran remained interested in dialogue. At the start of 2011, negotiations between Iran and a cadre of six nations (the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council -- the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia and China) as well as Germany -- ended in stalemate. Indeed, those talks were marked by Iran's refusal to engage in any meaningful dialogue regarding its nuclear program. Now, a year later, Ahmadinejad said on state-run Iranian television, "They have this excuse that Iran is dodging negotiations while it is not the case. Why should we run away from the negotiations?"

There was some suggestion that Iran's interest in a return to the negotiating table might be a sign that international pressure was taking a toll. That being said, Ahmadinejad's words could just as easily be interpreted as a symbolic gesture by a figure head intent on rallying national sentiment. To that end, Ahmadinejad suggested that the West

was responsible for the collapse of negotiations to date, saying. "It is the West that needs Iran and the Iranian nation will not lose from the sanctions. It is you who come up with excuses each time and issue resolutions on the verge of talks so that negotiations collapse."

As February 2012 began, Israel entered the Iranian nuclear fray. Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak indicated that if sanctions against Iran did not serve to curtail that country's nuclear development, then his country would be willing to consider military action against Iran, before it could become a global threat. It should be noted that United States Defense Secretary Leon Panetta expressed the view that Israel could very well strike Iran in the spring of 2012 -- citing a timeline of April through June. Panetta was cited in an article written by the Washington Post columnist David Ignatius, which suggested that Israel sought to hit Iran's nuclear targets before that country entered a "zone of immunity" in the effort to build a nuclear bomb. The article noted that the United States was opposed to such an attack, noting that it would imperil an increasingly successful non-military effort to isolate Iran, including the imposition of a harsh international economic sanctions program. Indeed, the Obama administration in the United States was reportedly worried about the "unintended consequences" of military action by Israel.

For its part, Iran had already said it was undeterred by either sanctions or threats of military action. Iranian Oil Minister Rostam Qassemi said the country would continue with its nuclear agenda regardless of pressure from foreign countries. As well, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei had earlier claimed that Iran was actually benefiting from Western sanctions. He insisted that the sanctions were helping his country to grow domestically, and said that war would only hurt the United States and other Western countries. Moreover, Khamenei issued a disturbing warning that Iran had its own "threats to make, which will be made in its due time."

By Feb. 6, 2012, United States President Barack Obama announced the imposition of new sanctions against Iran's banks, including its central bank, the Iranian government, and all other Iranian financial institutions. In a letter to Congress detailing his executive order, President Obama wrote: "I have determined that additional sanctions are warranted, particularly in light of the deceptive practices of the Central Bank of Iran and other Iranian banks to conceal transactions of sanctioned parties, the deficiencies in Iran's anti-money laundering regime and the weaknesses in its implementation, and the continuing and unacceptable risk posed to the international financial system by Iran's activities." As before, the United States was hoping that the even stricter sanctions regime would further isolate Iran.

President Obama also made it clear that the United States would stand in solidarity with Israel to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear power. In an interview with the NBC news, President Obama said the United States and Israel would work "in lockstep" to deal with the Iranian nuclear issue. "I will say that we have closer military and intelligence consultation between our two countries than we've ever had." President Obama also emphasized that while his objective was to resolve the nuclear standoff diplomatically, he was not taking any options off the table.

Of course, as noted above, the United States has sought to discourage Israel from going down the military route. This stance was emphasized on Feb. 19, 2012 when Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the United States Joint Chiefs of Staff, said in an interview with CNN that his country viewed a military strike on Iran by Israel as "not prudent." Dempsey noted that United States officials were attempting to move Israel away from that path saying, "That's been our counsel to our allies, the Israelis." He continued, "I'm confident that they [the Israelis] understand our concerns that a strike at this point would be destabilizing and wouldn't achieve their long-term objectives." That said, Dempsey had no illusions about the effectiveness of this argument as he noted: "I wouldn't suggest, sitting here today, that we've persuaded them that our view is the correct view. Nevertheless, Dempsey suggested that Iran was "a rational actor" and "the current path [re: diplomacy and sanctions] that we're on is the most prudent at this point."

The "soft power" of crippling sanctions -- led by the United States -- has, in fact, been yielding results. According to a report by Reuters, Iran was finding it difficult to purchase staples such as rice and cooking oil, which are needed to feed its population. For example, Malaysian exporters of palm oil stopped sales to Iran because they could not receive payment. Likewise, there were reports that Iran had defaulted on payments for rice from India -- its main supplier. As well, shipments of maize from Ukraine had apparently been cut in half. Meanwhile, the price of basic food was exponentially escalating. Meanwhile, countries around the world that previously did business with Iran,

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such as South Korea, were looking for alternative sources of oil. As well, multinational corporations based in Europe were suspending deals with Iran due to the new European Union sanctions.

Perhaps more detrimental for Iran were obstacles in selling its oil and receiving payments for its oil exports. In places where Iran is still able to sell oil, it has been stymied from receipt of funds due to prevailing sanctions, especially those levied by the United States. And in another twist, if Iran cannot sell its typical 2.6 million barrels of oil a day, or, if it must sell those barrels at deep discounts, the decreased revenue will inevitably have a debilitating effect on the Iranian economy, adding to the possibility of social unrest.

These findings from international commodities traders, which were part of a Reuters investigation, indicated real disruptions to Iran and flew in the face of claims from Tehran that sanctions were having no effect.

In February 2012, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad declared that his country had developed "advanced nuclear centrifuges," and that scientists had inserted nuclear fuel rods into Tehran's reactor that were enriched to 20 percent. Ahmadinejad also defiantly made clear that Iran had no intention of halting its uranium enrichment program. The West offering a symbolic yawn in response to Iran's nuclear announcement. France and the United Kingdom issued pro forma statements of "concern" while the United States Department of State spokeswoman, Victoria Nuland, dismissed the announcement as "not terribly new and not terribly impressive."

But on Feb. 21, 2012, Iran was now taking a belligerent tone as regards the prospects of military action with an Iranian military commander declaring that his country will take pre-emptive actions against enemies if its national interests are threatened. The deputy head of Iran's armed forces, Mohammad Hejazi, said in an interview with the Iranian Fars news agency, "Our strategy now is that if we feel our enemies want to endanger Iran's national interests, and want to decide to do that, we will act without waiting for their actions." Since Iran's leadership has a tendency to assert the country's ability to crush perceived enemies, it was difficult to determine if this statement should be regarded as the ratcheting up of rhetoric or a warning.

U.S Policy as regards Pakistan

As the year 2011 drew to a close, and with bilateral ties between Washington and Islamabad under great strain, the United States' Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) moved to suspend some drone missile strikes in Pakistan. According to a report by the Los Angeles Times, the CIA has suspended some drone missile strikes on gatherings of low-level targets suspected of terrorism or attacks on United States troops in the Afghan-Pak region.

An issue has been deteriorating bilateral relations between the United States and Pakistan dating back to May 2011 when United States President Barack Obama ordered a raid into Pakistani territory that ended in the death of global Jihadist terrorist, Osama Bin Laden. Relations were further strained by the November 2011 accidental death of 24 Pakistani soldiers as a result of United States gunships operating under the aegis of NATO. In response, Pakistan demanded that the United States vacate the Shamsi air base.

As well, Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani warned that Pakistan could even close Pakistan's air space to the United States. Additionally, Pakistan moved to block NATO supply convoys from operating "in country" and called for a review of cooperation with NATO and the United States.

For Pakistan, there was a growing climate of resentment for the invasion of sovereignty, and over the deaths of Pakistani citizens as a result of United States anti-terrorism operations in Pakistani territory. However, for the United States, there has been prevailing suspicion that Pakistan was complicit in attacks by the Taliban and other militant extremist groups, such as the Haqqani network, on Western and Afghan targets. In fact, the United States has suggested complicity of the Pakistan's intelligence agency in the siege of Kabul that targeted the United States embassy and NATO headquarters in the Afghan capital in September 2011.

The United States' claims were somewhat augmented by a report in the Dawn newspaper detailing the Pakistani government's admission that it had limited authority over the powerful military and intelligence services. To that end, the Pakistani Ministry of Defense reportedly told the country's Supreme Court it had no operational control

over the military or the country's intelligence agency. This claim would coincide with analysts' warnings that the even as the Pakistani government was trying to protect its own claims of sovereignty, its own power within this nuclear-capable country was severely curtailed. Thus, it was quite plausible that even as the Pakistani government was extending overtures of cooperation to the United States in fighting terrorism, it was balancing a difficult tightrope. Specifically, the powerful wings of the military and intelligence service in Pakistan could very well threaten the elected government's grip on power.

United States Restores Diplomatic Relations With Burma (Myanmar) in Response to Reforms

Summary:

The United States restored diplomatic relations with (Myanmar) on Jan. 13, 2012, in response to the government's move toward political reform. These measures have included allowing pro-democracy icon and opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi to contest upcoming parliamentary by-elections, a ceasefire with ethnic Karen rebels, and the release of political prisoners.

Landmark Visit of United States Secretary of State Clinton

In the latter part of 2011, foreign policy was at the forefront of the political landscape in Burma (Myanmar) as the Obama administration in the United States announced that it would send United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Burma (Myanmar) on the first visit by an American secretary of state in half a century. The decision appeared to be a test of sorts for the new civilian government.

Speaking from a regional summit in Indonesia at the time, President Barack Obama, linked the new domestic developments in Burma (Myanmar) with the decision to engage with that country. In particular, he referenced the regime's recent treatment of pro-democracy icon and opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, who was released from house arrest and was preparing to contest impending parliamentary by-elections (as discussed below). President Obama said, "Last night, I spoke to Aung San Suu Kyi directly and confirmed she supports American engagement to move this process forward." President Obama noted that Secretary of State Clinton would "explore whether the United States can empower a positive transition in Burma." He explained, "That possibility will depend on the Burmese government taking more concrete action. If Burma fails to move down the path of reform it will continue to face sanctions and isolation."

As November 2011 came to an end, Secretary of State Clinton landed in Burma (Myanmar) in the highly-anticipated historic visit to that country. There, Secretary of State Clinton met with Burmese President Thein Sein and pledged improved ties with Burma -- but only if that country continued on the path of democratization and reform. "The United States is prepared to walk the path of reform with you if you keep moving in the right direction," Clinton said. In an interview with media, Secretary of State Clinton addressed the recent moves to elections as follows: "These are incremental steps and we are prepared to go further if reforms maintain momentum. In that spirit, we are discussing what it will take to upgrade diplomatic relations and exchange ambassadors." But the United States' top diplomat asserted: "We're not at the point where we could consider lifting sanctions." One of the sticking points for the United States has been Burma's relationship with North Korea; the United States has apparently made it clear that Burma should sever "illicit ties" with North Korea. For its part, the government of Burma appeared to welcome the "new chapter" in bilateral relations.

It should be noted that Secretary of State Clinton also held talks with pro-democracy leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, in what the international community regarded as a landmark meeting of two of the most iconic female politicians of the modern era.

The Political Realm in Burma (Myanmar)

Just before United States Secretary of State Clinton arrived in Burma (Myanmar) in the aforementioned landmark visit, the domestic landscape in this country was dominated by the news that the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by noted pro-democracy icon, Aung San Suu Kyi, decided to rejoin the political scene. The NLD said that it would re-registered as a legal political party and contest the forthcoming by-elections. Notably, Aung San Suu

Kyi would herself be among the 48 candidates of the NLD seeking to contest the parliamentary by-elections, which were to be held in April 2012.

Speaking of this prospect at the time during an interview with Agence France Presse, Aung San Su Kyi noted, "If I think I should take part in the election, I will. Some people are worried that taking part could harm my dignity. Frankly, if you do politics, you should not be thinking about your dignity." She continued, "I stand for the re-registration of the NLD party. I would like to work effectively towards amending the constitution. So we have to do what we need to do."

The move constituted something of a political comeback for the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi after years of absence from the country's political arena. Indeed, the NLD boycotted the previous elections because of electoral laws prohibited Aung San Suu Kyi from contesting those polls. The NLD also accused the ruling junta of rigging the political structure to favor its newly-formed Union Solidarity and Development Party, and essentially creating a contrived electoral process. Now, the NLD had apparently decided that the time had come to re-enter the political system.

Note: By mid-December 2011, the NLD's bid to re-register as a legal political party was approved. Then, as noted here, in January 2012, it was confirmed that Aung San Suu Kyi would contest those elections for a parliamentary seat in the April 2012 vote.

Democratic Reform and Diplomatic Engagement

In late 2011, as the United States opened the door cautiously to bilateral dialogue, the government of Burma (Myanmar) appeared to be advancing measures intended to demonstrate its reformist credentials when Burmese President Thein Sein signed legislation allowing peaceful demonstrations for the first time. While the new law requires protesters to seek approval at least five days in advance of a possible rally, the move was clearly a shift in the direction of increased freedoms since all protests were previously prohibited. Indeed, it demonstrated a clear easing of long-standing political restrictions.

By the start of January 2012, the government of Burma (Myanmar) appeared to be traversing the path of political reform as the country's most prominent political dissidents were released from jail. Among those enjoying new-found freedom were

student protesters imprisoned since the late 1980s, Buddhist monks involved in 2007 pro-democracy protests, journalists, as well as ethnic and minority activists. In addition, former Prime Minister Khin Nyunt, who was detained in a 2004 purge, was released from house arrest.

The release of political prisoners was something the United States has urged for some time. United States President Barack Obama hailed the news that the government of Burma (Myanmar) had decided to free political dissidents from detainment, characterizing the move as a "substantial step forward." He said, "I spoke about the flickers of progress that were emerging in Burma. Today, that light burns a bit brighter, as prisoners are reunited with their families and people can see a democratic path forward."

In addition, there was new emerging from Burma (Myanmar) that the government was forging a ceasefire with ethnic Karen rebels. At issue was an emerging agreement with the Karen National Union.

In the background of these shifts was the parallel path of increased political participation of the opposition with the re-registering of the main opposition party, and the inclusion of Aung San Suu Kyi in impending parliamentary by-elections, as discussed here.

This groundwork yielded fruit for Burma (Myanmar) when the United States announced that Washington D.C. would restore diplomatic relations with Nay Pyi Taw in response to the Burmese government's move toward political reform. On Jan. 13, 2012, United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that her country would commence the process of exchanging ambassadors with Burma (Myanmar).

Foreign Policy United-States

As noted by Secretary of States Clinton, the restoration of bilateral relations would be an ongoing process and it would be dependent on further reform. She said, "An American ambassador will help strengthen our efforts to support the historic and promising steps that are now unfolding."

The development was a clear diplomatic victory for the Obama administration's policy of engagement. For his part, President Obama urged leaders in Burma (Myanmar) to take "additional steps to build confidence." He continued, "Much more remains to be done to meet the aspirations of the Burmese people, but the United States is committed to continuing our engagement."

This progress illuminated the success of Secretary of State Clinton's landmark visit to Burma (Myanmar) in December 2011, which facilitated productive results. At the time, Secretary of State Clinton said that she wanted to be "in country" to decide for herself whether President Thein Sein was serious about taking the path of democratization. To that end, it was believed that her visit could encourage Burma (Myanmar) to continue traversing that path of reform.

It should be noted that there was no immediate call for international sanctions against Burma (Myanmar) to be eased. Those sanctions -- in place since the 1990s -- have included arms embargos, travel bans on officials of the ruling regime, and asset prohibitions on investment. While the United States has clearly rewarded Burma (Myanmar) for its recent thrust for reform, the lifting of sanctions was not likely to occur until democratic changes in Burma (Myanmar) can be classified as incontrovertible and irreversible.

International analysts would be watching the ruling government's future treatment of the political prisoners who were recently released from detainment. Would they be able to participate in the proverbial public sphere, without fear of recrimination?

For its part, the government has said that it does not recognize the categorization "political prisoner" and, instead, has argued that it only jails people for criminality. That being said, President Thein Sein took a sanguine tone as he suggested that the prisoners who were released could "play a constructive role in the political process."

See below for more recent developments related to relations with Burma.

Tensions with Egypt

At the start of February 2012, approximately 40 aid workers were referred to a criminal court in Egypt on charges of illegally funding a civil society organization. The 40 aid workers were a multinational group including Europeans, Americans, Arabs, and Egyptians -- all of whom were non-governmental organization workers affiliated with organizations that failed to properly register with the government and were now facing charges. Among the defendants was Sam LaHood -- the son of Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood, who has been serving in the Obama administration. The situation has sparked tensions between the United States and Egypt. Speaking on behalf of the Obama administration, State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said, "We are urging the government of Egypt to lift these restrictions immediately and allow folks to come home as soon as possible. Frankly, we don't know how this is going to come out yet."

Irish Taoiseach meets with President Obama; grants U.S. president certificate of Irish heritage

On March 20, 2012, United States (U.S.) President Barack Obama and Irish Prime Minister Enda Kenny met behind closed doors to discuss Iran and Syria. After the meeting, the Irish Taoiseach described the talks as follows: "We discussed the issue of Syria, and I gave the president a rundown on the last discussions at the European Council meeting. We also discussed the question of Iran and what the U.S. has said very clearly about this in the short time window that there is" to reach an agreement on that country's efforts to build a nuclear weapon. For his part, President Obama discussed the strong bilateral bonds shared between his country and Ireland, and also thanked Ireland for contributing peacekeepers and humanitarian aid to various efforts around the world. In a nod to President Obama's partial Irish heritage, Prime Minister Kenny presented the United States' biracial president with

an official certificate of Irish heritage saying, "These are rare, as rare as the man himself." Thanking the Irish Taoiseach, President Obama

said, "This will have a special place of honor alongside my birth certificate." There was a significant eruption of laughter in the room in response to the president's quip regarding the ongoing obsession by far-right elements about his natural born status as an American citizen.

Update on Afghanistan

At the close of January 2012, it was reported that the Taliban in Afghanistan refused to assent to a ceasefire demand by the United States in Afghanistan. The demand was part of a prisoner exchange/peace proposal, which focused on the release of five leading Taliban commanders who were being held at the United States military detention facility at Guantanamo Bay (Cuba) since 2002. As reported by NBC news, a Taliban spokesperson said: "Our stance is the same. We will announce a ceasefire when the foreign forces start their withdrawal from Afghanistan."

By the start of February 2012, attention switched to the security scene in Afghanistan, with NATO affirming that local forces would play a leading role in defending the country in mid-2013, ahead of the complete termination of NATO combat operations in Afghanistan in 2014.

Speaking of these developments to come, NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said: From that time [2013], the role of our troops will gradually change from combat to support." Consistent with this plan, French President Nicolas Sarkozy announced his intention to withdraw his country's troops from Afghanistan by 2013. Meanwhile, United States Defense Secretary Leon Panetta was asserting success in the anti-extremist operations in Afghanistan, noting that insurgent forces there had been successfully weakened. Panetta said that the United States' goal in Afghanistan was to complete the transition "from a combat role to a training, advice and assist role" in 2013.

In March 2012, following a series of incidents (the unfortunate burning of Korans and the killing of civilians by a United States soldier), there was accentuated emphasis on United States foreign policy regarding Afghanistan. The American public was war-weary after such a lengthy engagement in Afghanistan and clamoring for "nation-building" at home on the domestic front. Accordingly, the calls for an even earlier exit strategy from Afghanistan were increasing.

That being said, the United States and its closest ally, the United Kingdom, indicated that the current schedule for ending engagement in Afghanistan would remain intact. Leaders of both countries addressed the matter while British Prime Minister David Cameron was in the United States for a state visit with American President Barack Obama. They said their respective countries would end combat roles in Afghanistan by mid-to-late 2013. Before then, 23,000 United States troops would return from Afghanistan by September 2012 (10,000 already returned in June 2011), as promised by President Obama. For its part, the United Kingdom would send 500 British troops home in the early autumn of 2012. These moves would assure that American and British forces would shift from lead combat roles to support and training capacities by the second half of 2013, with the complete termination of NATO combat operations in Afghanistan in 2014.

United States President Obama said his intent was to ensure a "responsible" end to the war in Afghanistan. Speaking of this issue, the American president said, "We have a strategy that will allow us to responsibly wind down this [Afghan] war. We're steadily transitioning to the Afghans who are moving into the lead. And that's going to allow us to bring our troops home. Already we're scheduled to remove 23,000 troops by the end of this summer ... following the 10,000 that we withdrew last year. And meanwhile, we will continue the work of devastating al-Qaida's leadership and denying them a safe haven." Referring to the recent tragedies and unfortunate incidents that raised tensions with Afghanistan, President Obama said, "There's no question that we face a difficult challenge in Afghanistan, but I am ... confident that we can continue the work of meeting our objectives, protecting our country and responsibly bringing this war to a close."

It should be noted that France was set to withdraw 1,000 of its soldiers from Afghanistan by the end of 2012, leaving about 3,000 "in country." Belgium had begun withdrawing half of its force at the start of 2012. Norway likewise began its withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan and was looking towards a complete exit. Spain said that 2012 would mark the start of its withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, with a complete exit set for 2014. Canada withdrew its combat troops in 2011 and had already made its transition to a training role in Afghanistan.

With an eye on smoothing tensions with Afghanistan, especially after Afghan President Karzai urged a faster exit of NATO forces from his country (as noted above), President Obama reportedly convened a telephone meeting with the Afghan leader. In that call, the White House said that President Obama and President Karzai "affirmed that they share the goal of building capable Afghan security forces and strengthening Afghan sovereignty so that Afghans are increasingly in charge of their own security, with the lead for combat operations shifting to Afghan forces, with U.S. forces in support, in 2013." Obviously, this schedule would also mean that the "date certain" for the deadline of the complete termination of NATO combat operations in Afghanistan in 2014 remained intact.

As March 2012 was entering its final week, the White House confirmed the exit schedule noting that the United States would have about 68,000 troops in Afghanistan in 2013 after surge forces withdraw from that country. Obviously, this schedule would also mean that the "date certain" for the deadline of the complete termination of NATO combat operations in Afghanistan in 2014 remained intact.

Special Report:

It's officially over; United States ends Iraq War

Summary: On Dec. 15, 2011, the flag of United States forces in Iraq was lowered in Baghdad, officially bringing the war to a close. As promised by President Barack Obama, the United States military would complete a full withdrawal of its troops from Iraq by the close of 2011. The move, as discussed here, would provide President Obama with the opportunity to assert that he kept one of his most important 2008 campaign promises: to bring the controversial war in Iraq to a responsible conclusion. Speaking at a ceremony at Fort Bragg in North Carolina for troops returning home the previous day, President Obama declared: "The war in Iraq will soon belong to history, and your service will belong to the ages." He additionally noted that his country had left behind a "sovereign, stable and self-reliant Iraq." At home, Americans were sure to applaud the fact that there would be no more expenditure on former President George Bush's Iraq War, which cost some one trillion USD. Meanwhile, the future course of Iraq -- in terms of political stability, national security, and economic development -- was now in the hands of the Iraqi people.

U.S. ends combat operations in Iraq after seven and a half years

In the early hours of Aug. 19, 2010, (Iraq time) the last major combat brigade of United States forces left Iraq and crossed the border into Kuwait. They were protected from above by Apache helicopters and F-16 fighters, and on the ground by both American military and the very Iraqi armed forces that they helped to train. The exit of the United States forces ensued in a phased basis over the course of several days. The final convoy of the United States Army's 4th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, was carrying 14,000 United States combat forces in Iraq, according to Richard Engel of NBC/MSNBC News, who was embedded with the brigade. A small number of United States combat troops were yet to depart Iraq, and approximately 50,000 troops would remain in Iraq until the end of 2011 in a support role to train Iraqi forces. Indeed, by Aug. 24, 2010, less than 50,000 United States troops were reported to be "in country" -- the very lowest level since the start of the war in 2003.

While violence continued in Iraq -- even in the days after the last American combat brigade left Iraq -- it was apparent that the Obama administration in the United States would not be deterred from the schedule for withdrawal, these fragile and chaotic conditions on the ground in Iraq notwithstanding. This decision has been a source of consternation among some quarters. In fact, a top military official in Iraq has questioned the withdrawal of United States forces from Iraq, warning that local security forces were not able to handle the security challenges on

their own for at least a decade. Echoing a similar tone, military officials from the United States said in an interview with the Los Angeles Times that it was highly unlikely that Iraqi security forces were capable of maintaining Iraq's fragile stability after the exit of United States troops from Iraq in 2010. Nevertheless, the citizenry in the United States was war-weary and concerned over the costs of war at a time of economic hardship, while President Barack Obama was intent on making good on his promises made while as a candidate and later, as president, to end the war.

The withdrawal of the last major combat brigade was regarded with great symbolism as an end to the combat mission of the war in Iraq that has gone on for seven and a half years. It also made clear that President Obama was fulfilling his central campaign promise to end the war in Iraq -- a vow that was reiterated in 2009 when President Obama set the deadline for the end of the combat mission in Iraq as Aug. 31, 2010. To this end, President Obama was fulfilling this promise even though Iraq was yet to form a new government several months after its parliamentary elections. It should be noted that the withdrawal of United States forces from Iraq was set forth in the Status of Forces agreement signed two years ago.

President Obama gave a televised address on Aug. 31, 2010, regarding the end of the active phase of United States operations in Iraq. That was the official deadline set by President Obama for the exit of combat forces from Iraq and the end to the war.

In this address to the nation from the Oval Office, President Obama asserted: "Operation Iraqi Freedom is over, and the Iraqi people now have lead responsibility for the security of their country." President Obama paid tribute to the military that carried out their mission, saying that he was "awed" by the sacrifices made by the men and women in uniform in service of the United States. President Obama additionally noted that the United States itself paid a high price for the Iraq War saying, "The United States has paid a huge price to put the future of Iraq in the hands of its people." The president noted that he disagreed with his predecessor, former President George W. Bush, on the very premise of the war, but urged the nation to "turn the page" on that chapter of recent history. To these ends, he said: "We have sent our young men and women to make enormous sacrifices in Iraq, and spent vast resources abroad at a time of tight budgets at home... Through this remarkable chapter in the history of the US and Iraq, we have met our responsibility. Now, it is time to turn the page."

For his part, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki noted that his country was "independent" and that Iraqi security forces would now confront all the security threats facing the nation. Maliki said in his own address to the nation, "Iraq today is sovereign and independent. Our security forces will take the lead in ensuring security and safeguarding the country and removing all threats that the country has to weather, internally or externally." He also sought to reassure Iraqis that the security forces were "capable and qualified to shoulder the responsibility" of keeping Iraq safe and secure.

United Nations lifts sanctions on Iraq

It should also be noted that in December 2010, the United Nations Security Council lifted sanctions against Iraq. The vote ended most of the measures comprising a harsh sanctions regime that had been held in place for almost two decades, starting with the time of Iraq's 1991 invasion of Kuwait during the era of Saddam Hussein. In its statement, the United Nations Security Council said that it "recognizes that the situation now existing in Iraq is significantly different from that which existed at the time of the adoption of Resolution 661." Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari said of the move, "Today Iraq will be liberated from all sanctions caused by wars and misdeeds of the former regime." Meanwhile, United States Vice President Joe Biden, who acted as chairman of the meeting, said: "Iraq is on the cusp of something remarkable -- a stable, self-reliant nation." Striking a more pragmatic tone, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon noted that Iraq would yet have to forge an agreement with Kuwait in regards to its border, and would also have to resolve the matter of war reparations. To date, five percent of Iraq's oil revenues have been used to pay war reparations to Kuwait.

U.S. President Obama announces complete withdrawal of troops by close of 2011

On Oct. 21, 2011, United States President Barack Obama announced the complete withdrawal of all American troops from Iraq by the close of 2011. President Obama said his country's nine-year military engagement in Iraq

would officially come to an end at that time. He noted that the United States had fulfilled its commitment in Iraq and would bring all American troops home "in time for the holidays."

With the end of United States' combat operations in Iraq in August 2010, the end of the war was believed to be in the offing. That being said, at the time in mid-2010, approximately 50,000 troops remained in Iraq in a support role to train Iraqi forces. Negotiations have been ongoing since that time to forge a deal that would allow them to stay in Iraq to work with Iraqi security forces. However, the United States and Iraq were unable to find concurrence on an agreement allowing United States trainers to remain "in country" and still enjoy immunity. Thus, United States President Obama and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki concluded that the time had come to shift the nature of their bilateral relationship to one marked by respect for mutual sovereignty.

The end of the Iraq war would close a controversial chapter in the story of American foreign policy, which began with George W. Bush's doctrine of "pre-emptive war," undertaken in the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Indeed, the invasion of Iraq -- the defining policy decision of former President Bush -- resulted in the ousting of former Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein, from office. The invasion of Iraq was criticized as a violation of international law by many, and condemned as ill-conceived foreign policy by others who argued that Iraq had nothing to do with the terror attacks in the United States of 2001, and that Iraq was not home to weapons of mass destruction -- the two expressed reasons for going to war in Iraq, according to the Bush administration. Analysts further warned that the deleterious consequence of the war and the unintended result of the ousting of Saddam Hussein would be ethno-sectarian strife and a strengthened Iran. Of course, on the other side of the equation, the Bush administration insisted on the necessity of the war in the interests of national security. These competing viewpoints notwithstanding, the war in Iraq ultimately left more than 4,400 American soldiers and tens of thousands of Iraqis dead.

As President Bush's successor to the presidency, President Obama has stood as a vocal critic of the Iraq war whose political influence in the war-weary United States intensified due to his pledge to bring an end to the controversial military engagement in Iraq. Clearly, now in 2011, President Obama was honoring a 2008 campaign promise to end the war in Iraq in a responsible manner. Indeed, President Obama said: "The U.S. leaves Iraq with our heads held high." He continued, "That is how America's military efforts in Iraq will end."

It should also be noted that the Obama administration has emphasized the fact there will be no permanent military bases in Iraq -- even after the withdrawal of all remaining troops from Iraq at the end of 2011. As well, as stated in the National Defense Authorization Act for 2010 passed by Congress and signed by President Obama on Oct. 28, 2009: "No funds appropriated pursuant to an authorization of appropriations in this Act may be obligated or expended ... to establish any military installation or base for the purpose of providing for the permanent stationing of United States Armed Forces in Iraq." That being said, Iraq is home to one of the United States' most significant embassies.

Flag of U.S. forces in Iraq lowered in Baghdad bringing the war to a close

On Dec. 15, 2011, the flag of United States forces in Iraq was lowered in Baghdad, officially bringing the war to a close. The small, somber, and symbolic ceremony in Baghdad, which focused on the military tradition of retiring or "casing" the flag, marked the end of the Iraq War. On this historic day, only 4,000 troops remained "in country," and were expected to depart Iraq within two weeks. At the height of the United States-led occupation of Iraq, there were as many as 170,000 American troops in that country.

Speaking of the momentous occasion, United States Defense Secretary Leon Panetta said: "To all of the men and women in uniform today your nation is deeply indebted to you." Secretary Panetta paid tribute to the sacrifices of United States' troops saying that they could leave Iraq with great pride. He declared, "After a lot of blood spilled by Iraqis and Americans, the mission of an Iraq that could govern and secure itself has become real."

As promised by President Barack Obama, the United States military would complete a full withdrawal of its troops from Iraq by the close of 2011. The move, as discussed here, would provide President Obama with the opportunity to assert that he kept one of his most important 2008 campaign promises: to bring the controversial war in Iraq to a responsible conclusion.

Speaking at a ceremony at Fort Bragg in North Carolina for troops returning home the previous day, President Obama declared: "The war in Iraq will soon belong to history, and your service will belong to the ages." He additionally noted that his country had left behind a "sovereign, stable and self-reliant Iraq." The American president also asserted that United States troops had left "with their heads held high" and he lauded their "extraordinary achievement." President Obama said, "Everything that American troops have done in Iraq, all the fighting and dying, bleeding and building, training and partnering, has led us to this moment of success." He continued, "You have shown why the U.S. military is the finest fighting force in the history of the world." At home, Americans were sure to applaud the fact that there would be no more expenditure on former President George Bush's Iraq War, which cost some one trillion USD.

Iraq -- while now liberated from the dictatorial hand of Saddam Hussein -- was not fully stabilized. Indeed, an insurgency continues to plague the country, which is culturally and politically characterized by ethno-sectarian tensions. There are enduring questions about the Iraqis' ability to maintain security in this country. Nevertheless, Iraq has made it clear that the time had come to end the occupation of their country. Indeed, as stated by Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Hussain al-Shahristani, "I think we are all happy that the American soldiers are returning home safely to their families and we are also confident that the Iraqi people and their armed forces, police, are in a position now to take care of their own security."

Clearly, the future course of Iraq -- in terms of political stability, national security and economic development -- was now in the hands of the Iraqi people. That agenda would not be achieved with ease. On Dec. 20, 2011, only one day after the United States withdrew its last combat troops from Iraq, the Shi'a-dominated government of that country ordered the arrest of Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi, a Sunni, on grounds of terrorism. The Iraqi authorities accused al-Hashimi of directing a death squad that assassinated police officers and government officials. The serious charges were sure to damage the coalition government, and indeed, already a Sunni-backed political coalition said that its ministers would resign from their posts, effectively leaving several Iraqi agencies in disarray. While the charges themselves, if true, could not be understood as anything by highly disturbing, another school of thought was warning that the Shi'a dominated government might be abusing its authority to persecute the minority Sunni in leadership positions, in a bid to consolidate power. For his part, Vice President Hashemi denied any wrongdoing and said he was ready to defend himself against the accusations of terrorism. Vice President Hashemi also wasted no time in accusing Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, a Shi'a, of orchestrating a sensational plot to debase him and to undermine the process of national reconciliation. He also warned that the situation could send Iraq -- an incredibly young and fragile democracy characterized by complex ethno-sectarian tensions -- into a state of sectarian war.

Special Feature:

Nuclear Politics on the Global Stage

Highlights --

- U.S. President Obama visits Korean DMZ; affirms ties with South Korea
- U.S. President calls for "a world free of nuclear weapons"
- Follow up on the "New START" treaty between U.S. and Russia
- North Korean "denuclearization for food" deal dead amidst plans for satellite launch
- Japan and U.S. prepare for fallout from North Korean launch
- Implications of global cooperation on Iran's nuclear development program
- New sanctions for Iran?

In Detail --

In the aftermath of a "denuclearization for food" agreement with the United States, there were high hopes that the deal would facilitate progress in multilateral negotiations on North Korea's nuclear program. Those high hopes were somewhat dashed by news that North Korea intended to launch a satellite into orbit.

The bilateral "denuclearization for food" deal was formalized at the end of February 2012 and included the exchange of 240,000 tons of food from the United States for North Korea's pledge to move towards denuclearization. The agreement included provisions for a North Korean moratorium on nuclear tests, long-range missile launches and uranium enrichment at its Yongbyon nuclear center, and acceptance of United Nations inspectors who would monitor the implementation of the terms. At the time, South Korea's Yonhap news agency reported that Washington and Pyongyang "reached the agreement based on North Korea's pledge to implement initial measures of denuclearization that include a suspension of its uranium-enrichment program" in exchange for much-needed food. North Korea, which has been plagued by chronic food shortages, would soon receive shipments of food aid, including biscuits and nutritional supplements for infants, rather than rice, which was requested by the North Koreans. United States officials have apparently been concerned that rice would be given to the country's military rather than used to alleviate the dire circumstances of the North Korean general populace.

The agreement was intended to set the tone for forthcoming multilateral nuclear negotiations. Six-party talks -- involving North Korea, South Korea, Japan, China, Russia, and the United States -- have stalled since late 2008. For its part, the United States welcomed the North Koreans' movement on the breakthrough deal, deeming it "important, if limited." United States Department of State spokeswoman Victoria Nuland took a cautiously optimistic stance saying, "The United States still has profound concerns regarding North Korean behavior across a wide range of areas, but today's announcement reflects important, if limited, progress in addressing some of these."

That caution appeared to be well placed since North Korea was planning to launch a satellite. Pyongyang announced on March 16, 2011, that it would launch an "earth observation" satellite, or the Kwangmyongsong-3, using a long-range rocket. The event was intended to mark the 100th birthday of its late leader Kim Il-Sung. Of course, such a move would be contrary to the prevailing United Nations resolutions, which prohibits North Korea's use of long-range intercontinental ballistic missile technology, as well as the aforementioned "denuclearization for food" agreement, the latter of which requires North Korea to adhere to a moratorium on nuclear tests and long-range missile launches.

Not surprisingly, all the other countries involved in multilateral negotiations -- South Korea, Japan, China, Russia, and the United States -- expressed dismay over this plan by North Korea. Nuland pointed to this concurrence and urged North Korea to rethink the satellite launch saying, "Obviously, we were heartened that every single one of the six-party talks participants made clear that they think that this would be an extremely bad idea and a violation of U.N. Security Council resolutions, so we are hoping and expecting that the DPRK will take that to heart." The United States also noted it would be "very hard" to go forward with its planned food assistance if North Korea moved ahead with the plan to launch a satellite into orbit.

The geopolitical complexity of the Korean peninsula became more complicated on March 21, 2012, when the White House in the United States announced that President Barack Obama intended to visit to the world's most heavily militarized border -- the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). The White House explained that the trip to the DMZ was intended to convey the president's support for the 30,000 United States troops stationed in South Korea, and to augment bilateral relations between Washington and Seoul. In a press briefing, Daniel Russel, Asia director for the White House National Security Council, said: "The DMZ is the front line of democracy in the Korean Peninsula, and it's the symbol of the U.S. and [South Korean] resolve, as well as solidarity. So a visit by the president there to see and to thank the U.S. and the South Korean service members makes perfect sense."

After his visit to the DMZ, President Obama was set to attend a global summit aimed at reducing the risk of nuclear terrorism in the South Korean capital of Seoul. In addition to the controversial and difficult issues of nuclear development in Iran and North Korea, the summit also addressed the threats posed by nuclear terrorists, as well as radiological materials that could be used to construct a "dirty bomb" (i.e. a bomb that would spread radiological contamination rather than causing a nuclear explosion). Also on the agenda was a plan for nuclear power stations to convert to low-enriched fuel. Due to the complexity of these issues, it was unlikely that new agreements and concurrence would be found anytime soon despite the participation of 50 countries at the Nuclear Security Summit. Notably absent from the list of participants at the summit were North Korea and Iran.

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During his trip to Asia for the Nuclear Security Summit, President Obama reiterated his call for "a world without nuclear weapons" and advanced his foreign policy agenda that advocates non-proliferation and the reduction of nuclear weapons through increase diplomacy.

In a speech to students at South Korea's Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, President Obama said the United States -- the only nation to have ever used nuclear weapons -- was fully committed to reducing its stockpile of nuclear arms. The United States leader said his country had a

"moral obligation" to pursue strategic arms cuts. President Obama also drew thunderous applause from the audience of students when he said that, as a father, he did not wish to see his daughters growing up in a world with nuclear threats.

"I say this as president of the only nation ever to use nuclear weapons," Obama said. "I say it as a commander in chief who knows that our nuclear codes are never far from my side. Most of all, I say it as a father, who wants my two young daughters to grow up in a world where everything they know and love can't be instantly wiped out."

President Obama acknowledged his country's unique position in the world but noted that "serious sustained global effort" was needed to achieve his expressed hope for a nuclear weapons-free world.

The issue of nuclear proliferation has been at the forefront of the international purview given the ongoing concerns about North Korea's nuclear arsenal as well as Iran's nuclear ambitions. To that latter end, President Obama was expected to meet with Russia's outgoing President Dmitry Medvedev on the matter of Iran's nuclear program -- an issue that has not always seen progress due to divisions among countries with veto power on the United Nations Security Council. With an eye on working cooperatively with such countries, President Obama pledged to work with Russia and China at reducing the risk of nuclear terrorism.

With regard to China, President Obama noted he has called on Beijing to work directly with Washington and this offer "remains open." He further noted that the Nuclear Security Summit in Seoul presented an opportunity for the United States and China to fortify bilateral relations. He said, "I think this is also an opportunity to build on the excellent cooperation and dialogue across all the dimensions of our relationship that we've been able to establish over the last three years" The United States leader observed that the summit "shows the progress that the international community has made in preventing nuclear proliferation and making sure that we've secured nuclear materials." He continued,

"And I know that's in the interest of both the United States and China."

With regard to Russia, the United States president said he hoped to follow up on the New Start Treaty (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty).

The "New START" provided for the significant reduction of the arsenal of nuclear weapons held by the United States and Russia; it would limit the United States' stockpile of 2,000 strategic nuclear weapons, and Russia's stockpile of nearly 3,000 to between 1,500 and 1,675 warheads respectively. "New START" was regarded as a milestone in the decades-long thrust to decrease the chances of nuclearized warfare. Indeed, it could arguably be characterized as one of the most important treaties forged in a generation.

President Obama expressed hope there could be a deal forged with Russia for further strategic arms cuts with Russia as part of the nuclear disarmament agenda. "Going forward, we'll continue to seek discussions with Russia on a step we have never taken before -- reducing not only our strategic nuclear warheads, but also tactical weapons and warheads in reserve," President Obama said.

Domestic politics intervened onto the international summit when President Obama was overheard telling his Russian counterpart President Dmitry Medvedev that dealing with the European missile defense shield would have to wait until after the election. President Obama suggested he would have more "flexibility" on difficult issues, such as missile defense, after the presidential election in the United States later in the year. Willard "Mitt" Romney, a

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political rival of President Obama, pounced on the United States' presidents words, saying that they were "alarming" and "troubling." Romney also cast Russia as the "number one geopolitical foe" of the United States. Russian President Medvedev responded to these claims by rebuking the American presidential hopeful for using such bellicose language, saying Romney's comments "smelled of Hollywood." Medvedev also offered some advice to American aspirants to higher office regarding foreign policy in the modern era. He said, "I recommend that all U.S. presidential candidates... do at least two things: that they use their head and consult their reason when they formulate their positions, and that they check the time - it is now 2012, not the mid-1970s." For its part, the White House explained that President Obama was expressing the political reality of the campaign season where rigorous diplomacy and negotiations would be difficult to accommodate.

President Obama addressed the issue of Iran's controversial nuclear development program, saying that time remained to resolve the deadlock through diplomacy. "But time is short," said President Obama. "Iran must act with the seriousness and sense of urgency that this moment demands," he continued.

For its part, Iran has insisted that it has the right to develop nuclear development for peaceful civilian purposes. On the other side of the equation, the West has asserted that Iran is seeking to build nuclear weapons via its clandestine nuclear arms development program. While Iran has been subject to sanctions as a result of its failure to fulfill its international obligations, international concurrence has not come easily due to objections from China and Russia. However, President Obama made it clear that he intended to work with these two countries as he stated: "Today, I'll meet with the leaders of Russia and China as we work to achieve a resolution in which Iran fulfills its obligations."

Addressing the matter of North Korea's nuclear ambitions, President Obama made it clear that the United States held "no hostile intent" to that country, but warned that there would be "no rewards for provocation."

The United States president said: "The United States has no hostile intent toward your country...We are committed to peace. And we are prepared to take steps to improve relations, which is why we have offered nutritional aid to North Korean mothers and children." President Obama continued, "But by now it should be clear, your provocations and pursuit of nuclear weapons have not achieved the security you seek -- they have undermined it. Instead of the dignity you desire, you're more isolated. Instead of earning the respect of the world, you've been met with strong sanctions and condemnation. You can continue down the road you are on, but we know where that leads. It leads to more of the same -- more broken dreams, more isolation, ever more distance between the people of North Korea and the dignity and the opportunity that they deserve."

President Obama also reiterated the warning already issued by his government that the long-range missile launch to place a satellite in orbit would only result in isolation for Pyongyang.

He said,

"With respect to North Korea, we are going to be both sending messages to North Korea that they should not go forward with this missile launch, which would violate existing U.N. Security Council resolutions. And our hope is, is that we can resolve these issues diplomatically."

President Obama also joined South Korean President Lee Myung-bak in noting that North Korea would be subject to further sanctions if it did not cancel its launch plans. Making clear the options available for North Korea, President Obama addressed the leadership of that country saying, "You can continue with the road you are on but we know where that leads...Today, we say: Pyongyang, have the courage to pursue peace."

For his part, Kim Jong Un -- North Korea's new leader -- appeared to be following his father's footsteps in the realm of rhetoric as he deemed the nuclear summit to be "a childish farce." Earlier, Pyongyang asserted that denunciations of North Korea would amount to a "declaration of war."

Pyongyang was also signaling that it had no intention of pulling back from its missile launch to sent a satellite into orbit. Instead, South Korean sources were reporting that North Korea moved a long-range rocket to a launch pad

close to the Chinese border. As well, satellite imagery appeared to depict preparations for the launch, which Pyongyang has said will take place between April 12-16, 2012. The guidance was that the rocket would follow a trajectory that would take it close to south-western Japan.

Accordingly, Japan's defense ministry made it clear that it had ordered the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to intercept North Korea's rocket launch, if necessary, using its missile shield. Japanese authorities also alerted rescue personnel that they would be mobilized to deal with potential disasters, should the veer off course. Already, the South Korean government had said that it would shoot down any North Korean rocket that strayed into its territory. As well, the United States was sea-based X-band radar into the Pacific to monitor the launch. Upset about the prospect of rocket debris affecting countries of the Pacific, President Benigno Aquino III of the Philippines called on Pyongyang to abandon the launch plans.

It should be noted that the Obama administration in the United States canceled its food aid program to North Korea due to that country's decision to move forward with the satellite launch. An official from the Pentagon was cited as saying: "Why we're not providing that food assistance at

this point is because our confidence in their ability to meet their agreements has been diminished. We do not use it as a lever to change their policies."

Along another vein, the United States was clearly using sanctions to pressure Iran into changing its nuclear development policies. As March 2012 drew to a close, President Obama was clearing the way to tighten sanctions against that country. Suggesting that there was enough oil on the world market to allow countries to withstand the loss of some Iranian oil, President Obama moved to ramp up sanctions against Iran that would penalize foreign entities that purchase oil from Iran's central bank, which collects payment for most of the country's energy exports. This move was intended to pressure Iran to halt its nuclear program.

Special Report:

U.S. President Obama marks one-year anniversary of elimination of Bin Laden; makes surprise trip to Afghanistan

Introduction

On May 1, 2012, United States President Barack Obama marked the one year anniversary of the elimination of notorious global Jihadist terrorist, Osama Bin Laden, by making a surprise visit to Afghanistan, to mark the approaching end of the war that has lasted for more than a decade. While President Obama traveled to Afghanistan to sign a strategic partnership agreement with Afghanistan, the trip was imbued by symbolic significance. As a president seeking a second term in office, the trip brought to mind the signature achievement of President Obama's refocused war effort: the killing of Bin Laden.

Revisiting the Elimination of Bin Laden --

The war in Afghanistan was sparked by the tragic 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, which were orchestrated by Bin Laden. As the leader of the terror enclave al-Qaida operating from Afghanistan, then-United States President George W. Bush promised to hunt down Bin Laden and get him "dead or alive." Bush launched attacks on the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, which was allied with Bin Laden, later that year. While the Taliban regime was defeated and a new government installed, the effort to capture or kill Bin Laden waned, most notably as the Bush administration became embroiled in the war in Iraq, leaving Afghanistan war effort in the hands of multinational coalition forces under the aegis of NATO command. Since his election to power in 2008, President Obama closed down the war in Iraq and made good on his campaign promise to redouble the United States' war effort in the Afghan-Pak region, given the general belief that Bin Laden was hiding in Pakistan and that al-Qaida was now operating widely across the border.

Finally, on May 1, 2011, following a highly orchestrated operation ordered by United States President Barack Obama, it was announced that Bin Laden had been killed by United States special forces during a raid on a highly-fortified compound in Pakistan. United States forces from the elite Navy Seal Team Six launched an attack on Bin

Laden's mansion in Abbottabad, located about 60 miles to the northeast of the Pakistani capital of Islamabad. United States officials said that while Bin Laden could have been taken into custody alive by United States commandos, the terrorist leader was shot to death after resisting detainment and an ensuing gun battle.

Politically, the successful elimination of Osama Bin Laden could hardly be interpreted as anything but a boon for President Obama. His predecessor, Bush, staked his presidency on the anti-terrorism theme, even arguing that a war in Iraq was necessary in the effort against global terrorism. However, Bush was never able to apprehend Bin Laden. Bush was criticized by his political opponents for allowing Bin Laden to escape capture at Tora Bora in Afghanistan and for using questionable tactics -- including torture and extraordinary rendition -- to try to find and eliminate al-Qaida terrorists. Earlier efforts by former President Bill Clinton to target Bin Laden also ended in failure. Consequently, for years since his earliest forays into global terrorism, including the East Africa embassy bombings of the 1990s, Bin Laden evaded capture. In fact, he raised the ire of many in the world by regularly releasing taped messages encouraging attacks on the United States, Western interests, Western allies, and even fellow Muslims deemed to be enemies of his extremist doctrine.

But in 2011, President Obama had made good on a promise he made while a candidate -- to move immediately on actionable intelligence to either kill or capture Osama Bin Laden. Indeed, having received the intelligence that Bin Laden may have been hiding out in a mansion in Pakistan, President Obama opted not for a drone attack; instead, he ordered a surgical strike, carried out by special forces, and left open the possibility of taking Bin Laden alive. It was a high risk calculation that could have ended in disaster. Instead, the operation ended with the world's most notorious terrorist dead, no deaths to Americans participating in the operation, no civilian casualties, and five deaths in total (Bin Laden included). Striking a patriotic tone at the time, President Obama hailed the outcome saying, "Today we are reminded that as a nation there is nothing we can't do."

An Exit Strategy from Afghanistan --

Since the elimination of Bin Laden in 2011, the war-weary American public has clamored for an end to the military engagement in Afghanistan. The matter has caused political consternation between some factions. On one hand were those who want the United States out of Afghanistan, in accordance with a "date certain" schedule, and concentrating on economic development on the home front. Then there were the neoconservatives who have urged continual military engagement in Afghanistan as part of a muscular anti-terrorism campaign. Another divide resided at the heart of the Afghanistan war debate. There were hawkish elements warning that a premature withdrawal of ground forces would result in a reversal of the fragile military gains made against the Taliban and al-Qaida in Afghanistan. At the other end of the philosophical spectrum was a cadre of advisers who were against the initial surge strategy in Afghanistan, favoring instead targeted attacks in the Afghan-Pak region.

In June 2011, more than a month after the killing of Bin Laden, President Obama unveiled his exit strategy from Afghanistan. At issue was the number of United States troops expected to leave Afghanistan and the associated pace of withdrawal from that country.

To be clear, since coming to office, President Obama tripled the number of United States forces operating in Afghanistan, for a total of about 100,000 troops "in country." Included in this 100,000 number were the 30,000 troops that were added as part of the "surge" aimed at providing reinforcements in the mission to reverse the Taliban's battlefield momentum.

In his 2011 Afghanistan strategy address, President Obama unveiled a plan to redeploy United States troops from Afghanistan and effectively end its commitments in that country that had now lasted a decade. President Obama ordered the withdrawal of 10,000 United States troops from Afghanistan in 2011, with another 23,000 troops to be redeployed the following year. This "draw down" of 33,000 United States forces from Afghanistan would essentially end the aforementioned surge by the summer of 2012. Remaining "in country" would be the rest of the troops -- about 67,000 in total -- which would themselves undergo a steady pace of phased withdrawal to end by a final deadline of 2014. Commanders on the ground in Afghanistan would be given the autonomy to sort out the "battlefield geometry" and decide on what types of troops would be needed in certain capacities from special forces, to trainers, intelligence officers, and combat troops.

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President Obama explained that the withdrawal plan would take time, saying, "This is the beginning -- but not the end -- of our effort to wind down this war." He also outlined the specific mission in Afghanistan going forward was to be: "No safe-haven from which al-Qaida or its affiliates can launch attacks against our homeland, or our allies. We will not try to make Afghanistan a perfect place. We will not police its streets or patrol its mountains indefinitely. That is the responsibility of the Afghan government, which must step up its ability to protect its people."

All told, the new mission would transition from that of comprehensive counter-insurgency (COIN) strategy to a focused and targeted counter-terrorism strategy, aimed at capturing and killing terrorists and insurgents. There would also be a clear "date-certain" exit deadline. Borrowing from the experience in Iraq, the Obama administration believed that it was vital that the Afghan government be pressured towards taking full responsibility for the country's security, and the United States Congress needed to have clear targets to be used as mileposts for evaluation.

Exit Strategy Confirmed --

Fast forward to May 2012 and the United States president landed in Afghanistan in a surprise visit to sign a partnership security agreement with Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

President Obama -- traveling in Air Force One -- traveled to Afghanistan under a veil of secrecy before landing in the dark of night at Bagram Air Base north of Kabul. The trip meant that the partnership security agreement would be signed on Afghan soil. Coming on the anniversary of the death of al-Qaida's leader, the timing of the trip was key. Not only was it a reminder that Afghanistan -- the geopolitical source of the 2001 terror attacks remained in the cross-hairs of American interests -- but it also signaled that the long engagement in that country was coming to an end.

The agreement, which was signed at the Afghan presidential palace, was something of a road map for bilateral relations going forward. Ensclosed in it was the confirmation of the exit strategy as regards military engagement at the close of 2014, as well as the direction for future relations through the following decade.

Before departing from Afghanistan, President Obama offered an address to his fellow Americans. Speaking from a military base in Afghanistan, the United States president acknowledged the end of the Iraq war and presaged an end to the war in Afghanistan saying, "The Iraq war is over. The number of our troops in harm's way has been cut in half, and more will be coming home soon. We have a clear path to fulfill our mission in Afghanistan, while delivering justice to al-Qaida." President Obama nonetheless indicated that the United States had to complete its mission. He said, "I will not keep Americans in harm's way a single day longer than is absolutely required for our national security," Mr Obama said. "But we must finish the job we started in Afghanistan, and end this war responsibly." Making it clear that the Afghanistan war was moving towards its final stages, President Obama said, "My fellow Americans, we have traveled through more than a decade under the dark cloud of war. Yet here, in the pre-dawn darkness of Afghanistan, we can see the light of a new day on the horizon." Conjuring up the national agenda, he said: "It is time to renew America."

The president also noted that at the forthcoming NATO summit in Chicago, the alliance would "set a goal for Afghan forces to be in the lead for combat operations across the country next year." Already, NATO -- in line with the President's exit schedule -- had signaled that combat operations in Afghanistan would end by the close of 2014. Indeed, NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen was already on the record indicating that 2013 would be a transitional year for NATO, with 2014 as a likely end date. He said: From that time [2013], the role of our troops will gradually change from combat to support."

Consistent with this plan, French President Nicolas Sarkozy has announced his intention to withdraw his country's troops from Afghanistan by 2013, although, like the United States, phased withdrawals would begin in 2012. As well, British Prime Minister David Cameron has said that his country would end its combat roles in Afghanistan by mid-to-late 2013, with phased withdrawal starting in 2012 and a shift to a support role for remaining troops in the next year. Belgium had already begun withdrawing half of its force at the start of 2012. Norway likewise began its withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan and was looking towards a complete exit. Spain said that 2012 would mark

the start of its withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, with a complete exit set for 2014. Canada withdrew its combat troops in 2011 and had already made its transition to a training role in Afghanistan.

It should be noted that only hours after President Obama departed Afghanistan on Air Force One, a suicide car bombing ensued in Kabul. Afghan officials said that at least two suicide bombers targeted a guesthouse popular with foreigners in the eastern part Kabul in the attack, killing several people. The Taliban soon claimed responsibility for the attack.

Shift in Strategy --

In May 2012, the New York Times reported that President Obama's strategy in the Afghan-Pak region has shifted over time, and his policy-making has gradually moved away from advice from military commanders to influence by his inner national security circle. At issue in the New York Times report was a suggestion that military leaders agreed to the president's circumscribed withdrawal schedule only because they believed they could persuade "an inexperienced president" to extend the engagement. Such an end, was not to come. According to a White House national security aide, President Obama reportedly said: "Well, I'm not going to give them more time."

The New York Times asserts that President Obama concluded in his very first year in office that the neo-conservative vision -- advanced by the previous Bush administration -- of remaking a democratized Afghanistan was unrealistic, and that the real threat posed to the United States was emanating from nuclearized Pakistan with its fragile and unstable government. Over the course of the next two years, President Obama repeatedly narrowed the goals of the Afghanistan mission, limiting the goals to targeted assassinations in the region against al-Qaida's leadership and weakening that terrorist enterprise. References to the fight against the resurgent Taliban were limited, and in some ways replaced by reminders that Afghanistan would have to be responsible for its own security. There has also been an increased reliance on drone strikes in the Afghan-Pak region and also in Yemen, where al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula has become far more active. Stated differently, rather than being bogged down further in a potentially victory-free war in Afghanistan, the Obama administration has moved toward a more tactical and targeted approach of eliminating enemies of the state.

President Obama's shift in approach was reportedly sourced in a briefing of the Obama transition team shortly after Barack Obama won the 2008 election. During that briefing, Thomas Donilon -- who would eventually become President Obama's national security adviser -- viewed a Power Point presentation in which military officials in the outgoing Bush administration expressed an inability to articulate a clear strategy for engagement in Afghanistan after eight years at war in that country.

The president's evolving strategy was also informed by the realization that Afghan President Hamid Karzai was a volatile and corrupt leader, who should not be trusted as a reliable partner. Another consideration has been the cost of a continued counter-insurgency plan championed by the generals that would cost about one trillion over ten years, without any guarantees of truly transforming the Afghan landscape. As stated by the New York Times, "The more he [President Obama] delved into what it would take to truly change Afghan society, the more he concluded that the task was so overwhelming that it would make little difference whether a large American and NATO force remained for two more years, five more years or ten more years."

Following up on that insight, once he was inaugurated, President Obama commissioned a rapid review by former Central Intelligence Agency officer Bruce Riedel. That review offered the first glimpse of an emerging policy that would look not only at Afghanistan, but at the threat posed by al-Qaida terrorists from the wider Afghan-Pak region, where nuclear-armed Pakistan with its shadowy intelligence service was identified as the bigger challenge. At first, the political calculation was that indicting Pakistan with such claims would not pay dividends either in Islamabad or in Washington D.C. As well, according to his aides, the president felt compelled to try to eke out a victory in Afghanistan by continuing the effort there, if only with a date-certain exit. Over time, though, the goals of that effort became more limited with the president's national security aides informally dubbing it: "Afghan Good Enough."

By 2011, President Obama reportedly reached his breaking point and concluded that he wanted an orderly exit strategy to be draw up for Afghanistan. The results of that assignment was manifested in the Obama administration's withdrawal schedule and plan, as discussed here.

Fastforward to the 2012 NATO summit in Chicago and on May 20, 2012, President Obama again affirmed the exit schedule from Afghanistan in 2014, while making it clear that all combat operations led by United States forces end in 2013. The end of the war in Afghanistan dominated the NATO summit where France's newly-elected President Francois Hollande made it clear that French troops would be withdrawn by the end of 2012 -- two years ahead of the schedule. (As noted above, France was to withdraw 1,000 troops in 2012 with the rest to remain "in country" until 2014.) Acknowledging that there would be "hard days ahead" for Afghanistan, President Obama urged allied countries to "pool resources" to assist in completing the mission. NATO leadership and the Obama administration also placed pressure on Pakistan to re-open key NATO supply routes through that country into Afghanistan, which were closed in late 2011 after air strikes accidentally killed Pakistani troops.

Editor's Note:

President Obama's decision to end the Iraq war, his restrained approach towards conflicts in Libya and Syria, his reliance on smart sanctions (or "soft power") with regards to nuclear Iran, suggest a "light footprint" orientation. Furthermore, President Obama's refocus on the Afghan-Pak region, culminating in May 2011 with the elimination of Bin Laden, and his tactical/targeted approach to deal with al-Qaida havens, collectively offer a glimpse of his foreign policy. Indeed, the Obama doctrine has embraced the following elements: (1) vigorous diplomatic engagement augmented by strategic military pressure; (2) strategic pragmatism, reliant more on intelligence and targeted operations than excessive boots on the ground; (3) multilateralism, in which an engaged United States of America works within an international framework to solve global problems; and (4) fidelity to democratic ideals, in which the United States would support self-determination of freedom-seeking people, while eschewing the neoconservative vision of American hegemony and empire.

National Security Special Reports

CIA says it foiled another "underwear bomb plot" involving double agent

On May 7, 2012, the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) said that it foiled a new "underwear bomb plot" by al-Qaida in Yemen. According to United States authorities, an upgraded version of the failed 2009 "underwear bomb" was disrupted and the improvised explosives device (IED) was now in the hands of United States intelligence officials. The bomb plot did not reach the advanced planning stages -- such as selection of a target and the purchase of airplane tickets -- and, accordingly, did not pose a direct threat to the public. That being said, the very development of the IED was a clear indication of the intent to carry out a terrorist attack.

A statement released by the Federal Bureau of Investigation read as follows: "As a result of close co-operation with our security and intelligence partners overseas, an improvised explosive device (IED) designed to carry out a terrorist attack has been seized abroad. Initial exploitation indicates that the device is very similar to IEDs that have been used previously by al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in attempted terrorist attacks, including against aircraft and for targeted assassinations."

It was soon disclosed that the foiling of the plot involved a double agent who infiltrated an al-Qaida terror cell, volunteered for the suicide mission, but who then delivered the IED to joint United States and international authorities. The double agent -- a British national of Saudi background -- supplied crucial intelligence information to United States and other foreign intelligence agencies, which allowed the CIA to successfully direct a recent drone strike in Yemen that killed Fahd al-Quso -- a senior figure in al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Al-Quso was linked with the 2000 bombing of the USS Cole in Yemen.

Meanwhile, with the IED in the hands of the CIA, it could now undergo technical and forensic analysis. Of concern was the degree of technological advancement garnered by al-Qaida terrorists as they attempt to evade conventional airport security measures, such as metal detectors and body scans. The "custom fit" device was reportedly difficult to detect in current airport security checks, and is believed to be the work of master bomb-maker and member of al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula -- Ibrahim Hassan Tali al-Asiri.

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Overall, the operation was an extraordinary intelligence coup for joint United States, British, and Saudi authorities. The identity of the double agent/informant has not been disclosed although, according to the New York Times, the British national was recruited by United Kingdom intelligence and has been functioning under the aegis of Saudi intelligence service, and in close cooperation with the CIA for several years.

U.S. cuts aid to Pakistan aid over jailing of doctor who helped with Bin Laden raid

On May 25, 2012, a United States (U.S.) Senate panel cut \$33 million in aid to Pakistan as a result of that country's decision to place Shakil Afridi in jail for assisting the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in locating the notorious Jihadist terrorist, Osama Bin Laden, who was ultimately found -- and killed -- on Pakistani soil. Afridi -- a Pakistani doctor -- was sentenced to 33 years in jail for treason under a tribal system of justice. He was found guilty of operating a vaccination program as a cover for gathering intelligence on behalf of the CIA. United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton characterized Afridi's jail term as "unjust and unwarranted." Accordingly, the Senate Appropriations Committee decided to cut U.S. aid by one million for each year of Afridi's sentence. Describing his country's increasingly problematic relationship with Pakistan, Democratic Senator Patrick Leahy said: "It's Alice in Wonderland at best. If this is co-operation, I'd hate like hell to see opposition." Likewise, his Republican colleague, Lindsay Graham said: "We need Pakistan, Pakistan needs us, but we don't need Pakistan double-dealing and not seeing the justice in bringing Osama Bin Laden to an end." For its part, Pakistan has maintained the view that that any country would take strong action if it found one of its citizens working for a foreign spy agency.

Al-Qaida deputy commander al-Libi killed by U.S. drone strike in Pakistan

On June 5, 2012, United States officials confirmed that the al-Qaida deputy commander, Abu Yahya al-Libi, was killed during a drone strike in the tribal area of northwestern Pakistan. As the second in command after al-Qaida leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Abu Yahya al-Libi was a high value target on the face of it. That said, al-Libi's elimination was also a practical accomplishment in the mission to defeat al-Qaida. Specifically, al-Libi has played a critical role in organizing al-Qaida's terrorism agenda against the West, according to United States officials, and there would be few individuals capable of filling his shoes. Moreover, as a young and charismatic figure, he was long considered the future leader of al-Qaida, and a likely successor to the less popular Zawahiri.

An Islamic scholar from Libya, al-Libi had become a respected al-Qaida leader possessing both religious credentials as he issued fatwas, as well as logistical guidance in terror operations. He joined al-Qaida in Afghanistan in the 1990s and was captured by NATO forces in 2002. Instead of transporting him to the United States for trial as a member of a designated terrorist organization, the Bush administration kept him jailed at the Bagram airbase along with many other high-ranking al-Qaida operatives. There, in 2005, al-Libi and three other leading al-Qaida terrorists launched a successful prison break from Bagram. He then rejoined al-Qaida in Pakistan, and rose through the ranks due to his cachet as an escapee from "the belly of the infidel." Al-Libi's standing as a marquee player in al-Qaida became obvious as more videotaped footage of him leading the front-lines, training operatives, and offering Jihadist sermons took hold on extremist Islamic websites.

Of course, in Pakistan, the drone strike raised the ire of the Pakistani government, and spurred Pakistani authorities to lodge a formal protest against the United States for violating its sovereignty. Indeed, coming after a spate of drone strikes by the United States on Pakistani territory in only the space of two weeks, anger by Pakistani authorities was at new heights.

However, the United States was well-placed to offer that counter-argument that Pakistan's sovereignty argument was weak since it clearly has no sovereign control over the volatile tribal regions of the northwest where extremists militants and terrorists have found safe haven. For its part, the United States was likely to be quite satisfied that it had struck a blow to the al-Qaida "brand" around the world.

United States will designate Haqqani network as terrorists

It should be noted that by September 2012, the Obama administration in the United States announced that it would blacklist the Haqqani network by designating the group to be a terrorist organization. To be sure, the

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Haqqanis were responsible for some of the deadliest attacks against American troops in Afghanistan in recent times. The move was expected to help in curtailing the group's fund-raising activities in countries like Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates; moreover, it could help spur Pakistan into launching its own military offensive against the Haqqanis.

Special Reports on Foreign Policy (as of 2012/2013)

Russian President Putin says missile deal more likely with Obama than Romney

In the first week of September 2012, Russian President Vladimir Putin entered the fray of American presidential politics, characterizing United States President Barack Obama as "a very honest man" while disparaging Republican nominee Mitt Romney as being politically craven.

In an interview with state media, President Putin said that if President Obama was re-elected in the November 2012 elections in the United States, he believed it was possible for a compromise agreement to be forged over the difficult issue of a United States' proposal for missile defense system in Europe. Russia has been opposed to the establishment of such a missile system in its geopolitical neighborhood; however, President Putin was signaling that a deal could be reached with an Obama administration in the United States that would satisfy the interests of both countries. He said, "Is it possible to find a solution to the problem, if current President Obama is re-elected for a second term? Theoretically, yes." The Russian president went on to state the following: His desire to work out a solution is quite sincere. I met him recently on the sidelines of the G-20 summit in Los Cabos, Mexico, where we had a chance to talk. And though we talked mostly about Syria, I could still take stock of my counterpart. My feeling is that he is a very honest man, and that he sincerely wants to make many good changes." He continued, "But this isn't just about President Obama."

The Russian head of state pivoted to talk about President Obama's rival for the presidency saying that although he could work with any American administration, there were limits to be considered. He said, "We'll work with whichever president gets elected by the American people. But our effort will only be as efficient as our partners will want it to be." President Putin then launched into as sharp rebuke of Mitt Romney's claim that Russia was "without question" the United States' "Number one geopolitical foe."

Putin said: "As for Mr. Romney's position, we understand that this is to a certain extent motivated by the election race. But I also think that he was obviously wrong, because such behavior on the international arena is the same as using nationalism and segregation as tools of U.S. domestic policy. It has the same effect on the international arena when a politician, a person who aspires to lead a nation, especially a superpower like the U.S., proclaims someone to be an enemy." Returning to the contentious matter of the missile shield, President Putin posed the following rhetorical question: "But what happens if Mr. Romney, who believes us to be America's No. 1 foe, gets elected as president of the United States? In that case, the system will definitely be directed against Russia."

It should be noted that President Putin's rare praise for President Obama stands in contrast to his attitude towards other American officials, or, American foreign policy in general. Russia has blocked a number of United State-backed Security Council resolutions against Syria at the United Nations, has at times stymied efforts to pressure Iran on its nuclear development program, and has even accused the United States' Department of State of providing tacit verbal support of anti-government demonstrations after Russia's recent disputed parliamentary elections.

Israeli PM wants "red line" on Iran over nuclear threat; Iran threatens retaliation for possible attack

As September 2012 began, the Iranian nuclear threat resurfaced with International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) report that Iran had doubled its nuclear development capacity at the Fordo nuclear site. According to the IAEA, there were now more than double the number of enrichment centrifuges at Fordo although new equipment was not yet functional. The IAEA also said that Iran had "significantly hampered" its ability to inspect the Parchin military site, which the nuclear watchdog agency said had been "sanitized," presumably to obfuscate Iranian nuclear activities. Undoubtedly, this collective news would concern Israel, raising the specter of an Israeli strike on Iranian

nuclear facilities. Of significance was the fact that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was set to address the United Nations General Assembly in September 2012 on the dangers of Iran's nuclear program.

With that gathering of the United Nations General Assembly in New York in the offing, Israeli Prime Minister attempted to schedule a meeting with United States President Barack Obama. Media reports indicated that Netanyahu said that he was prepared to travel to Washington D.C. to meet with President Obama. The White House declined the meeting on the basis of the United States' leader schedule; it also drew attention to the fact that there were no bilateral meetings scheduled for the United States president with any other leaders. The White House also pointed to a meeting between Prime Minister Netanyahu with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton .

The White House further noted that there was ongoing contact between President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu over a number of security issues, including the nuclear threat posed by Iran. In statement, the White House confirmed that President Obama had just spoken with President Netanyahu for an hour on Sept. 11, 2012. The statement included the following assertions: "The two leaders discussed the threat posed by Iran's nuclear program, and our close cooperation on Iran and other security issues. President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu reaffirmed that they are united in their determination to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, and agreed to continue their close consultations going forward."

Nevertheless, Netanyahu's inability to secure a meeting with President Obama fueled speculation about poor relations between the two men. It was certainly possible that the White House was not in the mood to reward Netanyahu after he criticized the United States for not being tough enough on Iran over its nuclear program. During a news conference in Jerusalem with Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov, Netanyahu spoke of the international community's reluctance to sanction a military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities. He said, "The world tells Israel: wait, there's still time. And I say: wait for what? Wait until when?" He continued, "Those in the international community who refuse to put red lines before Iran don't have a moral right to place a red light before Israel." Prime Minister Netanyahu went on to characterize Iran as "the greatest threat to world peace." The level of rhetoric from the Israeli leader was so high that the Haaretz newspaper described Netanyahu's remarks as "an unprecedented verbal attack on the United States government."

By the close of September 2012, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu had addressed the United Nations General Assembly and declared that time was running out to halt Iran's push to acquire enough enriched uranium to develop a nuclear bomb. Using a crude visual and a red pen, Netanyahu again reiterated his demand that there be a "red line" drawn as regards the Iranian nuclear threat.

Prime Minister Netanyahu charged that Iran might have sufficient material to create a nuclear bomb by the middle of 2013, thus requiring a clear message from the international community in the form of the "red line." Netanyahu said, "Red lines don't lead to war, red lines prevent war. Nothing could imperil the world more than a nuclear-armed Iran." He also dismissed the effectiveness of sanctions passed against Iran, saying that they had not curtailed Iran's nuclear program and asserting that "The Iranian nuclear calendar does not take time out."

It should be noted that the United States has generally taken the view that an aggressive sanctions regime was the best path to placing pressure on Iran to end its nuclear development program. As well, United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton seemed to dismiss Netanyahu's call, saying instead that her country was not prepared to commit to drawing "red lines." In his own address to the United Nations General Assembly, President Barack Obama asserted that his country would "do what we must" to stop Tehran acquiring nuclear arms." But he also made it clear that while the United States has not foreclosed a military option against Iran, multinational negotiations and sanctions should be given time to work.

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For its part, Iran responded to the Israeli prime minister's address by warning that it had the right to retaliate to any military strike on its territory or interests. Iran's deputy United Nations ambassador also said that his country possessed enough military might to defend itself and that it was not seeing nuclear weapons capability in the first place. Eshagh al-Habib said his country was "strong enough to defend itself and reserves its full right to retaliate with full force against any attack."

That being said, Iran's often-repeated claim that it had the right to a civilian nuclear program was itself subject to serious challenge. In mid-September 2012, the United Nations nuclear watchdog agency, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), issued a stern rebuke of Iran's refusal to suspend uranium enrichment. Notably, the IAEA's resolution was proposed jointly by the United States, China, Russia, Germany, France, and the United Kingdom in a rare display of unity as regards the Iranian nuclear development issue. Meanwhile, IAEA Director General Yukiya Amano noted that despite a series of meetings with Iran throughout 2012 aimed at ensuring that the IAEA would be able to carry out its investigations, there had been no concrete results. Amano characterized the lack of progress as "frustrating."

Nuclear talks between Iran and the United States?

On Oct. 21, 2012, the New York Times reported that Iran had agreed to bilateral negotiations with the United States over its controversial nuclear development program. The New York Times, in its report, suggested that the talks might be held after the November 2012 general elections in the United States. But shortly after this news item broke in the public sphere, the Obama White House was denying key aspects of these claims, asserting instead that while it was, in principle, prepared to meet with Iran bilaterally, there was actually no such plan afoot.

Tommy Vietor, a spokesperson for the United States National Security Council, offered the following statement: "It's not true that the United States and Iran have agreed to one-on-one talks or any meeting after the American elections." He continued: "We continue to work... on a diplomatic solution and have said from the outset that we would be prepared to meet bilaterally." Vietor reiterated the Obama administration's stance, saying: "The president has made clear that he will prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon, and we will do what we must to achieve that. The onus is on the Iranians to do so, otherwise they will continue to face crippling sanctions and increased pressure."

This latter statement referred to the ongoing approach to dealing with Iran. With an eye on pressuring Iran, the United States, countries of the European Union, and other Western nation states have levied harsh sanctions on that country.

The United States, in particular, has taken the view that an aggressive sanctions regime was the best path to placing pressure on Iran to end its nuclear development program. While United States President Barack Obama has not foreclosed the option of a military strike (either by the United States or Israel) on Iran's nuclear facilities, and he has made his determination to stop Iran from building a nuclear bomb clear, he has also been emphatic that the harsh sanctions regime be given a chance to work. In a September 2012 address to the United Nations General Assembly, President Barack Obama asserted that his country would "do what we must" to stop Tehran acquiring nuclear arms." But he also said that multinational negotiations and sanctions should be given time to work.

To that end, Iran was certainly suffering as a result of the crippling sanctions that included restrictions on banking, shipping, trade, insurance, as well as commodities and energy transactions. Together they have struck a blow on Iran's commercial ties to the outside world. One area of sanctions that has seen notable success has been the exhaustive ban by SWIFT -- an international financial clearinghouse -- which prohibits the transfer of Iranian funds. The SWIFT ban has affected access by ordinary Iranians to basic food items. At the same time, Iranians were being subject to inflated prices of cooking oil and other staples, as well as a precipitous decline of Iran's national currency,

which itself led to domestic unrest. Meanwhile, customs data from around the world showed that Iranian oil exports and oil revenues had sharply decreased. The question, of course, was whether or not the burgeoning decimation of the Iranian would actually affect Tehran's behavior on the nuclear issue.

A possible indication of the answer to that latter question came on Nov. 3, 2102, when the British-based Guardian newspaper reported that Iran suspended its 20-percent uranium enrichment levels as a goodwill gesture ahead of talks with the United States. Higher levels of uranium enrichment was a precursor to weapons-grade uranium. The Guardian cited a report on the Al Arabiya website, which quoted Mohammad Hossein Asfari, a Iranian member of parliament, who indicated that his country was hoping that damaging sanctions would be lifted in return for this move. The report seemed to be on something of a collision course with a recent revelation that Iran had recently finished installing centrifuges for enriching uranium at its underground nuclear facility in Fordo. It should be noted that the Guardian soon published a clarification of its original story, noting that Asfari was misquoted and that Iran had, in fact, not already halted 20 percent uranium enrichment. Instead, Asfari was indicating Iran's willingness to stop enrichment at these higher levels if sanctions were lifted.

Meanwhile, in the same period of early November 2012, goodwill between the two sides was likely strained when Iranian fighter jets shot at an unmanned United States drone carrying out routine surveillance mission over international waters. According to the Pentagon, two Iranian jets intercepted the Predator drone and fired "multiple rounds" in its direction. The Pentagon also made it clear that the drone was over international waters and never in Iranian air space. That being said, the shots from the Iranian jets ended in futility as the drone was guided back to base successfully. The Pentagon noted that the United States was undeterred from its intent to continue surveillance in the area. Speaking on behalf of the Pentagon, spokesperson George Little said: "The United States has communicated to the Iranians that we will continue to conduct surveillance flights over international waters over the Arabian Gulf."

President Obama set to become first U.S. leader to visit Burma (Myanmar)

Coming off his re-election victory in the United States in November 2012, United States President Barack Obama was set to visit Burma (Myanmar). According to the White House, President Obama would travel to the southeast Asian country of Burma (Myanmar) as part of a three-leg tour in the third week of November 2012, that would also include visits to Thailand, as well as Cambodia -- the site of the summit of the Association of South East Asian Nations. In Burma (Myanmar), he would meet with President Thein Sein as well as pro-democracy icon and opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi.

President Obama would make history as the first United States leader to visit Burma (Myanmar), which was subject to economic sanctions due to its prior record of political repression, but which has since been undergoing a process of economic and political reform advocated by the Obama administration. Indeed, until the announcement of the president's trip to Burma (Myanmar), Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had the distinction of being the most senior United States official to travel to Burma when she visited in December 2011. The White House said the president's visit to Burma (Myanmar) was intended "to encourage Burma's ongoing democratic transition." That said, further reforms were likely needed as political prisoners remain detained in that country and ethno-religious violence between ethnic Rakhine Buddhists and the Muslim Rohingya minority in Rakhine state has increasingly become a problem.

Deadly attack on consulate in Libya becomes domestic flashpoint in U.S.

Background

On Sept. 11, 2012, militants stormed the United States consulate in the eastern Libyan city of Benghazi yielding deadly consequences. Reports from the ground in Libya indicated that at least one United States state department official was killed and other Americans were wounded in the ensuing fracas, and that the embassy compound was set ablaze. That state department official was later revealed to be Ambassador Christopher Stevens who, along with other officials, died when unidentified armed men stormed the consulate compound and unleashed a volley of gunfire, grenades, and handmade bombs. Security forces returned fire but were overwhelmed for a time until the gunmen were repelled. Ambassador Stevens died of suffocation, presumably from the smoke and fire produced by the rocket attack.

Initial reports from authorities in the United States indicated that the violence may have been sparked by a film that was said to possess anti-Islamic inclinations. The film, "Innocence of Muslims," appeared to be of amateur quality but was promoted by an ultra-conservative church pastor in Florida, Terry Jones, who was in the international spotlight in 2010 over his plan to burn Korans. A trailer of the film was released on YouTube and translated into Arabic around the same time as another film with negative Islamic depictions, titled "Mohammad, Prophet of Muslims," was circulating in the public purview. Together, the publicity surrounding these filmic productions resulted in a massive outcry with Muslims across the world saying that they were insulting to the Islamic Prophet Mohammad.

To that end, protests over the film erupted in the Egyptian capital city of Cairo as well as the Yemeni capital of Sanaa, with the United States embassy being the main target in both cases. The protests soon spread to embassies of Western countries located in various other Muslim countries.

Meanwhile, the apparent film producer, Sam Bacile, was reported to have maintained a defiant stance in an interview with the media. Speaking from an undisclosed location, Bacile said "Islam is a cancer" and asserted that his work was intended to be a provocative political statement. He insisted that it would help expose Islam's flaws to the world. In the interview reported by Reuters, Bacile appeared unaffected by the news that the negative reception of his film may have contributed to the tragedy unfolding in the Middle East. He said, "I feel the security system (at the embassies) is no good. America should do something to change it." Of course, the media has subsequently reported that Bacile was a pseudonym, with the identity of the producer being linked to Nakoula Basseley Nakoula -- an apparent Coptic Christian who was convicted of bank fraud. It was clear that a great deal of mystery increasingly surrounded the anti-Islamic treatise.

Blame for the violence and the killings initially fell the Islamist extremist militia, known as the Ansar al-Sharia brigade. There were other reports suggesting the involvement of al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb -- an offshoot of the terror base, al-Qaida -- in the Libyan attack, with United States officials hinting that the assault may have been a planned operation. Stated differently, the attack in Libya might be distinct from other protests unfolding in other parts of the region over the controversial anti-Islamic film. Instead, there was initial fear that it may have been an operation intended to be carried out on the anniversary of the September 11, 2001, terror attacks in the United States 11 years prior, and it may have utilized the convenient "cover" of these mass protests. The rationale for such an attack, other than being of a pure Jihadist orientation, remained unclear; however, it was possible that al-Qaida sought revenge over the killing of al-Qaida deputy leader, Abu Yahya al-Libi, who died in a drone strike earlier in the year. Notably, al-Qaida confirmed the death of al-Libi, whose name itself translates into "the Libyan" on Sept. 11, 2012 -- the very day of the attack in Libya. That being said, this was simply a theory in a still-evolving story, which has focused on the mass unrest spreading across the Muslim world. (See "Update" below for more information about the emerging terror connection to the Benghazi tragedy.)

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The Libyan government was quick to distance itself from the violence directed at Ambassador Stevens and the other State Department officials and to emphasize its strong ties to the United States. Libyan deputy Prime Minister Mustafa Abu Shagour condemned the killing of the American diplomats, characterizing the violence as cowardly. Additionally, Libya's interim President Mohammed Magarief apologized to the United States over the deaths of the American diplomats, characterizing the bloodshed as "cowardly criminal acts." As well, Libya's deputy envoy to the United Nations, Ibrahim Dabashi, pledged that there would be an investigation into the violence. In remarks in front of the United Nations Security Council, Dabashi referred to Ambassador Stevens' death as follows: "We cannot understand how this group, or these persons, could have eliminated such a wonderful person."

Speaking on behalf of her country, United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton responded to the death of the State Department diplomats in Libya with the following statement: "We are heartbroken by this terrible loss." The statement continued, "Some have sought to justify this vicious behavior as a response to inflammatory material... The United States deplores any intentional effort to denigrate the religious beliefs of others. But let me be clear. There is never any justification for violent acts of this kind."

For his part, President Barack Obama condemned "in the strongest possible terms the outrageous and shocking" attack. Speaking from the Rose Garden at the White House, he paid tribute to the tragic end of Ambassador Stevens' life, referencing the veteran diplomat's role in the overthrow of Libya's former dictatorial leader, Qadafi, saying: "It is especially tragic that Chris Stevens died in Benghazi because it is a city that he helped to save." President Obama vowed to bring to justice those who carried out the attack that killed Ambassador Stevens and other diplomatic personnel in Libya. To this end, President Obama said: "Justice will be done."

He also indicated an emerging belief that the attack in Benghazi might be connected to terrorism, as he asserted: "No acts of terror will ever shake the resolve of this great nation."

It should be noted that the president ordered security at diplomatic missions be intensified around the world, and additionally deployed an anti-terrorism team consisting of experts from the Marines to Libya to

bolster security there in the aftermath of the attack.

As September 2012 entered its final week, tens of thousands marched in Benghazi to show their opposition to armed militias in Libya. On Sept. 21, 2012, a mass of Libyans registered their outrage over the killing of Ambassador Stevens by storming the compound of the Islamic extremist militia Ansar al-Shariah Brigade, which was suspected of being involved in the attack. The crowd forced militia fighters out of the premises and set the building ablaze. Fighters from Ansar al-Shariah at first tried to disperse the crowd using gunfire, but soon abandoned the compound as they were overwhelmed by the wave of outraged and angry Libyans screaming "No to militias." While no deaths were reported in the assault on the building, the action was a clear message that regular Libyans rejected the orientation of extremism in their country, only recently liberated from the tyranny of the Qadhafi regime.

Politics and the terrorism link to Benghazi tragedy

In late September 2012, United States Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton followed up on the president's words in the Rose Garden of the White House that were uttered the day after the Benghazi tragedy unfolded. Clinton publicly connected the attack at the United States diplomatic mission in Benghazi with terrorism. She noted that there was quite possibly a link with an al-Qaida affiliate in the region, perhaps even al-Qaida in the Maghreb. Soon thereafter, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta offered a more definitive assessment as follows: "It was a

terrorist attack. As we determined the details of what took place there and how that attack took place, it became clear that there were terrorists who had planned that attack."

The office of the Director of National Intelligence (DNI), James Clapper, attempted to address the shifting explanation of what transpired in Benghazi. DNI spokesperson, Shawn Turner explained that intelligence initially concluded that the attack on the diplomatic mission was sparked in the aftermath of the violent protests in Egypt. He continued, "We provided that initial assessment to Executive Branch officials and members of Congress, who used that information to discuss the attack publicly and provide updates as they became available. As we learned more ... we revised our initial assessment to reflect new information indicating that it was deliberate and organized terrorist attack carried out by extremists."

Republicans were quick to pounce on the evolving explanation, first claiming that it was clear the killing of Ambassador Stevens was part of a terrorist attack, and later suggesting that the White House may have attempted a "cover up" of the true events that transpired in Benghazi. Specifically, they alleged that the Obama administration was trying to hide the fact that an act of terrorism may have taken place, since such an occurrence would mar President Obama's national security record. That being said, in the wake of the attack, Libyan officials were quite clear in their belief that the assault on the United States diplomatic mission was the work of terrorists. As well, President Barack Obama himself used the following words only one day after the attack (as noted above): "No acts of terror will ever shake the resolve of this great nation." Thus, some observers noted that if a "cover up" was afoot, it was not a particularly well-plotted one since the president himself and the country's allies in Libya were all referencing the possibility of terrorism.

By the second week of October 2012, about a month ahead of the 2012 presidential election, the Republican chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, Rep. Darrell Issa, convened emergency hearings, charging that security failures at the embassy in Benghazi led to the death of Ambassador Stevens and three other Americans in Libya. For Democrats, the hearings constituted a transparent attempt to embarrass the Obama administration for inadequate diplomatic security at the embassy in Benghazi. But as noted in an article by Dana Milbank in the Washington Post, diplomatic security may have been less than optimal largely due to budget cuts brought about by Republicans in Congress. To that end, Milbank wrote: "For fiscal 2013, the GOP-controlled House proposed spending \$1.934 billion for the State Department's Worldwide Security Protection program — well below the \$2.15 billion requested by the Obama administration. House Republicans cut the administration's request for embassy security funding by \$128 million in fiscal 2011 and \$331 million in fiscal 2012. (Negotiations with the Democrat-controlled Senate restored about \$88 million of the administration's request.) Last year, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton warned that Republicans' proposed cuts to her department would be "detrimental to America's national security" -- a charge Republicans rejected."

On Oct. 15, 2012, Secretary of State Clinton said in an interview with CNN that she, and not the White House, took responsibility for the security situation in Benghazi, leading up to the Sept. 11, 2012 terrorist attack at the consulate there that left four Americans, including the ambassador, dead. She said: "I take responsibility." Secretary of State Clinton also explained that the state of "confusion" in the aftermath of the attack contributed to inconsistent, and sometimes confusing, explanations of the cause of the attack in Libya, and the actual motivation of those responsible. She said that she was taking public responsibility for what happened because she wanted "to avoid some kind of political gotcha."

But the issue was, indeed, becoming a political flashpoint. As noted above, House Republicans were determined to argue that the Obama administration was to be blamed for either insufficient security or a cover up. The matter was slipping into the presidential race where Republican nominee, Mitt Romney, was arguing that the situation in Libya was illustrative of President Obama's "unraveling" foreign policy.

In a pre-election presidential debate in the United States in mid-October 2012, there was a question from selected voters on the subject of Libya and foreign policy. The Republican candidate attempted to draw President Obama into a contretemps over the administration's handling of the terror attack in Benghazi. Romney suggested that the president waited two weeks before characterizing the incident as a terror attack, saying, "It took the president 14 days before he called the attack in Benghazi an act of terror." But President Obama was sanguine in his knowledge that he had, on the day after the attack, promised in a speech from the White House Rose Garden the following: "No acts of terror will ever shake the resolve of this great nation."

Romney seemed unwilling to let go of his confidence in the two week timeline, although the moderator, Candy Crowley, confirmed that the president had indeed called the attack "an act of terror" on Sept. 12, 2012.

By Oct. 24, 2012, email correspondence between the States Department, the White House, and intelligence officials, revealed that the aforementioned Islamist group, Ansar al-Sharia, had claimed responsibility for the attack. Some critics of the Obama administration in the United States suggested that the emails would place pressure on the White House. That is to say, they might reinforce Republican claims that there was some sort of obfuscation involved in the situation, as well as a reluctance by the White House to acknowledge the terrorism element. However, the Ansar al-Sharia connection was not a new revelation. As noted above, right after the attack on the Benghazi consulate, there were immediate reports the Ansar al-Sharia brigade was to blame. Immediate reports, though, could not be considered conclusive. The group's claim of responsibility on Facebook, as noted by Secretary of State Clinton, was not the same as proof. Indeed, extremist groups often surface to claim responsibility for attacks even when they are not involved; they do so in order to garner (dubious) cachet for the successful execution of acts of terrorism. Secretary of State Clinton said that the review board she appointed to investigate the attack would be "looking at everything," instead of "cherry picking one story here or one document there."

Nevertheless, it was expected that the political dimensions of the Benghazi would continue to dominate the landscape in the United states, with oversight committees in the House of Representatives and the Senate expected to look into the matter themselves. Meanwhile, it should be noted that the government of Tunisian government arrested Tunisian national in connection with the consulate attack in Libya.

Congressional testimony on Benghazi tragedy

The abrupt resignation of General David Petraeus, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), re-ignited the partisan fire over the Benghazi tragedy only days after President Barack Obama's re-election victory in November 2012.

Petraeus resigned after issuing a statement in which he admitted that he had engaged in an extramarital affair.

The timing of this revelation was regarded as unfortunate since Petraeus was expected to give testimony at oversight committee meetings in the House of Representatives and the Senate over death of Ambassador Steven in Libya. The exit of Petraeus appeared to further fuel speculation about a cover-up regarding Libya. Some Republicans returned to the (now-debunked) claim that it took the Obama administration several days to characterize the event as a terrorist attack, while others accused the White House of misleading the public over what happened in Benghazi. Senator John McCain and Senator Lindsey Graham were at the forefront of vociferous demands for intensified investigations into the death of Ambassador Stevens in Libya. In the crosshairs of McCain and Graham was United Nations Ambassador Susan Rice, who made frequent appearances on television in the

days after the Libyan tragedy postulating the original theory that the protests broke out over the anti-Islamic film discussed above.

Meanwhile, other Republicans pounced on the notion that the former CIA head was being forced into silence under the guise of a personal indiscretion. That theory was blown open when Petraeus attending congressional hearings on Nov. 16, 2012, and gave testimony on the intelligence surrounding the Benghazi affair.

In those congressional hearings, according to the Associated Press, Petraeus told lawmakers that he believed all along that the deadly attack on the United States consulate in Libya was an act of terrorism. Petraeus said that its draft on the events included a reference to it as a terrorist attack, but that reference was removed from the final version by a separate federal or intelligence agency. He noted that the CIA's draft included a reference to named terror entities, such as al-Qaida, as being behind the attack, but that the names were replaced with the generic term "extremists" along the way.

Congressman Peter King expressed concern over this news, saying in an interview with the media: "The fact is, the reference to al-Qaida was taken out somewhere along the line by someone outside the intelligence community. We need to find out who did it and why." But Senator Mark Udall offered this counterpoint: "The extremist description was put in because in an unclassified document you want to be careful who you identify as being involved." Udall also pointed out that Petraeus himself acknowledged that signed off on the final draft of the report, which included the reference to "extremists" in general terms.

According to Representative Adam Schiff, Petraeus made clear that the White House played no political role in the process of putting the intelligence report together. Schiff was on the record saying, "The general was adamant there was no politicization of the process, no White House interference or political agenda. He completely debunked that idea." Still, Republicans remained unsatisfied and retained their criticism of the Obama administration's handling of the situation. Senator Marco Rubio said that Petraeus' testimony showed that "the security measures were inadequate despite an overwhelming and growing amount of information that showed the area in Benghazi was dangerous, particularly on the night of September 11."

It should be noted that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was also expected to offer testimony to Congress on the Libya embassy attack. According to Republican Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, Clinton would testify after an internal review of events was complete.

Secretary of State defends handling of Benghazi consulate attack

On Jan. 23, 2013, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton gave testimony to committees in both houses of Congress over the handling of the attack by terrorists on the United States consulate in Benghazi, Libya, on Sept. 11, 2012. During her testimony, Secretary Clinton took responsibility for the security failures that led to the attack, which ended fatally for Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other Americans. The matter spurred a heated partisan debate, with many Republicans accusing the Obama administration of trying to obfuscate the terrorist element of the attack, even though both President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Clinton wasted no time in characterizing the attack as such. The matter reached such heights as to cause leading Republicans to pillory United Nations Ambassador Susan Rice for adhering to the intelligence talking points during Sunday morning news shows after the attack, which at the time suggested that the attack was the result of a spontaneous disturbance. Moreover, several conservative voices accused Secretary of State Clinton of faking her head concussion that prevented her from testifying earlier before Congress, speculating that she was trying to evade the experience.

Now that Secretary of State Clinton was before Congress, she tearfully recalled accompanying President Barack Obama to receive the bodies of the four victims. As well, Secretary Clinton accepted all the recommendations of a non-partisan inquiry board looking into the attack and security lapses, saying: "Nobody is more committed to getting this right. I am determined to leave the state department and our country safer, stronger and more secure." The previous controversy over the information Ambassador Rice offered in September 2012 emerged during Clinton's testimony with Republican Senator Ron Johnson of Wisconsin saying, "We were misled that there were supposedly protests and then something sprang out of that, an assault sprang out of that." Secretary Clinton responded with discernible outrage, asserting: "But with all due respect, the fact is we had four dead Americans; was it because of a protest, or was it because of guys out for a walk one night who decided they'd go kill some Americans." Punctuating her anger with raps on the table in front of her, Clinton continued, "What difference, at this point, does it make? It is our job to figure out what happened and do everything we can to prevent it from ever happening again, senator." Another confrontation occurred when Republican Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky suggested that Clinton failing to read the diplomatic cables from Libya seeking additional security ahead of the attack as "inexcusable." Rand pugnaciously suggested that if he were president, Clinton would have been fired. He said: "Had I been president at the time and I found that you did not read the cables, 'I would have relieved you of your post.' " Clinton, who enjoys the highest approval ratings of any politician -- male or female -- on the national scene, merely smiled in reaction to this hypothetical scenario.

Note that at the start of May 2013, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in the United States released surveillance photos of three individuals who were on the grounds of the United States Special Mission in Benghazi when it was attacked on Sept. 11, 2012. The attack resulted in the death of Chris Stevens, the U.S. ambassador to Libya, and three other Americans. The FBI was hoping that the release of the three men on the United States diplomatic compound would spur the memories of persons able to shed light on the violent attack, and thus assist in bringing those responsible to justice. The FBI did not specifically identify these three men as suspects although, according to NBC News, the agency has 45 possible persons on a list of "persons suspected of involvement in the attack." Meanwhile, an anonymous source from United States law enforcement told CNN News that it was believed that al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula may have played a role in attacks on the consulate office in Libya.

United States confirms complete withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan

In January 2013, as Afghan President Hamid Karzai arrived in the United States capital of Washington D.C. for meetings, the Obama administration was reported to be considering a complete withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. In a conference call, Ben Rhodes -- the deputy national security adviser for strategic communication -- acknowledged that the total withdrawal of troops (known as the "zero option") was indeed an option that the Obama administration had on the proverbial table. Rhodes said, "The U.S. does not have an inherent objective of X number of troops in Afghanistan. We have an objective of making sure there's no safe haven for al-Qaida within Afghanistan and making sure that the Afghan government has a security force that is sufficient to ensure the stability of the Afghan government and the denial of that safe haven." He continued, "So that's what guides us and that's what causes us to look for different potential troop numbers, or not having potential troops in the country." One possibility was the notion of using non-military means of meeting the national interests in Afghanistan.

Rhodes' statement was an indication that in his second term, President Barack Obama intended to put more of his own stamp on foreign policy, as shown by his selection of former Senator Chuck Hagel as defense secretary. The Vietnam war veteran holds that military engagement should be used judiciously and shares Obama's skepticism over the Iraq war; perhaps most pertinently, Hagel has advocated a faster withdrawal from Afghanistan. Overall, many aspects of Hagel's foreign policy orientation tracks harmoniously with that of President Obama, and was

certainly a departure from the neo-conservative foreign policy, which was vociferously championed by Republicans during the previous Bush administration.

A report in the Washington Post noted that some elements of the Obama administration have advanced the idea of reducing the United States' troop presence in Afghanistan radically to only 2,500 after 2014. By way of comparison, there were about 68,000 United States troops stationed in Afghanistan at the start of 2013. Those voices in the Obama administration -- quite in contrast to certain military officials -- have suggested that it would be the best way to end a long, expensive, and increasingly unpopular war. But some military officials believe that an accelerated withdrawal from Afghanistan would be irresponsible. Certainly, some reports from the Pentagon indicate that Afghanistan security forces are barely able to manage their duties without support from United States forces.

Regardless of the efficiency of Afghan security forces, the reality was that the foreign troop presence in Afghanistan was highly unpopular and the Afghan government itself was not restrained in casting aspersions on the United States' troops stationed in Afghanistan. Indeed, just ahead of his trip to the United States in January 2013, Afghan President Hamid Karzai blamed the United States troop presence for the rise in corruption and violence in his country, the actual causality of bloodshed in that country over decades notwithstanding. The formulation of a post-2014 foreign troop presence in Afghanistan was expected to be the main agenda item to be discussed during Karzai's visit to the United States.

There appeared to be little concurrence between the United States and Afghanistan on the nature of a continued United States troops presence in Afghanistan beyond 2014. According to the New York Times, despite his bluster about the United States military in Afghanistan being the cause of troubles in his country, Karzai wanted as many as 15,000 troops to remain past the official end of the war. By contrast, the United States was considering a total withdrawal by 2014.

Note that on Jan. 11, 2013, after a meeting with Afghan President Hamid Karzai, United States President Barack Obama said that a transition of security responsibilities to Afghan forces would ensue over the course of 2013 with a complete end of the war in Afghanistan at the end of 2014. The Obama White House also released a statement making it clear that the year 2013 was intended to bring an end to United States combat operations in Afghanistan. Explaining his exit strategy from Afghanistan, President Obama said, "But let me say it as plainly as I can: Starting this spring, our troops will have a different mission -- training, advising, assisting Afghan forces. And by the end of next year, 2014, the transition will be complete -- Afghans will have full responsibility for their security, and this war will come to a responsible end."

Meanwhile, the governments of the United States and Afghanistan additionally agreed to a plan to engage Taliban officials in future peace talks, which Karzai said were intended to return "peace and stability to Afghanistan as soon as possible."

Attack on U.S. embassy in Turkey evokes recent memory of Benghazi tragedy

On Feb. 1, 2013, a suicide attack on the United States embassy in the Turkish capital city of Ankara left two people dead and several people injured. Among the dead were the suicide bomber and a guard at the embassy. Turkey's extreme-left Revolutionary People's Liberation Party-Front (DHKP-C), which is designated to be a terrorist organization by the United States, soon claimed responsibility for the attack. An online statement by the DHKP-C read as follows: "Our warrior Alisan Sanli carried out an act of self-sacrifice on 1 February 2013, by entering the Ankara embassy of the United States, murderer of the people of the world." For its part, the United States warned Americans citizens to avoid diplomatic missions in Turkey for the foreseeable future. The incident evoked

unfortunate reminders of the attack on the United States consulate in Benghazi on Sept. 11, 2012, which left Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other Americans dead in Libya. Not surprisingly, leading politicians in the United States were referring to both attacks as evidence of a vital and pressing need for a foreign security review.

CIA operating secret air base for unmanned drones in Saudi Arabia

On Feb. 6, 2013, various media outlets in the United States were reporting that the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was operating a secret air base for unmanned drones in Saudi Arabia. The air base and drone operations had been in place for the previous two years and was oriented towards targeting terrorists linked with al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula, which has its stronghold in Yemen.

The use of drones in places like Yemen came to the fore in 2011 when the unmanned aircraft was used to eliminate Anwar al-Awlaki -- a United States-born terrorist orchestrator and propaganda communicator for al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula. Alwaki used his command of language and biculturalism, along with modern media, to reach out to young Muslims in across the world with the objective of radicalizing them and urging them to turn to terrorism. He was also believed to have been responsible for orchestrating a number of attempted attacks, including the recruitment of infamous Nigerian "underwear" bomber, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who tried but failed to blow up a United States-bound airliner on Christmas Day in 2009.

The existence of the secret air base has been known to United States media but was not disclosed until the New York Times decided to publish a report on the matter.

United States officials in the Obama administration expressed alarm over the revelation about the drone air base in Saudi Arabia, noting the success of the drone program in killing "high value targets." They also pointed to the fact that it could undermine operations against al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula, and undermine the United States' cooperation with Saudi Arabia on counter-terrorism efforts. Indeed, news of a secret United States air base on Saudi soil could only turn into a complicated geopolitical challenge for the Saudi Arabian government.

At home in the United States, critics of the drone program have challenged the legitimacy of eliminating United States citizens (such as Alwaki and his son) via a drone strike and without a trial. That being said, the United States government has argued that it was operating within legal bounds by targeting an enemy of the state, and a leader of a terror enclave that has declared war on the United States. Only a day earlier on Feb. 5, 2013, a United States Justice Department memorandum was leaked to the media, detailing the Obama administration's argument for eliminating any American abroad who is believed to be a "senior, operational leader" of al-Qaida or its allies.

It should be noted that the use of drones in anti-terrorism efforts has been expanded under the Obama administration. It was yet to be determined if President Obama would pay a political price for the controversial drone program, or, if war-weary Americans would view targeted killings of apparent enemies as preferable to traditional warfare with its mounting death toll of soldiers.

U.S. tightens sanctions against Iran; Ayatollah rebuffs talks with U.S.

On Feb. 6, 2013, the United States tightened its financial sanctions against Iran, making it more difficult for that country to spend oil revenue. Iran has already been subject to harsh international sanctions due to its controversial

nuclear development program, its clandestine nuclear development activities, and its lack of cooperation with nuclear inspectors at the International Atomic Energy Agency. It has additionally been subject to unilateral financial sanctions by the United States and other Western countries, in an effort to place pressure on Iran to relinquish its nuclear program, which most international powers believe is not intended for peaceful purposes but oriented towards nuclear weaponization. Existing financial sanctions were already having an effect on Iran's economy, making it difficult to procure basic goods, such as cooking oil and medical supplies, creating huge obstacles for Iran to do business with other countries, and contributing to a precipitous decline in the value of the Iranian currency, the rial.

On Feb. 7, 2013, Iran's Ayatollah Ali Khamenei rebuffed the notion of direct talks with the United States during an address that was published on the Internet. With an apparent reference to United States Vice President's suggestion of direct bilateral talks, followed by the tightening of sanctions, Khamenei said the United States was giving the appearance of being open to negotiations while simultaneously "pointing a gun at Iran." He further asserted that talks with the United States "would solve nothing." At issue were upcoming multilateral talks on Iran's nuclear program.

Biden was suggesting parallel bilateral talks, saying that his country was prepared to hold direct negotiations with Iran "when the Iranian leadership, supreme leader, is serious." He continued, "That offer stands, but it must be real and tangible and there has to be an agenda that they are prepared to speak to. We are not just prepared to do it for the exercise." Of course, on Feb. 7, 2013, with Khamenei's reaction on the record, it was apparent that the notion of bilateral talks was just an exercise in theory.

On Feb. 16, 2013, Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, insisted that his country was not developing nuclear weapons. He also said that his preference would be the prohibition of nuclear weapons across the world. Still, Khamenei foreclosed the notion of global pressure on Iran and made it clear that if Iran wanted to manufacture a nuclear bomb, no other country would be able to stop the process. He said: "We believe that nuclear weapons must be obliterated, and we do not intend to make nuclear weapons, but if we had not had this belief and had decided to possess nuclear weapons, no power could have ever been able to stop us."

With a presidential election scheduled to be held in June 2013, there was no likelihood that the Iranian authorities would give way to the will of the international community. In fact, outgoing President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad gave voice to the domestic political climate in Iran when he said in a national address on state television: "On behalf of the Iranian nation, I say that whoever thinks that the Iranian nation would surrender to pressure is making a huge mistake and will take his wish to the grave."

Meanwhile, talks in mid-February 2013 involving United Nations inspectors yielded no progress. Inspectors from the United Nations nuclear watchdog agency, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), had traveled to Iran to try to reach an agreement aimed at allowing inspectors back into the country to continue their investigation into Iran's suspected nuclear weapons program. Of particular concern to IAEA inspectors has been the Parchin military base where explosives tests related to nuclear weaponry were suspected to have taken place. There were prevailing suspicions that Iran had "sanitized" the site to conceal evidence of clandestine activities. That being said, IAEA inspectors attempting to reinvigorate the nuclear investigation characterized their efforts with the Iranians as wholly unproductive. In a news conference, the chief United Nations inspector, Herman Nackaerts, said that he and his colleagues "could not finalize the document" aimed at resuming the inquiry, and that no new date had been set for further negotiations.

There was an emerging sense -- even from the West -- that the door was closing on a peaceful resolution to the challenge of the Iranian nuclear issue. According to a report by Reuters News,

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a Western diplomat accredited to the IAEA was on the record saying: "Despite its many commitments to do so, Iran has not negotiated in good faith. It appears that we now have to ask ourselves if this is still the right tactic."

The expressed admission by an IAEA-aligned diplomat of the failure of the negotiations progress meant that non-military options were quickly dissipating. Without progress on the diplomatic front, and with Iran in a stalemate with the international community, the specter of military action loomed large. Israel has made it clear that it was willing to use force, if necessary, to prevent Iran from developing its suspected nuclear weapons program.

It should be noted that Iran has done little to reduce the anxiety of the Western world. First, the IAEA had already made it clear that engagement with Iran yielded absolutely no progress and that concerns related to Iran's nuclear program remained in tact. Second, Iran had denied IAEA inspectors from visiting the aforementioned Parchin site.

The case against Iran was further bolstered by the news that IAEA inspectors identified new centrifuges at Natanz -- Iran's main enrichment plant. As reported by Reuters News on Feb. 21, 2013, Iran was now installing advanced machines to refine uranium -- a development that could potentially accelerate the accumulation of materials used to develop a nuclear weapon.

The new model of centrifuges, known as the IR2m, was able to enrich uranium at rates two or three times faster than prior levels to date. Although the new model of centrifuges were not yet believed to be fully functional, Iran was already expanding its stockpile of higher grade uranium, moving gradually closer to the so-called "red line" identified by Israel as its final grounds for taking military action.

In a bit of encouraging news, the IAEA also reported that Iran resumed converting some of its 20 percent concentration uranium for use as reactor fuel in late 2012. That usage likely curtailed Iran's ability to develop a higher-grade uranium stockpile. It was possible that this information could cause Israel to delay military action against Iranian nuclear facilities. Nevertheless, in the third week of February 2013, Israel's Ambassador to the United States Micheal Oren reiterated his country's position that if no progress was made in the effort to stop Iran's nuclear development program, there was a high likelihood of a military gesture by mid-2013. Oren made these remarks during an interview on MSNBC's "Morning Joe" television show.

For its part, the Obama administration in the United States wasted no time in condemning Iran over the installation of the IR2m centrifuges at the main uranium enrichment plant of Natanz. As stated by United States Department of State spokesperson Victoria Nuland: "The installation of new advanced centrifuges would be a further escalation and a continuing violation of Iran's (U.N.) obligations. It would mark yet another provocative step."

At the end of February 2013, Iran attended multilateral talks in Kazakhstan with the so-called P5+1 group -- the United Nations Security Council permanent members of China, Russia, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States, plus Germany. According to Reuters News, Vincent Floreani, a spokesperson for France's Foreign Ministry, said the P5+1 countries were prepared to table a new offer for Iran, which could change the trajectory of the negotiations to date. He said, "We will make a new offer that will have significant new elements. The approach ... is to begin gradually with confidence-building measures. We want a real exchange that will lead to concrete results." For its part, Iran was claiming that it looked forward to these talks. Iran's United Nations Ambassador Mohammad Khazaei said: "As the representative of the Islamic Republic, I announce that Iran is not essentially against negotiations. Iranians are a civilized nation and always favor dialogue and are opposed to war."

In the aftermath of the discussions in Kazakhstan, Saeed Jalili, Iran's chief negotiator, characterized the meeting in a positive tone, describing the aforementioned new offer from the P5+1 countries as "more realistic and positive" and "a little closer to Iran's position." According to the New York Times, the offer would require Iran end its program of uranium enrichment to 20 percent, export its stockpile of existing more highly enriched uranium, and close its Fordo enrichment facility. In return for these three actions, the P5+1 countries would offer Iran sanctions relief, including permission to resume trading of gold and precious metals, and permission to resuming limited petroleum trading and international banking.

At the end of these talks in Kazakhstan where the new offer was brought forward, all the parties reportedly agreed to a round of further discussions in April 2013. It was to be seen if these negotiation on the basis of the new proposal would prove fruitful or accentuate the prevailing perception that the door on a negotiated resolution was rapidly closing.

Pressure on Iran was mounting with the call from the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Yukiya Amano, on March 4, 2013, saying that Iran should "proceed with a sense of urgency" and focus on achieving real and rapid results. Amano reiterated its **stance** that the IAEA "cannot conclude that all nuclear material in Iran is in peaceful activities." At issue was the IAEA's desire to inspect the Parchin military site where testing related to nuclear weapons development was believed to have taken place, but where access to IAEA inspectors has long been subject to denial by Iran.

On the same day, United States Vice President Joe Biden said that President Barack Obama was "not bluffing" about the United States' determination to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. In a speech in front of a major pro-Israeli lobbying group, he said, "We're not looking for war. We're ready to negotiate peacefully. But all options including military force are on the table. While that window is closing, we believe there is still time and space (for diplomacy)."

The main question for the IAEA, the United Nations Security Council, the P5+1 countries, Israel, and the global community at large, involved the matter of how easy (or difficult) it would be for Iran to increase its uranium enrichment activities in a manner that would allow for the development of a nuclear bomb. Further, what kind of timeline was at stake in achieving this end? Was United States Vice President Joe Biden's statement on Iran on March 4, 2013, pure bluster? Or was it a warning of sorts from Washington to Tehran?

These questions would likely be complicated by the announcement of new uranium discoveries in Iran and the Iranians' declaration that it was expanding its nuclear development program. Iran said that it had found new uranium deposits and as many as 16 sites were deemed to be suitable for the construction of new power plants. Iran additionally said that the discovery of uranium deposits would multiply "the current amount of [uranium] resources," and thus facilitate the expansion of the country's nuclear development program.

By mid-March 2013, as United States President Barack Obama was preparing to embark on his first official visit to Israel as a sitting American head of state, the issue of Iran's nuclear development program was dominating the international geopolitical landscape. For some time, Israel has threatened strikes on suspected Iranian nuclear facilities, in the interests of national security. Indeed, Iran does not recognize the Jewish state of Israel and has issued repeated (often anti-Semitic) warnings to "wipe Israel off the map," essentially posing an existential threat to the Jewish State.

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While the United States has eschewed imprudent military action against Iran, it has nonetheless stood with Israel in asserting that it would take necessary action to prevent the Islamic Republic of Iran from ever producing a nuclear weapon.

Ahead of this visit to Israel, President Obama was signaling that Iran was yet some ways away from being able to produce a nuclear weapon. In a pre-visit interview with Channel 2 in Israeli, he said that Iran was "over a year or so" away from being able to develop a nuclear weapon. Still, President Obama said that he was not interested in leaving action against Iran for the last moment. He said, "We think that it would take over a year or so for Iran to actually develop a nuclear weapon but obviously we don't want to cut it too close." Describing the purpose of his meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on the issue of Iran, President Obama said, "My message will be the same as before: if we can resolve it diplomatically, that's a more lasting solution. But if not, I continue to keep all options on the table." The United States leader did not foreclose military strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities, saying, "When I say that all options are on the table, all options are on the table and the United States obviously has significant capabilities."

Once "in country" in Israel, President Obama confirmed his stance on Iran, asserting the United States' resolve to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu underlined the United States president's commitment on this issue, saying he was "absolutely convinced that the president [Obama] is determined to prevent Iran from getting nuclear weapons. In a significant development, Netanyahu acknowledged that Obama's stated one year timeline on Iran's nuclear weapons development capacity was correct, although he noted that his [Netanyahu's] so-called "red line" involved the uranium enrichment aspect of weaponization and not the actual building of a nuclear weapon. Of course, both uranium enrichment and the manufacture of a bomb would be involved in nuclear weapons development. Accordingly, it seemed that President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu were respectively offering a sense of unanimity on the issue of Iran and its nuclear development program.

Bin Laden's spokesperson captured; set to be tried in New York

On March 7, 2013, reports were emerging that Sulaiman Abu Ghaith had been captured in Jordan and was transported to the United States where he was expected to face trial in a New York court. Abu Ghaith was said to be a spokesperson for the now-deceased terrorist mastermind, Osama Bin Laden; he also shared a personal connection with Bin Laden as his son-in-law. Assistant Director George Venizelos of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) declared in a statement: "Sulaiman Abu Ghaith held a key position in al-Qaida, comparable to the consigliere in a mob family or propaganda minister in a totalitarian regime. He used his position to threaten the United States and incite its enemies."

After the terror attacks in the United States in 2001, Abu Ghaith was stripped of his Kuwaiti citizenship. But his apparent Jihadist inclinations did not cease as Abu Ghaith was identified in recorded footage, alongside Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, threatening the interests of United States during the period of 2001 through 2002.

Abu Gaith would now face justice for charges of "conspiracy to kill United States nationals." His capture was one of the most significant developments in the fight against Jihadist terrorism since the elimination of Bin Laden in 2011. While scores of foreign terror suspects have been convicted in United States federal courts since 2001, the impending trial of Abu Ghaith in a New York court would mark the first major prosecution of a senior al-Qaida leader on American soil. Some Republican lawmakers objected to this course, arguing that Abu Ghaith should instead be sent to Guantanamo Bay. However, the Obama administration in the United States has been vociferous in its position that Abu Ghaith be tried in a federal court, rather than adding to the population of the controversial prison at Guantanamo, which it would ultimately like to close.

Afghan "insider" opens fire on United States troops; Karzai accuses U.S. of working with Taliban

On March 11, 2013, a man clad in the uniform of an Afghan police officer opened fire on security forces at a police station in Afghanistan, killing two United States troops and three Afghan troops, and wounding several others. The attack took place as United States and Afghan troops were holding an early morning meeting. Officials said the attack was an "insider" operation and the killer was identified as a member of the Afghan security forces. Although the killer was eventually eliminated and the area was said to have been secured, the United States military characterized the violence as a "betrayal."

This incident in Wardak occurred only one day after United States special forces withdrew from the province. It also occurred just after the Afghan government, led by President Hamid Karzai, made the bizarre assertion of collusion between United States forces and the Taliban. Karzai made this claim on March 10, 2013, following a bombing in the Afghan capital of Kabul that left around ten people dead. Karzai suggested that there were "ongoing daily talks between Taliban, American and foreigners in Europe and in the Gulf states" and advanced the notion that the "Taliban want longer presence of foreigners -- not their departure from Afghanistan." The commander of the NATO-led forces in Afghanistan, Marine General Joseph Dunford, took vociferous exception to Karzai's claim, declaring: "We have fought too hard over the past 12 years. We have shed too much blood over the past 12 years. We have done too much to help the Afghan Security Forces grow over the last 12 years to ever think that violence or instability would be to our advantage." It should be noted that Karzai has described by political insiders, including a former United States ambassador to Afghanistan, as having a history of erratic behavior.

United States President Obama emphasizes bond with Israel in first official state visit as president

On March 20, 2013, United States President Barack Obama traveled to Israel in his first official state visit as president. The trip would offer an opportunity for the American president to improve frosty personal ties with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, rather than operate as a policy catalyst of any sort. The White House in the United States indicated that meetings between Obama and Netanyahu were not likely to focus on the peace process with Palestinians, since the movement on that track was expected to be slow. Instead, the focus would be on the matter of Iran's nuclear aspirations and the priority to prevent that country, which poses a threat to Israel, from developing a nuclear weapon. The war in Syria was also likely to be addressed during bilateral meetings. But the essential purpose for the trip appeared to be oriented towards recalibrating the relationship between the two leaders.

In 2013, the political landscape was quite different from the scenario of the last few years, and the political dynamics for the two men had certainly changed. Whereas United States President Obama had been decisively re-elected to power in November 2012 and inaugurated for a second term in January 2013, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu had emerged from his country's elections as the weakened leader presiding over a precarious coalition. Now, with both men having to deal with one another and with the geopolitical stakes in the ever-more volatile Middle East higher than ever, it appeared that the time was right for a "re-setting" of the relationship between the two men and an affirmation of bilateral ties.

President Obama arrived in Israel for this highly-anticipated visit on March 20, 2013. As the president disembarked from Air Force One onto the tarmac of Ben-Gurion International Airport, he was personally greeted by both Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Shimon Peres.

President Obama affirmed the United States' long-standing and unbreakable bond with Israel saying, "Just as we have for these past 65 years, the United States is proud to stand with you as your strongest ally and your greatest

friend." Emphasizing the bilateral bond between the two countries, President Obama characterized his visit to Israel as "an opportunity to reaffirm the unbreakable bonds between our nations, to restate America's unwavering commitment to Israel's security, and to speak directly to the people of Israel and to your neighbors." He continued by noting that the United States' interests intersected with those of Israel, saying, "It's in our fundamental security interest to stand with Israel." There was a moment of levity when President Obama said to Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Peres, "It's a lovely day. Great to see you, great to be here ... It's good to get away from Congress."

During a joint press conference, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu made a clear departure from the challenging tone taken with President Obama in previous venues of this sort. In one infamous case, Netanyahu stood next to Obama during a news conference and lectured the leader of the free world on Israel's unique security challenges. This time, Netanyahu's attitude towards Obama was significantly more conciliatory, and even marked by amity. Indeed, Prime Minister Netanyahu offered a heartfelt welcome to the American president, saying, "I come here today with a simple message. Thank you." He continued, "Baruch haba ley Israel — welcome to Israel. The people of Israel are honored to have you visit." Netanyahu further thanked President Obama for the United States' support for the Jewish state of Israel saying, "Thank you for standing by Israel at this time of historic change in the Middle East."

The trip was not purely focused on improved personal relations between the two heads of government, The serious challenge of a nuclearized Iran was also on the table for discussion. Indeed, even before President Obama's trip to Israel, the issue of Iran's nuclear development program has loomed large. It should be noted that Iran does not recognize the Jewish state of Israel and has issued repeated (often anti-Semitic) warnings to "wipe Israel off the map," essentially posing an existential threat to the Jewish State. With such threats prevailing and with the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran on the horizon, Israel has threatened strikes on suspected Iranian nuclear facilities. While the United States has eschewed imprudent military action against Iran, it has nonetheless stood with Israel in asserting that it would take necessary action to prevent the Islamic Republic of Iran from ever producing a nuclear weapon.

Ahead of this visit to Israel, President Obama was signaling that Iran was yet some ways away from being able to produce a nuclear weapon. In a pre-visit interview with Channel 2 in Israel, he said that Iran was "over a year or so" away from being able to develop a nuclear weapon. Still, President Obama said he was not interested in leaving action against Iran for the last moment. He said, "We think that it would take over a year or so for Iran to actually develop a nuclear weapon but obviously we don't want to cut it too close." Describing the purpose of his meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on the issue of Iran, President Obama said, "My message will be the same as before: if we can resolve it diplomatically, that's a more lasting solution. But if not, I continue to keep all options on the table." The United States leader did not foreclose military strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities, saying, "When I say that all options are on the table, all options are on the table and the United States obviously has significant capabilities."

Once "in country" in Israel, President Obama confirmed his stance on Iran, asserting the United States' resolve to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu underlined the United States president's commitment on this issue, saying he was "absolutely convinced that the president [Obama] is determined to prevent Iran from getting nuclear weapons."

In a significant development, Netanyahu acknowledged that Obama's stated one year timeline on Iran's nuclear weapons development capacity was correct, although he noted that his [Netanyahu's] so-called "red line" involved the uranium enrichment aspect of weaponization and not the actual building of a nuclear weapon. Of course, both uranium enrichment and the manufacture of a bomb would be involved in nuclear weapons development. Accordingly, it seemed that President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu were respectively offering a sense of

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unanimity on the issue of Iran and its nuclear development program. Indeed, as noted by President Obama himself, there was "not a lot of daylight" between American and Israeli assessments on the stage of Iran's nuclear development program, although he added that there was "time to resolve this diplomatically."

Netanyahu reserved the right to take unilateral action against Iran saying that he was certain Obama appreciated the fact that Israel "can never cede the right to defend ourselves to others, even to the greatest of our friends." He continued, "Today we have both the right and the capability to defend ourselves." For his part, President Obama offered concurrence on this point, saying "Each country has to make its own decisions when it comes to the awesome decision to engage in any kind of military action. And Israel is differently situated than the United States."

President Obama also expressed hopes that the Israeli-Palestinian peace process might be revitalized. Although President Obama was scheduled to meet with Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas, Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza appeared to have no enthusiasm for the American president. The previously-hopeful attitude of Palestinians towards Obama was now replaced with jaded resentment, presumably due to the United States' opposition to the Palestinians' unilateral bid for statehood at the United Nations and the lack of active participation by the Obama administration on the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

Conversely, President Obama -- who arrived in Israel in 2013 without great support from the Israeli people -- was now experiencing the benefits of thawing relations. The majority of Israelis were not fans of President Obama, viewing with suspicion his relentless push for Israel to end its settlement activities in predominantly Palestinian areas, as well as his decision not to visit Israel during his 2009 trip to the Middle East when he gave his landmark pro-democracy speech in Cairo. Now, however, the tide appeared to be turning.

Israelis watched President Obama's motorcade as it drove through the streets of Jerusalem from the homes and on television with interest. News commentators in Israel cast the temperature between Obama and Netanyahu as genuinely warmer. If the news commentators in Israel were reflective of national sentiment, Obama's declaration "Tov lihiyot shuv ba'aretz" -- Hebrew for "It is good to be back in Israel" -- resonated very positively with Israelis. The Israeli news commentators also paid particular -- and affirmative -- attention to President Obama's statement that Israel was "the historic homeland of the Jewish people." President Obama said, "More than 3,000 years ago, the Jewish people lived here, tended the land here, prayed to God here. And after centuries of exile and persecution, unparalleled in the history of man, the founding of the Jewish state of Israel, was a rebirth, a redemption, unlike any in history. Today, the sons of Abraham and the daughters of Sarah are fulfilling the dream of the ages: to be masters of their own fate in their own sovereign state." This fulsome nod to the plight of Jews through history appeared to reify the essential and historic claim of the Jewish people on the land of Israel.

President Obama also earned personal capital in the simple gesture of assisting 89-year old President Peres along the red carpet. As stated by one Israeli commentator, "Who Remembers Romney Now?" in a clear reference to the fact that Prime Minister Netanyahu and many Israelis were hoping for a one-term Obama presidency. Likewise, as noted by Herb Kleinom in the Jerusalem Post, "He had us at "Shalom."

On March 21, 2013, as expected, President Obama met with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in Ramallah. There he called on Palestinian leaders to resume peace talks with Israel, regardless of ongoing Israeli settlement building. Obama's arrival in the West Bank was not without political stress. Palestinian extremists greeted the United States leader by firing rockets from Gaza into the Israeli border city of Sderot in violation of a prevailing ceasefire agreement.

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On the same day, President Obama delivered a speech to Israeli university students at the International Convention Center in Jerusalem. In that address, he acknowledged the obstacle to resolving the Palestinian issue, but asserted that peace "is the only path to true security." President Obama noted that the path to ensuring Israel remained a democratic and Jewish state necessitated peace and a two-state solution with Israel existing alongside a future Palestinian state.

President Obama said, "Given the demographics west of the Jordan River, the only way for Israel to endure and thrive as a Jewish and democratic state is through the realization of an independent and viable Palestine." He also outlined the rights for Palestinians, saying, "The Palestinian people's right to self-determination and justice must also be recognized." On the issue of national security, and given the challenge of global opinion, President Obama urged Israel to take on the challenge of peace, saying: "Given the frustration in the international community, Israel must reverse an undertow of isolation. And given the march of technology, the only way to truly protect the Israeli people is through the absence of war -- because no wall is high enough and no Iron Dome is strong enough, to stop every enemy from inflicting harm."

Irrespective of the controversial subject matter, President Obama's address was well-received by the Israeli youth who applauded his passionate call for the cause of peace, gave him a standing ovation in response to his good humored attitude to a heckler, and even expressed support for the notion of a Palestinian state.

A state dinner, hosted by Israeli President Shimon Peres, brought a conclusion to President Obama's first official visit to Israel as the American head of state and leader of the free world. There, President Peres awarded Obama with Israel's Presidential Medal of Distinction in recognition of his [Obama's] "tireless work to make Israel strong, to make peace possible." As he bestowed on President Obama Israel's highest honor, President Peres said: "The path to tomorrow may be fraught with obstacles, I believe we can overcome them with our determination and with your commitment."

Note: Barack Obama is the first serving United States president to receive the Medal of Distinction from the state of Israel.

North Korea and the Nuclear Threat of War

At the start of 2013, the United Nations tightened sanctions against North Korea. This move was made in response to North Korea's December 2012 rocket launch. For its part, North Korea reacted with anger and promised strong retaliation. All expectations were that another nuclear test might be in the offing, although North Korea was raising the anxiety of the international community by raising the rhetoric and threatening an even harsher actions. North Korea warned of retribution against the United States, which it described as a "sworn enemy." The following statement was issued via the official Korean Central News Agency: "We do not hide that a variety of satellites and long-range rockets will be launched and a nuclear test of higher level will be carried out in the upcoming new phase of the anti-U.S. struggle, targeting against the U.S., the sworn enemy of the Korean people." Pyongyang soon expanded its threats to noted that it would take action against South Korea, if it participated in the United Nations sanctions regime. China's official Xinhua News Agency was also reporting that Pyongyang intended to walk away from multilateral six-part talks since "the U.N. Security Council has been reduced into an organization bereft of impartiality and balance."

North Korea's bellicose language was matched with provocative visual imagery. At issue was the release of a three-minute video on YouTube depicting a North Korean man's dream sequence in which the city of New York is destroyed, with the 1985 song "We are the world" playing in the background.

A caption, which was translated from Korean in The Guardian newspaper, reads as follows: "Somewhere in the United States, black clouds of smoke are billowing. It seems that the nest of wickedness is ablaze with the fire started by itself."

It continues: "Despite attempts by imperialists to isolate and crush us ... never will anyone be able to stop the people marching towards a final victory." The video was reported to have been released by North Korea's state-run media and while of amateur quality in some regards, it nonetheless represented a sharp threat against the United States and/or the interests of its allies.

On Feb. 12, 2013, seismic activity in North Korea suggested that North Korea may have selected an even earlier date to go forward with its third nuclear test. The seismic shock activity was emanating from the same area where North Korea conducted its 2006 and 2009 nuclear tests. Kim Min-seok of the South Korean Defense Ministry indicated that country's belief, saying, "We believe that North Korea has conducted a nuclear test." Meanwhile, the United States Geological Survey indirectly confirmed that the test had taken place as it noted the shock appeared to be one kilometer underground and was consistent with a nuclear blast. According to Lassina Zerbo, the director of the international data center of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test Ban Treaty Organization, the magnitude of the test was twice as large as the 2009 nuclear test. It should be noted that initial reports suggested the use of plutonium in this nuclear test, which tends to be suited for use as a missile warhead.

North Korea itself soon confirmed that it had carried out its third underground nuclear test, which it said involved a "miniaturized" nuclear device. As reported in a statement by the state-run KCNA news agency: "It was confirmed that the nuclear test that was carried out at a high level in a safe and perfect manner using a miniaturized and lighter nuclear device with greater explosive force than previously did not pose any negative impact on the surrounding ecological environment."

North Korea claimed its third nuclear test was an act of self-defense against "U.S. hostility" and warned that further moves might be in the offing. Via the state-controlled KCNA news agency, Pyongyang claimed that the nuclear test "was only the first response" taken "with maximum restraint." Pyongyang warned that further actions were in the offing, saying: "If the United States continues to come out with hostility and complicates the situation, we will be forced to take stronger, second and third responses in consecutive steps."

The chorus of condemnation from the international community was broad and vociferous. United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon wasted no time in condemning North Korea's nuclear test, which he emphasized was a "clear and grave violation" of United Nations resolutions. NATO cast the nuclear test as an "irresponsible act" that posed a serious threat to world peace.

China, North Korea's closest ally, demanded an audience with the North Korean ambassador in Beijing, while Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi said China was "strongly dissatisfied and resolutely opposed" to the nuclear test.

In a statement, United States President Barack Obama argued for a swift response, asserting: "The danger posed by North Korea's threatening activities warrants further swift and credible action by the international community. The United States will also continue to take steps necessary to defend ourselves and our allies."

The United Nations Security Council convened an emergency meeting later on Feb. 12, 2013, to discuss future measures. During that meeting, the permanent and rotating member nations of the United Nations Security Council unanimously condemned North Korea's latest nuclear test and warned that "appropriate measures" would be in the offing. But North Korea has rarely been deterred by such a prospect.

North Korea's lack of concern for international opinion was displayed in high relief when the state-controlled newspaper declared the country's need for intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). Only two days after carrying out its third nuclear test, North Korea displayed its brazen stance by declaring that it should own ICBMs since the "imperialists" -- an apparent reference to the United States -- had a nuclear arsenal. According to a review in Rodong Sinmun, North Korea's main newspaper and an apparent mouthpiece for the North Korean government -- the country required ICBMs to augment its self-defense. The article in Rodong Sinmun also declared that North Korea would be a formidable enemy in the face of adversity or any challenge, and warned that there "can be no compromise in the last fight to herald the victory for independence for humanity." The diatribe also included the promise to "strike a blow to end imperialism."

The North Koreans' efforts to develop ICBM capacity were apparently not being undertaken in isolation. According to researchers at Johns Hopkins University, there were suggestions that the Iranians might be assisting the North Koreans with the development of a rocket program. Blog 38 at Johns Hopkins University noted that its analysis of satellite imagery taken in early 2013 showed that preparations were being made for an impending test of a liquid-fueled rocket. That satellite imagery further showed that North Korea could conceivably test rockets larger than the size of the rocket deployed in late 2012 from a new launch pad. As stated in the report published in Blog 38: "Analysis of construction activities around the new launch pad has revealed evidence that Pyongyang's rocket program may be receiving assistance from Iran."

Since Iran was already ensconced in its own controversial nuclear development program -- to the great consternation of the international community -- the news of a possible connection between Pyongyang and Tehran was being met with alarm across the world. Indeed, there was a growing sense of anxiety about global security as a result. That being said, the general consensus was that North Korea had not, to date, developed the ability to deploy a nuclear warhead on an ICBM.

In the last week of February 2013, researchers at Johns Hopkins University -- via Blog 38 -- said that satellite imagery of the nuclear test facility show possible signs of human activity there, even after the third nuclear test. They suggested that North Korea might be preparing for a fourth nuclear test. As stated in Blog 38: "It remains unclear whether renewed activity at the site is normal for the days after a nuclear detonation or if it is an indication of Pyongyang's intention to conduct another test in the near future." Sources from the Chinese government suggested that Pyongyang was waiting for possible action from the United Nations Security Council before it makes a decision on

a fourth nuclear test.

With news circulating in the first week of March 2013 that a draft of a United Nations Security Council resolution against North Korea had been crafted, Pyongyang wasted little time in registering its anger. On March 5, 2013, North Korea warned that it would end its 1953 armistice (ceasefire) that brought a conclusion to the conflict with South Korea, without officially ending the Korean War.

North Korea also demanded that the United States and South Korea end its ongoing military drills in the region, referring to them as a "dangerous nuclear war targeted at us." Furthermore, the Korean People's Army warned that it would carry out stronger actions in response to the "hostile" policies of the United States and South Korea. It was apparent that North Korea was prepared to take an aggressive stance in the face of international pressure

Clearly, North Korea would be faced with the prospects of international action. Even its closest ally, China, via its state-controlled media, had urged North Korea not to go forward with such a provocative action and warned that North Korea would pay a "heavy price" if it proceeded with the test. Of course, in the realm of international

jurisprudence, heavy costs have come in the form of harsh sanctions by the United Nations Security Council, which have done little to curtail North Korea from going forward with its missile program and nuclear development agenda. Indeed, the very existence of sanctions has not stopped North Korea from repeatedly violating the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty.

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On March 7, 2013, the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2094 censuring North Korea for its February nuclear test and imposing an even stricter sanctions regime on that country. Included in those new sanctions were provisions to target the financing sources of North Korea's nuclear and missile technology, but there were additional penalties imposed on North Korea in the realm of banking, travel, transportation, and trade.

As stated by United States Ambassador to the United Nations, Susan Rice, "The strength, breadth and severity of these sanctions will raise the cost to North Korea of its illicit nuclear program. Taken together, these sanctions will bite and bite hard." South Korea's Ambassador to the United Nations, Kim Sook, said the time had come for North Korea to "wake up from its delusion" of becoming a nuclear state. He continued, "It can either take the right path toward a bright future and prosperity, or it can take a bad road toward further and deeper isolation and eventual self-destruction." Meanwhile, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said the unanimous adoption of the resolution delivered a strong message to North Korea that its pursuit of nuclear weapons would not be tolerated by the international community.

In addition to scrapping its non-aggression agreements with South Korea, North Korea responded to the news of international action by saying that it would be cutting off the North-South hot-line. Installed in 1971, the hot-line was created to provide direct communication at times of increased tensions and also to organize the transfer of persons and goods through the heavily fortified Demilitarized Zone. Clearly, the disabling of the hot-line was not only symbolic of the breakdown in bilateral relations between the two Koreas, there were also practical and security implications.

It should be noted that North Korea has also shockingly threatened to launch pre-emptive nuclear attacks on the United States and South Korea in response to the joint military drills, which it said were proof of the United States' intent to go to war. A belligerent North Korea said via its Foreign Ministry that the United Nations' action would "compel" that country to take "countermeasures" in short order.

Furthermore, it declared in a statement: "Now that the U.S. is set to light a fuse for a nuclear war, the revolutionary armed forces of the DPRK will exercise the right to a pre-emptive nuclear attack to destroy the strongholds of the aggressors and to defend the supreme interests of the country." North Korea even threatened to transform

Washington and Seoul into "a sea in flames" with "lighter and smaller nukes."

For its part, South Korea was undeterred and moving forward with the very joint military drills (with the United States) that earned outrage and threats from Pyongyang. Still, South Korean Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se said on March 11, 2013, that his country would try to re-engage with North Korea with an eye on shifting the climate from tension and threats to cooperation. In an address, Yun said his goal was to "turn this era of confrontation and mistrust into an era of trust and cooperation with North Korea." Yun further asserted: "The security situation on the Korean Peninsula for now is very grave as the unpredictability surrounding North Korea is rising following its third nuclear test."

As March 2013 was drawing to a close, North Korea increased its belligerent rhetoric and said that missile and artillery units were combat-ready and aimed at United States and South Korean targets. In a statement broadcast on the state-controlled Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), the Korean People's Army's Supreme Command said: "From this moment, the Supreme Command puts all of its field artillery including strategic rocket units and long-range artillery units into the No. 1 combat ready posture." The statement further delineated targets in South Korea and the United States -- from its military installations in the Pacific to Hawaii and the mainland. Indeed, a North Korean spokesperson was on the record saying, "The U.S. should not forget that the Anderson Air Force Base on Guam, where B-52s take off, and naval bases in Japan proper and Okinawa, where nuclear-powered submarines are launched, are within the striking range of [North Korea's] precision strike means." North Korea said

that its motivation was driven by the priority "to safeguard our sovereignty and the highest dignity [of leader Kim Jong Un] through military actions."

The United States responded with its own statement as follows: "North Korea's bellicose rhetoric and threats follow a pattern designed to raise tensions and intimidate others. While the United Nations Command, Combined Forces Command and U.S. Forces Korea continue to maintain the armistice, North Korea continues its provocative behavior and rhetoric. The Republic of Korea-U.S. alliance is strong and we remain committed to the defense of [South Korea]."

Then, on March 30, 2013, North Korea declared it was in a "state of war" with South Korea and that its the long-standing truce with the South had ended. A statement from Pyongyang read as follows: "From this time on, the North-South relations will be entering the state of war and all issues raised between the North and South will be handled accordingly. The long-standing situation of the Korean peninsula being neither at peace nor at war is finally over."

In response, the South Korean defense ministry denounced the war threat and issued its own statement, which read as follows: "Our military is maintaining full preparedness to leave no blind point in safeguarding the lives and safety of the people." As well, South Korean President Park Geun-hye noted that her country was taking the threats from North Korea "very seriously." She said, "If there is any provocation against South Korea and its people, there should be a strong response in initial combat without any political considerations."

For its part, the United States military command in South Korea dispatched a statement that read as follows: "North Korea will achieve nothing by threats or provocations, which will only further isolate North Korea and undermine international efforts to ensure peace and stability in Northeast Asia."

Matching its words with concrete illustrations, the United States was also displaying its military versatility by deploying B-2 and B-52 planes with nuclear capabilities over South Korea, while also flying F-22 Raptor fighter jets from Japan to South Korea's Osan Air base. As well, as noted below, the United States said it would deploy additional ballistic-missile interceptors along the country's Pacific Coast, with an eye on protecting the United States from a potential attack from North Korea. As well, the United States moved its sea-based X-Band radar platform, normally based in Hawaii, closer to the North Korean coast, with the intent of monitoring potential attempts from North Korea to launch a long-range missile. By April 2013, the United States additionally decided to deploy an anti-missile system to Guam.

Tensions on the Korean Peninsular escalated on April 2, 2013 when the state-controlled Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) of the North Korea announced that it would be re-opening its main nuclear complex at Yongbyon and restarting its nuclear reactor there.

The Yongbyon complex was home to both a uranium enrichment facility and a nuclear reactor; it was closed as a part of a 2007 agreement between North Korea and a multilateral cadre, including China and the United States. The agreement mandated the closure of the reactor at Yongbyon in lieu of one million metric tons of heavy fuel oil as well as humanitarian aid benefits.

The agreement was only really in effect for a couple of years since North Korea resumed the reprocessing of fuel rods stored at the site in 2009, complaining that it did not receive the desired level of energy assistance.

This 2013 decision to open the Yongbyon complex and restart operations of the nuclear reactor was illustrative of the intensification of dissonance on the Korean peninsula ongoing since late 2012. But it was also a disturbing development as it showed that the new leader of North Korea, Kim Jong-un, was prepared to take increasingly provocative actions. As a result, the international community was now regarding the paranoid and alienated nation state of nuclearized North Korea through the valence of anxiety.

Reflecting this sentiment, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said he was "deeply dismayed" by North Korea's decision to re-open the main nuclear complex at Yongbyon and restart the nuclear reactor. He further condemned the provocative actions declaring: "The current crisis has already gone too far. Nuclear threats are not a game. Aggressive rhetoric and military posturing only result in counter-actions, and fuel fear and instability."

Secretary General Ban urged all parties to engage in urgent talks as "the only way to resolve the current crisis." However, with North Korea cutting off its military hot-line with South Korea, canceling its armistice with that country, using the rhetoric of war, and re-opening its Yongbyon facility, it seemed that authorities in Pyongyang were not in the mood for productive diplomatic engagement.

Indeed, a day later on April 3, 2013, North Korea has ceased border crossing access for South Koreans into the jointly-administered Kaesong industrial zone. Since Kaesong has been viewed as a tacit symbol of the state of geopolitical relations and the last significant arena of cooperation between the two Koreas, the cessation of cross-border access at the industrial zone was regarded as a disturbing development.

By April 4, 2013, the state-controlled Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) said the military had "ratified" an attack on United States interests. The KCNA statement further noted that North Korean troops had been authorized to counteract American aggression with "powerful practical military counteractions," including nuclear weapons, and involving "cutting-edge smaller, lighter, and diversified nuclear strike means." The KCNA statement included the following warning: "The moment of explosion is approaching fast. No one can say a war will break out in Korea or not and whether it will break out today or tomorrow." The expressed nuclear threat was the most blatant and belligerent exposition from the North Korean regime on global stability in recent memory. Raising the threat to another level, Pyongyang also told foreign embassies that it could not guarantee their safety in the event of conflict.

In a speech to the National Defense University in Washington, United States Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel noted that the recent actions of the North Koreans "present a real and clear danger." Meanwhile, Russian foreign ministry spokesperson, Alexander Lukashevich, observed that North Korea's actions may very well foreclose the notion of multilateral negotiations. He cast Pyongyang's attempts to violate decisions of the United Nations Security Council as "categorically unacceptable," and issued the following warning: "This radically complicates, if it doesn't in practice shut off, the prospects for resuming six-party talks."

On April 5, 2013, Western officials were confirming reports that North Korea had moved a medium-range missile, known as a Musudan or Nodong B, to its east coast. It was unknown if the move was to be interpreted as a threatening gesture, with a warhead mounted on the missile, or part of the preparations for test firing. There was growing suspicion that North Korea might, in fact, be preparing to carry out yet another missile test. It should be noted that while this Musudan/Nodong B missile has a range of around 3,000 kilometers (1,875 miles), which would put all of South Korea, Japan, and possibly the United States' territory of Guam in its range; however, there was no test history to ensure precision. As noted by Greg Thielmann, a senior fellow at the Arms Control Association, "A missile that has never even had a flight test is not an operational system and is not a credible threat." Of course, a missile launch might be in the offing for the purpose of acquiring that test history.

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By April 10, 2013, South Korean sources said that North Korea appeared to be preparing to launch the Musudan mid-range ballistic missile that had been moved to the east coast, and warned that North Korea might even be preparing the fire the Musudan simultaneously with shorter range Nodong and Scud missiles. The missiles launch could conceivably coincide with the celebration of the birthday of Kim Il-sung, the country's founder.

Meanwhile, the rhetoric from North Korea continued to be bellicose with North Korean state media asserting that the scenario on the Korean Peninsula situation was "inching close to a thermonuclear war," and authorities in Pyongyang warning foreign nationals in South Korea to evacuate from that country. The Obama administration in the United States, via White House spokesperson, Jay Carney, characterized North Korea's statements as "unhelpful." Carney continued, "This kind of rhetoric will only further isolate North Korea from the international community and we continue to urge the North Korean leadership to heed President Obama's call to choose the path of peace and to come into compliance with its international obligations."

It should be noted that the foreign ministers of the so-called G-8 countries -- the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Canada, Japan, and Russia -- have condemned North Korea's recent actions, and warned of consequences in North Korea conducts either a missile launch or a nuclear test. On April 12, 2013, United States Secretary of State John Kerry traveled to South Korea and accentuated this multilateral warning, saying "If Kim Jong-Un decides to launch a missile, whether it is across the Sea of Japan or some other direction, he will be choosing willfully to ignore the entire international community."

A day later, Secretary of State Kerry met with Chinese leaders to find ways to end the geopolitical crisis brewing on the Korean peninsula. Following that meeting, Secretary Kerry said that the United States and China were both calling for North Korea to refrain from further provocative actions. It was clear that the international community was united in its stance against North Korea's recent acts of dangerous provocation.

Secretary of State John Kerry ended his Asian trip with a call for negotiations to end the dissonance and emphasizing the imperative of finding a diplomatic solution. He said, "The United States remains open to authentic and credible negotiations on denuclearization, but the burden is on Pyongyang. North Korea must take meaningful steps to show that it will honor commitments it has already made, and it has to observe laws and the norms of international behavior."

Meanwhile, with an eye on decreasing the tensions between the two Koreas, South Korean President Park Geun-hye called for peaceful dialogue. But North Korea was quick to reject the overture, characterizing the offer of talks as a "cunning ploy." If that response was any indication, North Korea remained defiant in the face of international pressure.

April 15, 2013 -- the anniversary of North Korea's founder's birth -- passed fairly quietly, without a continuation of the bellicose war threats and even free of a huge military parade showcasing North Korean military might. The hopes that North Korea might be digesting the call for talks, and that the heated geopolitical climate had cooled for the moment, dissipated as Pyongyang issued new threats of war. A statement via state-controlled media was issued as follows: "Our retaliatory action will start without any notice from now."

It should be noted that South Korea responded to the recent actions of North Korea by deploying two warships with the Aegis missile defense systems on the east and west coasts. As well, Japan deployed missile defense systems around Tokyo to defend against any missile threat by North Korea.

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In an interview with NBC News broadcast on April 16, 2013, United States President Barack Obama said that while the intelligence available does not suggest that North Korea has the ability to successfully arm a ballistic missile with nuclear warheads, he yet believed his country needed to be prepared for all possibilities. He said, "Based on our current intelligence assessments we do not think that they have that capacity. But we have to make sure that we are dealing with every contingency out there. That's why I repositioned missile defense systems: to guard against any miscalculation on their part."

Asked whether he believed the North Korean leader, Kim Jung-Un, was mentally unstable, President Obama responded, "I'm not a psychiatrist. And I don't know the leader of North Korea."

However, President Obama characterized North Korea's exposition of bellicose and vituperative war rhetoric as being similar to a childish tantrum, and unlikely to yield productive results. He said, "You don't get to bang your spoon on the table and somehow you get your way."

President Obama seemed cognizant of the fact that the impasse was unlikely to end easily, although he did not foreclose the possibility of a diplomatic resolution. He mused, "All of us would anticipate that North Korea will probably make more provocative moves over the next several weeks... This is the same kind of pattern that we saw his father engage in, and his grandfather before that. If they want to rejoin the community of nations, that path is available to them."

On April 18, 2013, North Korea's National Defense Commission issued a statement via the official Korean Central News Agency, demanding that the United States and South Korea withdraw "all nuclear war making capabilities from the region," with an eye on future dialogue. North Korea also called for Washington and Seoul to apologize for its aggression.

In response, a spokesperson for the White House, Josh Earnest, said that the Obama administration was committed to denuclearization of the Korean peninsula and was open to "authentic and credible negotiations." Earnest noted that the actions and rhetoric from North Korea "actually indicate the opposite." He added, "We also need to see some clear evidence that the North Koreans themselves are willing to live up to their international obligations, are willing to demonstrate their commitment to ending the nuclear program, something they've promised in the past."

By April 21, 2013, North Korea was reported to have moved two short-range missile launchers to the east coast. According to a South Korean military source in a report by the South Korean Yonhap news agency, satellite imagery showed the transfer of two mobile missile launchers suitable for short-range Scud missiles to the South Hamgyeong province. Earlier in the month, as noted above, two mid-range Musudan missiles were placed on launchers on the east coast. Collectively, these actions indicated that a missile launch might be in the offing -- possibly to mark the anniversary of the founding of the North Korean military on April 25. However, that date passed without any show of force.

In the last week of April 2013, South Korea called on North Korea to engage in dialogue over the Kaesong industrial complex, which became a flashpoint in the ongoing crisis between the two Koreas. Regarded as a symbol of cooperation between North Korea and South Korea, the decision by the North to block access to the jointly-run industrial complex was interpreted as a clear sign of deteriorating relations, devolving diplomacy, and the slide towards confrontation. That slide became more precipitous when North Korea outright rejected the invitation to engage in talks. South Korea, therefore, responded by withdrawing its nationals from the Kaesong industrial zone in the interests of safety.

On May 6, 2013, CBS News reported that the two Musudan medium-range missiles, which had been moved to the east coast of North Korea weeks prior, were now removed from the launch site. Those missiles, as discussed above, had sufficient range to reach Japan as well as the United States territory of Guam in the Pacific.

The movement of the missiles was being interpreted in some circles as a cooling of the heated tensions on the Korean Peninsular. Of course, with the start of the spring farming season, it was also possible that many members of the army were -- as they do each year -- necessarily turning their attention to the planting effort.

Regardless of the rationale, the removal of the Musudan missiles from the launch site conceivably indicated that the threat posed by North Korea was reduced at this time, if only on a temporary basis. Indeed, since the Musudan is a mobile missile, it could well be transported back to the launch site in short order. As noted by a senior United States official from the National Security Council in an interview with BBC News, it was "premature to celebrate it as good news," given North Korea's record of unpredictable behavior to date. Striking a similar tone, George Little, a Pentagon spokesperson, characterized North Korea's most recent stance as "a provocation pause."

May 2013 saw North Korea carry out a series of short-range missile tests from its east coast. As global leaders attempted to bring down the level of tensions on the Korean Peninsular, and even after North Korea pulled back its two medium range missiles from its launch pad, the firing of four -- albeit short range -- missiles was being regarded as a provocation. It was not known if North Korea was trying to re-ignite geo-political tensions or if the tests were routine exercises intended to simply show military might. Regardless, United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon urged North Korea to refrain from carrying out any further missile tests and "resume dialogue."

Presumably in an effort to show that the United States was fully prepared to defend itself from the potential nuclear missile threat posed by North Korea or any other belligerent nation state, the Missile Defense Agency along with the United States Navy on May 16, 2013 completed a successful test of a missile defense system as it destroyed a target launched in the Pacific Ocean. According to reports from the Department of Defense, a short-range ballistic missile target was launched from the Pacific Missile Range Facility on the Hawaiian island of Kauai; the USS Lake Erie was able to detect and track the missile, then launch a blocking missile with a kinetic warhead, which successfully destroyed the target. United States officials said the test operation in Hawaii demonstrated that the Aegis Ballistic Missile Defense system was fully functional.

It came as something of a surprise when, in June 2013, North Korea proposed direct talks with the United States. North Korea's National Defense Commission, headed by North Korea's leader, Kim Jong-un, said it hoped for "serious discussions... to secure peace and stability." The United States responded to this overture by saying it looked towards "credible negotiations," made clear that North Korea had to be compliant with United Nations resolutions and travel down the path of denuclearization.

At the start of July 2013, North Korea renewed its push for engagement with the United States when Choi Myung-nam, an international affairs director at the North Korean Foreign Ministry, said Washington should take Pyongyang's diplomatic offers seriously. It should be noted that while representatives of the United States and North Korea have held meetings sporadically, the two sides have not engaged in high-level talks since 2009.

Meanwhile, in the third week of June 2013, North Korea was apparently building on its sudden appetite for diplomatic engagement as it expressed an interest in restarting international nuclear negotiations. According to China's foreign ministry, North Korean officials were now indicating that they wanted to "peacefully resolve the

nuclear issue." It should be noted that multilateral talks between North Korea, South Korea, China, Japan, Russia, and the United States over North Korea's controversial nuclear program collapsed in 2008. North Korea's renewed interest in diplomatic engagement at the multilateral level came as a result of high-level strategic talks with Chinese officials in Beijing. It was to be seen if an actual return to the multilateral negotiating table was in the offing.

See below for information on North Korea's nuclear capability and the United States' reaction to the threat posed by North Korea to its national security.

Nuclear Capability

Of course, the main question is whether or not North Korea could make good on its threats against the United States and its allies. It was clear that both South Korea and Japan were within range of potential North Korean missile attacks.

North Korea's medium-range Nodong 1, a single-stage liquid-propelled weapon based on Soviet "Scud" technology, could reach Japanese and South Korean targets, according to an International Institute for Strategic Studies overview of North Korea's missile program. However, that technology was not known for its targeting prowess and was thus not to be regarded as a "precision strike" mechanism.

Obviously, at an even further distance, the Nodong 1 could not really be regarded as a serious threat against Guam. It was possible that North Korea could deploy its multi-stage intermediate range ballistic missile, the Taepodong, against the United States base on Guam, but the record for the Taepodong was not stellar, even failing during flight testing.

As discussed above, in the first week of April 2013, North Korea moved a medium-range missile, known as a Musudan or Nodong B, to its east coast. It was not known if there was a warhead mounted on the missile, or, if the movement of the missile was part of the preparations for yet another missile test. While this Musudan/Nodong B missile has a range of 3,000 kilometers (1,875 miles), which would put all of South Korea, Japan and possibly Guam in its range, there was no reliable test history to ensure precision. A missile launch would ostensibly be aimed at acquiring that flight test history, thus driving South Korea to deploy warships with missile defense systems to the coasts.

It should be noted that the Kn-o8 missile was believed to have enough range to hit United States terrain such as Alaska, Hawaii, and Guam. This missile was actually displayed at a North Korean military parade within the last year. However, there were some suggestions that the missile was not yet viable, with some experts even suggesting it was only a "mock-up" missile.

The longer range option for North Korea would likely be the multi-stage rocket, the Unha-3, which was used to launch a satellite into space in late 2012. Theoretically, the Unha -- with its range of 10,000 kilometers -- could deliver a nuclear warhead-sized payload as far as Alaska or Hawaii or even California. However, as noted by the Center for Nonproliferation Studies (CNS), previous launches of Unha-based rockets have not been terribly successful, raising questions about the technology's reliability. Moreover, unlike most intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICMBs) which use solid fuel, the Unha-3 is powered by liquid fuel, which cannot be stored for long periods inside the rocket. Accordingly, the Unha-3 was a liquid-fueled rocket, it would have to sit on a launch pad for lengthy periods of time for fueling, leaving it essentially vulnerable to a strike. For all these reasons, the CNS

has concluded that while the Unha was evidence of North Korea's missile capability, it was not deemed to be "a reliable system capable of delivering a nuclear weapon to the continental United States."

Still, the navy of South Korea obtained first stage debris from the 2012 Unha launch and concluded that North Korea had made some technological strides. Notably, the missile showed a capacity for steering thanks to the use of small auxiliary engines instead of jet vanes.

Another consideration as regards North Korea's progress on nuclear development was the use of uranium versus plutonium in nuclear testing. It is widely believed that North Korea used plutonium as fissile material for nuclear tests undertaken in 2006 and 2009. But there were suspicions by experts that North Korea might have used uranium in its recent (February 2013) nuclear test. The use of uranium could indicate North Korea's intent to expand its nuclear arsenal through uranium enrichment.

Nevertheless, the general consensus at the time was that North Korea had not (yet) developed the technology to manufacture a miniaturized nuclear device small enough to fit on a ballistic missile, which would be needed to carry out a nuclear attack on the United States.

North Korea has carried out nuclear weapons tests and has made it clear that future tests were in the offing. But producing a nuclear explosion was not the same as producing a nuclear device small enough to fit on the top of a missile that could be delivered across an extensive range of territory. Indeed, not only do nuclear warheads have to be small enough to fit on a missile, they also have to be durable enough to withstand intense heat, as well as the vibration of re-entry, and they need to possess the precision to arrive at their intended targets. As noted by Greg Thielmann, a senior fellow at the Arms Control Association, "Based on the testing we've seen and some other assumptions about North Korean abilities, we don't think they're ready to arm an ICBM with a nuclear warhead yet even if they had an ICBM, which they don't yet."

That being said, a new assessment of North Korea's nuclear capability conducted by the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) of the Pentagon concluded with "moderate confidence" that North Korea had, for the first time, learned how to manufacture a nuclear weapon small enough to be delivered via a ballistic missile. The precise language used by the Defense Intelligence Agency was as follows: "North currently has nuclear weapons capable of delivery by ballistic missiles however the reliability will be low."

The assessment, portions of which were publicized in a report by the New York Times on April 11, 2013, was a sobering and disturbing revelation at a time of heightened tensions on the Korean peninsula.

Related to this report was emerging insight derived from debris from the rocket used by the North Koreans to launch a satellite into space in December 2012. The United States Navy was able to retrieve the front section of the rocket for study by experts, thus contributing to assessments about possible warhead designs by the North Koreans. According to media reports, that front section of the satellite rocket offered scientists evidence that North Korea was manufacturing the missile's cone at dimensions suitable for a nuclear warhead, and intended to function on a long-range missile capable of re-entry to the earth's atmosphere from space.

Anxieties over this possible benchmark by the North Koreans were likely to be assuaged by the general view that such a nuclear weapon would likely be hampered by low reliability -- a plausible deduction given North Korea's poor record of developing accurate weapons and its limited test history of missiles in its possession. As well, even if

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North Korea did make technological strides and was now able to make a deliverable warhead, it would still have to be able to withstand intense heat and the vibration of re-entry, and would to be sufficiently tested for target precision, as noted above. To that end, North Korea has no test history of a re-entry vehicle and without that functional technology, it cannot deliver a warhead.

It should be noted that in a report to the United States Congress at the start of May 2013, the United States Department of Defense made it clear that North Korea was aiming to move closer to its goal of striking the United States with a nuclear-armed missile. There was no estimate as to when North Korea might achieve that capability; however, the report surmised that progress on this front would be dependent on North Korea's degree of investment in its military program. And to that end, North Korea was believed to be committed to becoming a nuclear powerhouse, irrespective of its domestic challenges of famine, starvation, and economic strife. The report emphasized the view that North Korea's key strategic aim was to deploy "coercive diplomacy" to force the international community to accept its nuclear ambitions. No reference in this report was made of the aforementioned conclusions of the DIA.

For its part, the United States government has long maintained the position that it has the ability to protect the homeland. To that end, in mid-March 2013, the Obama administration in the United States said it would deploy additional ballistic-missile interceptors along the country's Pacific Coast, with an eye on protecting the United States from a potential attack from North Korea. The deployment of additional ballistic-missile interceptors would increase the number (currently based in California and Alaska) from 30 to 44. As well, the United States moved its sea-based X-Band radar platform, normally based in Hawaii, closer to the North Korean coast, with the intent of monitoring potential attempts from North Korea to launch a long-range missile. The radar system also possesses the capability to search and track targets, as well as communicate with interceptor missiles at overseas bases that can shoot down missiles. By April 2013, the United States decided to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system to Guam.

The anti-ballistic missile interceptor system and the X-Band radar platform do not guarantee protection against a possible North Korean attack; however, they are intended to deter Pyongyang, which has been known to have only a limited intercontinental ballistic missile arsenal. As noted here, experts have concluded that North Korea simply does not have the military capability to carry out a nuclear strike on United States territory.

In May 2013, in an effort to show that the United States was fully prepared to defend itself from the potential nuclear missile threat posed by North Korea or any other belligerent nation state, the Missile Defense Agency along with the United States Navy completed a successful test of a missile defense system as it destroyed a target launched in the Pacific Ocean. According to the Department of Defense, a short-range ballistic missile target was launched from the Pacific Missile Range Facility on the Hawaiian island of Kauai; the USS Lake Erie was able to detect and track the missile, then launch a blocking missile with a kinetic warhead, which successfully destroyed the target. United States officials said the test operation in Hawaii demonstrated that the Aegis Ballistic Missile Defense system was fully functional.

Should a confrontation actually emerge, North Korea would be helped by the fact that its army is the fifth largest in the world; however, it is also inexperienced having not seen combat since 1953, and having been deprived of the superior and sophisticated training available to the smaller South Korean military, or the extensive United States military industrial complex. As well, a lot of North Korea's military equipment is outdated in comparison to Western powers. That being said, even outdated military equipment can still (presumably) function and thus North Korea poses a real and serious threat to global security.

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Retired United States Admiral Dennis Blair, a former head of the United States Pacific Command and director of national intelligence in the Obama administration, cautioned against taking a sanguine stance in response to the North Korean threat. He said in an interview with Bloomberg News, "I'm not relaxed about this one...I think this one's more dangerous."

Most experts on North Korea posit the view that Pyongyang is not really prepared to ignite a conflict that would ensure its own destruction; however, they note that Kim Jong-un's inexperience could lead to misunderstanding and miscalculations with potentially catastrophic consequences. For example, regardless of its intended target, a missile launched by the North that appears to be headed towards South Korea or Japan -- accidentally or otherwise -- would clearly yield a response from those countries or the United States. That response could itself be a catalyst for a deadly confrontation among players armed with no shortage of conventional weapons, not to mention nuclear bombs.

Indeed, Admiral Samuel J. Locklear, the top United States commander in the Pacific, said during testimony before the Senate Armed Services committee on April 9, 2013 that while the United States would not opt to shoot down a North Korean missile aimed for open waters, interceptors would be used to defend against a North Korean missile perceived as threatening the interests of the United States or its allies. It was an unknown matter as to how a paranoid regime like North Korea would itself respond to such defensive action.

Meanwhile, as noted by United States Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel of his country's ability to respond to threats posed by North Korea: "We have every capacity to deal with any action that North Korea would take, to protect this country and the interests of this country and our allies." At the same news conference with Hagel, General Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the United States military Joint Chiefs of Staff, would not say if he believe North Korea had been able to make a nuclear warhead small enough to fit onto a ballistic missile; however, he warned that the United States need to be prepared for the worst possible scenarios. Dempsey said: "They [the North Koreans] have conducted two nuclear tests. They have conducted several successful ballistic missile launches. And in the absence of concrete evidence to the contrary, we have to assume the worst case, and that's why we're postured as we are today."

Boston terror bombings intersects with challenge of Islamic separatism and extremism in Russia

On April 15, 2013, two bombs exploded along the path to the finish line of the Boston Marathon in the state of Massachusetts in the United States. NBC News reported that the bombs were small and crudely-made explosive devices.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the bombings and at the time, authorities indicated that there was no suspect in custody. That being said, several individuals were being questioned in connection with the attacks.

Investigators were treating the bombings in Boston as a terrorist event, although in the aftermath of the attacks, it was unknown if the terrorists responsible were domestic or foreign actors. Likewise, it was not immediately know if the bombs were planted by a lone individual or a group of people. As noted by a White House official, "Any event with multiple explosive devices as this appears to be is clearly an act of terror and will be approached as an act of terror. However we don't yet know who carried out this attack and a thorough investigation will have to determine whether it was planned and carried out by a terrorist group foreign or domestic."

It should be noted that in the period following the two explosions, the Federal Aviation Administration instituted a no-fly zone over the Boston area, while security in the United States' capital of Washington D.C. and major cities, such as New York, was tightened. As well, according to United States government sources, federal law

enforcement was placed on "level one mobilization." Additionally, CNN was reporting that teams were on "stand-by" and ready to search flights leaving the United State, although the teams were not yet activated to follow this course.

Because of the anxieties over the possibility of other explosive devices being planted in Boston, authorities were urging people to remain either at home or indoors at hotels, and to refrain from congregating in large groups until the scene was stabilized. As stated by Boston Police Commissioner Edward Davis during a news conference, "We recommend to people that they stay home. We want to make sure that we completely stabilize the situation." Governor Deval Patrick echoed this call, saying, "We are asking that people ... calmly make their way home." Governor Patrick also characterized the situation unfolding as a "horrific day in Boston."

The explosive devices were believed to have been placed inside backpacks and detonated remotely. The first explosion emanated from the north side of Boylston Street, across from the grand stand, just before the bridge that marked the marathon finish line. That first explosion occurred roughly two hours after the winners crossed the finish line. The second explosion occurred just moments after the first one and along the same stretch of road.

Videotaped footage by NBC news showed the explosion, the smoke from the blast, the scattering debris, and the runners still on the course falling to the ground from the force of the blasts. After the explosions, as other runners approached the finish line, they were rerouted in another direction for obvious security reasons.

Fellow runners, spectators, and other individuals, all reacted to the chaos by trying to assist victims, essentially administering "make shift" medical help before emergency responders arrived on the scene. Three people were reported to have been killed, and more than 130 people were injured, as a result of these apparent terrorist acts. Tragically, one fatality was believed to be an eight year old child. The other two victims were a young Bostonian woman and a female student from China. Meanwhile, there were scores of people hospitalized due to the intensely grave nature of so many injuries. It should be noted that due to the placement of the explosive devices, many of the victims endured horrific injuries to their lower extremities, with limbs severed as a result. Indeed, the scene of the tragedy displayed a traumatizing scene of dismembered and bloodied body parts along with the injured victims and shocked bystanders.

United States President Barack Obama offered a national address on the day of the Boston bombings, which was broadcast by the media, in the immediate aftermath of the unfolding tragedy in Boston. In that address, the American leader promised that those responsible for these violent terrorist attacks would feel the "full weight of justice." Noting that the identity of those responsible were yet unknown, President Obama said: "We still do not know who did this or why. But we will find out who did this and we will hold them accountable."

President Obama earlier spoke with Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick and Boston Mayor Tom Menino to make it clear that the full weight of federal authority and assistance was at their disposal in dealing with the unfolding tragedy. Vice President Joe Biden offered condolences, saying, "Our prayers are with those people in Boston who have suffered injury."

One day after the Boston bombings, on April 16, 2013, President Obama again offered nationally-televised remarks. In those remarks, the president again reiterated his commitment to use federal powers to find those responsible and bring them to justice. He said, "It will take time to follow every lead and determine what happened. But we will find out. We will find whoever harmed our citizens and we will bring them to justice."

The president also made it abundantly clear that the Boston bombings were acts of terrorism. President Obama asserted, "This was a heinous and cowardly act. And given what we now know about what took place, the FBI is investigating it as an act of terrorism. Any time bombs are used to target innocent civilians it is an act of terror." But he continued by striking a defiant tone, "We also know this -- the American people refuse to be terrorized.... So if you want to know who we are, what America is, how we respond to evil -- that's it. Selflessly. Compassionately. Unafraid."

As to the matter of those responsible, any suggestions about the identity of the terrorists were exercises in speculation immediately after the bombings. That being said, some experts pointed to the use of pressure cooking

equipment in the manufacture of the explosive devices. Apparently the Islamic extremist Jihadist publication, Inspire, has run stories instructing aspiring Jihadist terrorists to build bombs using such equipment. Going in another (domestic) direction, another cadre of observers pointed to the fact that the attacks took place on April 15, 2013 -- tax day in the United States and Patriots Day in Boston. Clearly, it would take more investigation to get a better sense of the identity of the attacker(s) and the agenda at stake.

But the pace of revelation was unfolding in a rather rapid manner. Thanks to the sheer quantity of photographic evidence from witnesses at the marathon taking pictures of the day's events, as well as cameras installed on commercial buildings, authorities were able to get a sense of the perpetrators and their actions. Indeed, on April 18, 2013, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) released photographs of two suspects and actively sought the public's assistance in apprehending those responsible. Richard DesLauriers of the FBI explained that one of the suspects was believed to have placed one of the explosive devices outside a restaurant close to the marathon finish line. Both suspects -- one in a black baseball cap (referred to in the media as "black cap") and the other shown in a white baseball cap (referred to in the media as "white cap") were described as armed and dangerous.

The night of April 18, 2013 unfolded with unmatched drama of the type one might only see on a television or movie screen. The action ensued only hours after the photographs of the suspects were released. Presumably agitated by the realization that their pictures were being shared with the world, the two suspects -- "black cap" and "white cap" -- became engaged in a spate of violent activities with deadly consequences.

The drama began with the killing of a police officer on the campus of MIT University, the motive for which remained hazy at the time of writing. "Black cap" and "white cap" then carjacked a man in a Mercedes-Benz SUV, held him by gunpoint, identified themselves as the Boston marathon bombers, and used his ATM card to withdraw \$800 in cash from the car owner's bank account, before the car owner was able to make an escape at a gas station in Cambridge. The search for the carjacked individual's vehicle led to a car chase that ended in a vicious battle in the Boston suburb of Watertown.

The suspects -- "black cap" and "white cap" -- exchanged gunfire with police, with many stray bullets landing in the homes of people who lived in the hitherto quiet residential neighborhood of Watertown. As well, one transit officer was seriously wounded in the mayhem. The situation became even more intense when, during their attempted getaway, the two suspects hurled explosive devices at the police. Residents of the neighborhood who witnessed the events said in interviews with the media that the devices looked like a combination of grenades and pressure cooker bombs. Bomb detecting robots were soon dispatched to the scene to determine the security of the area since the two men reportedly hurled an arsenal of weapons and explosive devices on the Watertown residential street.

Meanwhile, the firefight between the suspects and police was ongoing. The suspect known in the media as "black cap" ran towards the police and opened fire, only to be rewarded by being shot himself. That suspect's prospects for survival took a negative turn when his partner in crime, "white cap," drove over his body in the rush to escape. It should be noted that an improvised explosives device was reportedly strapped to the body of "black cap" indicating his intent to carry out a suicide attack, if he had the chance. "Black cap" was eventually reported to have died at the Beth Israel Medical Center from the lethal combination of injuries, while "white cap" was said to be on the run.

Authorities soon cordoned off large swaths of Watertown, Newton, Arlington, Waltham, Belmont, and Cambridge, as well as the Allston-Brighton neighborhoods of Boston. They also suspended mass transit, called on local businesses to shut down, and ordered residents to remain inside under "lock down" conditions. These measures were undertaken as the police and Swat teams prepared to carry out a "house to house" search for the surviving suspect, known as "white cap." Authorities warned the public that the surviving suspect was a "white male" and a "dangerous terrorist" with international connections. As stated by Boston Police Commissioner Ed Davis, "We believe this man to be a terrorist. We believe this to be a man who's come here to kill people."

This disclosure seemed to foreclose the possibility that the Boston marathon attack was related to domestic extremists with anti-government stances. At the same time, the disclosure pointed towards the possible path of Jihadist terrorism (although confirmation of that fact was yet to come).

In the early hours of April 19, 2013, details regarding the identities of the two suspects were beginning to surface. The suspect seen in the FBI photographs wearing the black cap, and who had died as a result of the firefight with police, was identified as 26-year old Tamarlan Tsarnaev. The surviving suspect, who was seen in the FBI photographs wearing the white cap, was identified as his brother, 19-year old Dzhokhar A. Tsarnaev. The young men were of Chechnyan and Avar (Dagestani) ethnicity. The father of the two brothers had worked in the former Soviet republic of Kyrgyzstan, which is now independent; the Tsarnaev brothers spent some of their younger years there. Anzor Tsarnaev was fired from his government job in Bishkek (the capital of Kyrgyzstan) when the war sparked again in Chechnya in 1999; the general view was that he lost his job due to his Chechen ethnicity. The Tsarnaev family then moved to the Russian semi-autonomous region of Dagestan, close to the breakaway Russian region of Chechnya, which has been the site of an extremist separatist Islamic insurgency for about two decades. The entire family emigrated to the United States about ten years ago and settled in the suburban Boston area of Somerville and Cambridge. Tamarlan Tsarnaev was a legal resident of the United States and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev had become a United States citizen in 2012.

Hours after residents of Boston suburbs were placed under "lockdown," and as the search for the second suspect -- Dzhokhar Tsarnaev -- yielded no progress, police acknowledged that the trail had gone cold. Boston authorities decided to lift the de facto curfew and urged residents to remain vigilant.

Ironically, it was the lifting of the de facto curfew that led to the discovery of Dzhokhar Tsarnaev's hiding place. One resident took advantage of the fact that he was now allowed to go outdoors and exited his home to smoke a cigarette. Looking out on his back yard, he noticed that his boat stored in his yard looked as if it had been tampered with and he additionally identified blood stains. He removed the tarpaulin covering the boat and found a person covered in blood hiding there. Authorities arrived on the scene and another gun battle broke out before Dzhokhar Tsarnaev surrendered and was taken to the hospital where he was being treated for serious gunshot injuries.

Boston Police Department tweeted the news as follows: "CAPTURED!!! The hunt is over. The search is done. The terror is over. And justice has won. Suspect in custody." People took to the streets to share their relief that the ordeal was over and to express appreciation for law enforcement.

By April 21, 2013, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev remained in serious condition and under armed guard at the Beth Israel Medical Center. Gunshots to the throat area left him unable to speak, although he was periodically providing some written responses to questions by investigators.

More details were meanwhile emerging about the extent of the Tsarnaev brothers' desire to continue their campaign of carnage. Based on reports of the man who was carjacked by the Tsarnaev brothers, they intended to make their way to New York. The FBI suggested that the two men intended to detonate their remaining arsenal of explosives in Time Square.

Formal charges of some sort were expected to be brought against Dzhokhar Tsarnaev. These charges would be harsh, given the allegations of terrorism and the apparent evidence of participation in a terrorist act. As noted by Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick in an interview with NBC News, video surveillance footage put Dzhokhar Tsarnaev at the scene of the first bomb explosion. He said, "It does seem to be pretty clear that this suspect took the backpack off, put it down, did not react when the first explosion went off and then moved away from the backpack in time for the second explosion."

On April 22, 2013, the United States Department of Justice charged the second suspect in the Boston marathon bombings with using a weapon of mass destruction. While there is no death penalty in the state of Massachusetts, the federal charge of using a weapon of mass destruction to kill people carries with it a possible death sentence. At the close of April 2013, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev was moved from the Beth Israel Medical Center to the Bureau of Prisons federal detention hospital.

Meanwhile, some Republican politicians were calling for Dzhokhar Tsarnaev to be treated as an enemy combatant, although as a United States citizen, such an action could well be regarded as unconstitutional. The Obama administration soon made it clear it was not interested in going down this road. As noted by White House

spokesperson, Jay Carney, "He will not be treated as an enemy combatant. We will prosecute this terrorist through our civilian system of justice." Indeed, the sheer wealth of evidence against the Tsarnaev brothers ensured that the government's case would be a strong one.

With Tamarlan Tsarnaev dead and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev in custody, no doubt questions about motive would dominate the public purview. Information about Tamarlan Tsarnaev suggested that he had a difficult time adjusting culturally to life in the United States, despite some success with a boxing career. His decision to stop boxing on religious grounds appeared to have angered and perplexed his father, who had been socialized in the Soviet system and culture to hold a far more permissive and moderate attitude towards Islam. Influenced by his mother's religious transformation to Islamic orthodoxy, Tarmalan Tsarnaev reportedly became increasingly **hard line** in his Islamic and extremist views, even alienating some members of his extended family. Ruslan Tsarni, an uncle to the Tsarnaev brothers, was on the record with the media saying that as far back as 2009, Tamerlan Tsarnaev was becoming more of an extremist Muslim, expressing what he described as "this radical crap." This trend appeared to have fueled a break in contact among family members.

As well, according to a report by the Wall Street Journal, Tamerlan Tsarnaev's Islamist views grew so rigid and radical that he managed to offend fellow Muslim worshippers at the mosque they attended in Cambridge. In fact, there were multiple accounts of Tamerlan Tsarnaev confronting speakers giving sermons at the mosque. In one case, he was angry that the speaker urged worshippers to celebrate the birthday of the Prophet Mohammed along with American Independence Day, as well as Thanksgiving and other American holidays. In his own community, he was angered that a Middle Eastern grocery owner was selling Thanksgiving turkeys, deeming it inappropriate for Muslims.

It should be noted that the Russian government had Tamarlan Tsarnaev on its radar, having requested that the United States authorities investigate him as early as 2011, due to suspicions of involvement with Islamic extremists and unspecified underground groups. The FBI confirmed that they interviewed Tamerlan Tsarnaev in 2011, as requested, but found no cause for alarm at the time. Still, Russian intelligence continued to regard Tarmalan Tsarnaev with suspicion and recorded a telephone conversation in 2011 in which Jihadism was discussed with his mother. Collectively, the corpus of information garnered by both American and Russian intelligence appeared to have indicated concerns about religious extremism, but stopped short of signaling actual terrorist activities in the future. Thus, it would be difficult to suggest that the governments of either country could have prevented the Boston bombings.

While there was no information available at the time to suggest an intent to carry out a terror attack, United States authorities nevertheless placed Tarmalan Tsarnaev on two government watch lists in 2011. Although those lists did not go as far as the so-called "no fly list," when Tamerlan Tsarnaev left the United States in 2012 for a trip to Russia, his reservation triggered a security alert to customs authorities at the time. Of course, that security alert did not translate into any action by United States authorities that actually prevented the trip from occurring.

In fact, Tamarlan Tsarnaev was able to travel out of the country for an extended period of time on this 2012 trip to visit his father who was now living in the Dagestan region of Russia. However, the actual time Tamarlan Tsarnaev spent with his father in Dagestan was limited to one month, leaving the rest of the period a mystery and open for speculation. It was possible (although not confirmed) that he attended a terrorist training camp -- perhaps in the restive Caucasus region or elsewhere. But even without such an expedition, Tamarlan Tsarnaev may very well have been radicalized in a less "official" manner. While politicians in the United States were eager to suggest that Tamarlan Tsarnaev was radicalized out of the country, it was apparent that his increasingly extreme Islamic views were part of a personal transformation taking place in the home he shared with his mother. Still, it was after an overseas trip more recently that Tamarlan Tsarnaev created YouTube postings called "Terrorists," which featured videos from a militant extremist in Dagestan known as Amir Abu Dudzhan. In one posting, Dudzhan is shown holding a Kalashnikov rifle and declaring: "Jihad is the duty of every able-bodied Muslim." It was apparent that Tamarlan Tsarnaev was ideologically inspired by Islamic extremism and radicalism, while being sympathetic to the Chechnyan and Dagestani separatist and Jihadist causes.

Of course, the motivation for Dzhokhar A. Tsarnaev to join his brother in carrying out terrorist attacks remained more of a matter of debate. Significantly more well-adjusted to American life than his brother, the younger Tsarnaev was a seemingly successful student at the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth, with a number of American friends, an active social life, and hopes for a medical career. It was difficult to determine if Dzhokhar Tsarnaev shared his brother's Jihadist views, or, if he was simply motivated by his relationship with his brother. To that end, there were some suggestions that Tamerlan Tsarnaev may have "brainwashed" his younger brother into participating in his terrorist agenda. For his part, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev's posts on the Russian social media site, Vkontakt, made clear that he self-identified as Islamic in terms of religion and "world view," and Chechnyan in terms of ethnicity and culture. He also posted links to Islamic and pro-Chechnyan independence websites.

There seemed to be bewilderment among United States intelligence circles about the idea that the Chechnyan drive for independence and war with Russia should be transported to American terrain. But it was not clear that Chechnyan independence was the driver for the two Tsarnaev brothers to commit acts of terror.

In fact, it should be noted that Islamic militants operating under the aegis of the Caucasian Mujahedeenin denied any involvement in the Boston marathon terror attacks, emphasizing that their conflict was with Russia. However, as discussed below, the militant Islamic insurgency in the North Caucasus has steadily expanded past Chechnya's borders to neighboring territories, such as Dagestan and Ingushetia, and the cause itself has moved past establishing an independent Chechnya to a broader Jihadist goal in the Caucasus. It was quite possible that personal transformation to radical Islam meshed with the Jihadist agenda for the older Tsarnaev brother, and he drew the younger one into the fold.

To be clear, an Islamic insurgency emanating from the North Caucasus has bedeviled the Russian Federation for close to two decades. Despite successful offensive operations by the Russian military in the North Caucasus, violence by Islamist separatist militants has been ongoing. At issue has been the Chechen mandate to create an independent Islamic state and the willingness of the Chechen militants to use terrorism and violence to achieve their ends.

While the mainstream media has focused on this separatist war carried out by extremist Islamic insurgents from Chechnya, the neighboring restive provinces in the North Caucasus have also been engulfed in the conflict. The epicenter of the Islamic separatist insurgency is, of course, Chechnya, which has been in state of war for some time; however, neighboring Dagestan and Ingushetia have been intensely affected and a discussion of Islamic insurgency in Russia can not ensue without including all three territories. Dagestan is the site of militant activity, and a frequent target of terrorism and violent criminality, while Ingushetia is a literal war zone. Other parts of the North Caucasus have also seen violence -- North Ossetia is the site of militant activity, while Kabardino-Balkaria is often caught in the crossfire of violence between government forces and Chechen rebels.

The area is beset by daunting poverty and Russian leaders, such as Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, have offered the view that poverty alleviation in the region should be part of the solution aimed at stabilization of the area. Indeed, expert analysts have, likewise, noted that poor socio-economic conditions constitute the stimulus for many youth to join extremist Islamic militant groups in the North Caucasus. At the same time, it must be emphasized that revenge and resistance against the brutal tactics of the Russian military are part of the equation, ultimately serving to augment extremism and militancy, and create more fertile political soil for radical action.

The motivation of extremism and militancy aside, it should be noted that terrorism by Islamic extremists on Russian terrain is not a new phenomenon. Militant Islamic extremists from the North Caucasus have been behind a host of terrorist attacks over the years. In 2002, Chechen rebels carried out a siege on a theater in Moscow. The Chechen militant rebels who took over the theater demanded an end to the war in Chechnya, and threatened to kill the hostages if their demands were not met. The grave situation demanded a rapid and overwhelming response by Russian authorities and, indeed, most of the hostages were eventually freed when Russian forces stormed the theater. However, 116 hostages were killed in the rescue operation, due to the indiscriminate use of an unspecified sleep-inducing agent by the Russians to deal with the Chechen rebels. In 2004, Chechen terrorists carried out a brutal and bloody attack on a school in Beslan, in which hundreds of people were taken hostage. A two day siege ended with a bloodbath in which more than 300 people were killed under the most horrific conditions. At least half

the victims in that case were children. In 2009, the express train from Moscow to St. Petersburg was hit by North Caucasus Islamic terrorists. In 2010, militant extremists stormed the parliament in Chechnya. That same year, the Moscow underground transit system was hit by two female suicide bombers from Dagestan. In 2011, a bomb attack at Moscow's Domodedovo airport left more than 35 people dead and at least 170 others wounded -- many of them critically. The suicide bomber in that attack was identified as a 20-year-old man from the North Caucasus although a Chechen warlord, Doku Umarov, had claimed responsibility for orchestrating the attack at the Moscow airport.

Doku Umarov, who has been seen as more of a philosophical separatist leader than a military figure, has claimed responsibility for a number of terrorist attacks, including the aforementioned double suicide bombing of the Moscow subway system in 2010 and the 2011 Moscow airport attack. In fact, Umarov has threatened further attacks, insinuating that the extremist Islamic insurgency would intensify with more "special operations" in the future if Russia refused to allow the Caucasus to become an independent Islamic state. In a videotaped message in 2011, he warned, "Among us there are hundreds of brothers who are prepared to sacrifice themselves." Umarov's warning served as both a clarifier and a reminder. First, it was becoming increasingly clear that the ambitions of Islamist extremists had expanded from the goal of Chechnya's independence to a broader Jihadist ambition of creating an Islamic state across the Caucasus, governed by Shar'ia law. This broader objective explained the widening of the Jihadist cause -- from a concentrated geopolitical center in Chechnya to a broader claim across the Northern Caucasus. Second, and more simply, it was possible that the Tsarnaev brothers were the latest actors willing to undertake "special operations" and "sacrifice themselves" for that Jihadist cause, thus bringing Chechen Jihadist terrorism to American terrain.

But it was also possible that these two young men -- neither of whom were victims of economic strife as is the case for many Chechens, Dagestanis, and Ingushetians at home -- were motivated for different reasons. It was possible that they were inspired by a broader ideological (read: global Islamic Jihadist) sensibility, reminiscent of the September 11, 2001, hijackers, or the Nigerian Christmas Day bomber. All the young men in these cases were well-educated, spent several years in Western countries, quite possibly suffered from cultural alienation to some degree as a result of the experience, thus driving them to take on radicalized Islamic extremist identities, and ultimately -- to terrorist actions on the basis of religion.

On April 22, 2013, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev was reported to have told investigating authorities that he and his brother acted alone, rather than in concert with an organized Jihadist or terror enclave, and that their actions were motivated by their Islamist beliefs, and inspired by the goal of global Jihadism. By the last week of April 2013, a clearer picture of the motivation for the bombings was emerging as reports surfaced about the radicalization of Tarmalan Tsarnaev as early as 2010 -- a track that seemed to run parallel with the increasingly religious orientation of his mother. Both mother and son, as noted above, were wiretapped by Russian intelligence and appeared to have discussed the possibility of participating in Jihad. As such, it was apparent that Islamic extremism within the Tsarnaev family fueled the terrorist actions of the two brothers.

On May 1, 2013, three friends of Dzhokhar Tsarnaev were arrested in connection with the Boston bombings. Authorities in the United States made clear that the young men -- two foreign students from Kazakhstan and one American student -- were not believed to have assisted with the planning of the bombings. However, the two Kazakh students were being arrested for obstruction of justice due to their decision to remove Dzhokhar Tsarnaev's backpack filled with the remnants of fireworks explosives and deposit it in a landfill. The third individual was being arrested for lying to federal agents about the chain of events.

As to the logistical planning of the terror operation, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev revealed to federal investigators that he and his brother had mulled over the possibility of carrying out suicide attacks before settling on the idea of pressure cooker bombs. He said they made that decision based on the Internet footage of Anwar al-Awlaki, a radical American cleric who settled in Yemen and died in September 2011 as a result of an United States drone strike. Anwar al-Awlaki had advocated Islamist activist make use of home-made bombs to carry out small scale acts in the United States, in order to terrorize the American people on a sustained basis. Dzhokhar Tsarnaev also said they had initially targeted July 4 as the date to carry out their attacks, but because they managed to manufacture the

arsenal of bombs in Tarmaan Tsarnaev's apartment sooner than that date, they decided to move the date of their attack to the Boston Marathon to April 15.

Special Report:

President Obama outlines national security vision and counter-terrorism policy focusing on the use of drones, closure of Guantanamo prison, and an end to perpetual war

In Detail --

On May 24, 2013, at the National Defense University in Washington, United States President Barack Obama offered a broad speech outlining his national security vision and counter-terrorism policy. The president clarified his position on the use of unmanned aircraft, referred to as "drones," in the fight against brutal Islamic extremist terrorists. President Obama also reiterated his call to close the prison for Islamic militants at Guantanamo Bay. Finally, President Obama put to rest the notion of an endless "war on terror," which was spurred in the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks in the United States by the previous Bush administration.

On the matter of drones, President Obama struck a balance between the vital need to defend the country against the very real threat posed by terrorists, while preventing undue collateral damage in drone strikes. He noted that there should be "near certainty" that no civilians die in drone strikes. At the same time, the president asserted that he had a duty to protect the American people from those who would do them harm, saying: "We are at war with an organization that right now would kill as many Americans as they could if we did not stop them first."

Human rights groups and leftist critics have for some time condemned the use of drones to eliminate terrorists finding safe haven in remote regions of the world, such as the restive Afghan-Pak borderlands and broad swaths of Yemen where Islamic extremist militants have strongholds. These critics have argued against the use of unmanned aircraft to strike at individuals, sometimes killing United States citizens in so doing, and certainly exacting collateral damage in the form of other human beings in some cases. They have loudly questioned the legality of killing United States citizens in such a matter and without a trial, and have viewed the use of drone strikes as an immoral use of air power and technology.

On the other side of the equation, however, geo-strategic experts have noted that the use of drones -- already popular with the United States public as an alternative to "boots on the ground" by an already overly-extended United States military -- was a far more efficient and targeted approach to eliminating terrorists with malignant intentions. As well, they have challenged the moral argument of human rights groups, noting that both drones and "on the ground" warfare inevitably result in the deaths of human beings. Experts also questioned why one form of military engagement was so much more subject to criticism than the other.

Moreover, the United States government could well argue that it was operating within legal bounds by targeting an enemy of the state, and a leader of a terror enclave that had declared war on the United States.

For his part, the president himself addressed the difficult question of deciding whether or not to undertake a drone strike, especially when its execution results in the deaths of United States citizens. President Obama suggested that drone strikes constituted a necessary -- but complicated -- option for military engagement when capture of a terrorist was not possible; however, he said that drone strikes and targeted killings should be used with more

temperance. Explaining his stance, President Obama said, "America does not take strikes to punish individuals, we act against terrorists who pose a continuing and imminent threat to the American people."

President Obama addressed his critics who have condemned targeted strikes against United States citizens believed to be intent on carrying out attacks against the United States. The president declared that such individuals should not be shielded by their citizenship from facing the consequences of their actions, just as a sniper at a local crime scene should not be shielded from police. To this end, President Obama stated the following: "When a U.S. citizen goes abroad to wage war against America -- and is actively plotting to kill U.S. citizens; and when neither the United States, nor our partners are in a position to capture him before he carries out a plot -- his citizenship should no more serve as a shield than a sniper shooting down on an innocent crowd should be protected from a SWAT team."

The president continued by observing that those who might die as collateral damage in a drone strike "will haunt us for as long as we live." However, he made clear that the death toll from terrorists was astronomical in comparison to the estimated civilian casualties from drone strikes.

That being said, President Obama explained that the United States had arrived at a "crossroads" in its efforts to vanquish extremism and militancy, and that the effort had to be undertaken with greater oversight, more transparency, and stricter rules of engagement. Accordingly, the controversial drone strike program would be shifted from the jurisdiction of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), where it has been shrouded in secrecy, to the jurisdiction of the Defense Department where there would be more oversight and transparency in the execution of drone strikes, especially with respect to targeted eliminations outside war zones such as Afghanistan. However, it should be noted that the CIA would retain control over drone strikes in Pakistan. According to the White House, the new "presidential policy guidance" on the use of drone strikes also included provisions to limit circumstances under which drones could be used in places such as Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia.

The new presidential policy guidance additionally made clear that the capture of terrorist suspects as the preferable "end game" although drone strikes would be used in cases of "continuing" and "imminent" threats to United States national security where capture was not feasible. As noted by the president himself, drone strikes should be undertaken only "when there are no other governments capable of effectively addressing the threat." President Obama additionally warned there should be "near certainty" that no civilians would be killed in a targeted strike.

Republican critics wasted no time in criticizing these moves. Representative Michael McCaul, the chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee, said, "The president's policies signal a retreat from the threat of al-Qaida." But the Republicans were not alone in their critique. Far left voices joined the fray, albeit for decidedly different reasons. The American Civil Liberties Union complained that there was "still insufficient transparency" regarding the drone strike program.

Regardless of the negative response to President Obama's national security and counter-terrorism policy by his conservative and liberal antagonists, it was clear that the international community welcomed the president's vision and policy agenda. The government of Yemen said it welcomed the initiatives aimed at transferring detainees to that country while the government of Pakistan was appreciative of President Obama's acknowledgment that "force alone cannot make us safe." While the Pakistani government reiterated its complaint that drone strikes violated its sovereignty, the fact of the matter was that such operations could not ensue without Pakistan's tacit knowledge of these actions. Perhaps most significantly, the United Nations rapporteur leading an inquiry into the legality of United States' drone strikes characterized President Obama's new guidelines on the use of drones as "historic." Ben Emmerson reacted to President Obama's new policy framework as follows: "It sets out more clearly and more

authoritatively than ever before the administration's legal justifications for targeted killing, and the constraints that it operates under. The publication of the procedural guidelines for the use of force in counter-terrorism operations is a significant step towards increased transparency and accountability."

On the matter of the terrorist detention center at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, President Obama embarked a new push to close the controversial facility. It should be noted that earlier in his presidency, President Obama attempted to make good on his campaign promise to close the prison, observing at the time that it was a blight on the reputation of the United States in terms of international jurisprudence.

His efforts to close the detention center at Guantanamo were thwarted by Republicans and Democrats alike, who were not eager to bear the political burden of dealing with fate of the prisoners, especially in regard to a plan to resettle them at maximum security jails in the mainland United States.

At issue was the concern that some detainees would be released into society and resume their pursuit of terrorism. Also at issue was some concern that terrorism suspects could not be properly or safely held in prisons on the United States mainland. That latter argument was, at the time, challenged by the president who pointed to a host of dangerous individuals -- from Charles Manson to the first World Trade Center bombers -- who were held in United States prisons, and then tried and sentenced within the United States justice system.

Now in 2013, however, President Obama renewed his advocacy on the closure of the prison at Guantanamo. To this end, he again noted that Americans should not have anxiety over the notion of extremist militant Jihadists being housed at maximum security prisons on American continental terrain. President Obama pointed out that there have been no escape incidents from such facilities in the United States. But perhaps with a cognizance that the United States would be reluctant, once again, to act affirmatively on the controversial issue of closing the prison at Guantanamo, President Obama made clear that he would use his executive power to advance the process. To this end, President Obama announced that he had lifted a moratorium on prisoner transfers to Yemen. This plan was rejected by several Republican politicians, with Senator Saxby Chambliss of Georgia warning that the transfer of some of the "meanest, nastiest killers in the world" would be akin to "turning them loose."

Regardless of such objections, the fact of the matter was that the continuing existence of the prison camp at Guantanamo was viewed negatively by the international community, effectively illustrating the perceived erosion of American constitutional values and the rule of law. As noted by President Obama himself: "Guantanamo has become a symbol around the world for an America that flouts the rule of law." Thus the need to close it down and use established methods and facilities of jurisprudence to deal with all individuals threatening United States national security, according to President Obama.

As the president reiterated his desire to close the detention center at Guantanamo Bay, he was interrupted repeatedly and relentlessly by Medea Benjamin of the ultra-left organization, Code Pink, which has made a habit of heckling United States politicians over the course of the last decade. Undeterred by the interruption, President Obama incorporated the protester's actions into his speech on a spontaneous basis, saying, "I'm willing to cut the young lady who interrupted me some slack because it's worth being passionate about."

It should be noted that during his speech, President Obama defined the war against al-Qaida type Islamic extremist terrorists as a "just war." With the new parameters for drone strikes in effect (now to be administered by the Defense Department with more oversight authority), he noted that this war would be waged in a proportionate manner and only for the purpose of self defense.

But President Obama was also willing to delve into the ethical questions surrounding the very notion of a "just war" and the self defense justification of it. He said, "And yet as our fight enters a new phase, America's legitimate claim of self defense cannot be the end of the discussion. To say a military tactic is legal, or even effective, is not to say it is wise or moral in every instance." He continued, "For the same progress that gives us the technology to strike half a world away also demands the discipline to constrain that power -- or risk abusing it." From a philosophical point of view, President Obama outlined the ethical challenge facing the United States as he said, "From our use of drones to the detention of terror suspects, the decisions that we are making now will define the type of nation and world that we leave to our children."

Finally, President Obama put to rest the notion of an endless "war on terror," which was spurred in the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks in the United States by the previous Bush administration. Making clear that his foreign policy vision and counter-terrorism orientation would not continue to be marked by the legacy of the previous Bush administration, President Obama warned against a "perpetual" war on terror, regardless of what military tactics were used to prosecute the war.

From troop deployments of the type used in Iraq and Afghanistan, to special forces operations of the type used in Pakistan to eliminate the terrorism mastermind, Osama Bin Laden, or even drone strikes of the type used in Yemen to eliminate Anwar al-Alwaki, the United States-born terrorist orchestrator and propaganda communicator for al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), a never-ending war on something as broad as terrorism would be "self-defeating," according to President Obama. He said: "I believe, however, that the use of force must be seen as part of a larger discussion about a comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy. Because for all the focus on the use of force, force alone cannot make us safe. We cannot use force everywhere that a radical ideology takes root; and in the absence of a strategy that reduces the well-spring of extremism, a perpetual war — through drones or special forces or troop deployments — will prove self-defeating, and alter our country in troubling ways."

At a practical level, the president observed that many of the world's terrorists were now on the run rather than safely situated and comfortably able to plot attacks against the United States and its allies. Instead, al-Qaida terrorists in Pakistan and Afghanistan were worrying about their own safety, while the threat posed by extremist Islamic Jihadists was more diffuse and amorphous, extending way beyond the area of the Afghan-Pak border to Yemen, wide swaths of Africa, parts of Asia, and even the North Caucasus in Europe. As such, concentrating on the threat posed by terrorism in a state-based manner was likely outmoded. Instead, the emerging threat of terrorism would come from localized extremist entities, of the type thought to be responsible for the 2012 attack on the United States embassy in Benghazi in Libya, and homegrown terrorists of the type responsible for the 2013 Boston terror bombings.

To meet these evolving threats, President Obama promised to continue the effort against terrorist groups, while at the same time making it vividly clear that the so-called term, "war on terror," should be transposed to the history books, and that the war itself should be brought to a conclusion. He said: "Our systematic effort to dismantle terrorist organizations must continue. But this war, like all wars, must end. That's what history advises. That's what our democracy demands."

Editor's Note:

President Obama's decision to end the Iraq war, his restrained approach towards conflicts in Libya and Syria, his reliance on smart sanctions (or "soft power") with regards to nuclear Iran, suggest a "light footprint" foreign policy orientation. Furthermore, President Obama's refocus on the Afghan-Pak region, culminating in May 2011 with the elimination of Bin Laden and the killing of terrorism and propaganda orchestrator, al-Alwaki, his timeline for ending

the war in Afghanistan, and his tactical/targeted approach to deal with al-Qaida havens, collectively offer a glimpse of his anti-terrorism approach. At the same time, President Obama's decision to voluntarily put the reins on his own presidential power by curtailing the use of drone strikes, attempting to close the Guantanamo detention center, and banishing the lexicon of "war on terror," suggest a complicated -- and perhaps even an ambivalent -- philosophical perspective on matters of war and peace. Indeed, the Obama doctrine has embraced the following elements: (1) vigorous diplomatic engagement augmented by strategic military pressure; (2) strategic pragmatism, reliant more on intelligence and targeted strikes and operations than excessive boots on the ground; (3) multilateralism, in which an engaged United States of America works within an international framework to solve global problems; (4) a mixture of restraint and aggression in regards to national security interests, manifest by reticence over further military engagement juxtaposed against brazen strikes against terrorists when those actions are deemed to be necessary; and (5) an embrace of democratic ideals, in which the United States would support self-determination of freedom-seeking people, while eschewing the neoconservative vision of American hegemony and empire.

President Obama makes personnel changes: Rice to NSA and Power to UN

In the first week of June 2013, United States National Security Adviser Thomas Donilon stepped down from his post, paving the way for President Barack Obama to make some significant changes in his national security and foreign policy team.

With Donilon vacating the spot at the president's most trusted national security adviser, President Obama nominated Dr. Susan Rice, the United States ambassador to the United Nations, to take over that role. With Rice vacating the role as the United States' top diplomat to the United Nations, human rights advocate Samantha Power was tapped to fill that spot. Both Rice and Power have been part of President Obama's foreign policy inner circle since the start of his presidential campaign and before he won the White House in 2008.

Rice gained notoriety over her characterization of the events leading to the attack on the Benghazi diplomatic compound in Libya on Sept. 11, 2012. Her usage of talking points from the Central Intelligence Agency to describe the attack as the result of a spontaneous disturbance sparked criticism from Republicans. That criticism likely derailed the possibility that she would gain Senate confirmation as the new Secretary of State succeeding outgoing Hillary Clinton. That job ultimately went to then-Senator John Kerry. Meanwhile, President Obama was biding his time and was now nominating Rice for the powerful national security position, which would not require Senate confirmation. Republicans eager to go after Rice could presumably look to Power as a proxy target since the United Nations position requires Senate confirmation. But Power, a Pulitzer Prize winner for her advocacy of intervention in cases of genocide, had the backing of the international human rights community thanks to her steadfast and powerful background as one committed to preventing mass atrocities.

Special Report:

Is NSA hacker Snowden a hero or a threat to United States national security?

Mid-2013 was dominated by questions about the fate of Edward Snowden -- a former contract employee of the National Security Agency who leaked classified information to the public and then fled the United States. The revelations about the United States' secret surveillance program highlighted the post-September 11, 2001, debate over privacy rights versus national security interests in the United States.

The matter emerged in the public purview via an article in the United Kingdom-based Guardian newspaper.

The Guardian's piece focused on a phone records monitoring program by the National Security Agency (NSA), which gathers millions of phone records in the United States as part of a database for national security purposes. The phone records or so-called "meta-data" theoretically do not include the actual content of conversations. Instead, the meta-data concentrates on points of contact, frequency of contacts, location data, call duration, and other such patterns that could presumably assist in determining whether terror suspects are in communication with persons in the United States.

An article by the Washington Post revealed another surveillance program, known as PRISM, in which the NSA and the Federal Bureau of Investigation can garner a broad swath of records of Internet (online) activity in an effort to detect suspicious behavior, or patterns of behavior, and determine possible terrorist threats. It should be noted that while some news articles claimed that the government had the ability to directly "tap into" the servers of Internet giants, such as Google, in fact, this government actually has to request that information from Internet companies.

Director of National Intelligence James Clapper condemned the disclosure of the intelligence-gathering programs as reckless and "gut-wrenching to see this happen because of the huge, grave damage it does to our intelligence capabilities." Accordingly, the NSA requested that the Justice Department start an investigation into the unauthorized disclosure of classified information.

On June 9, 2013, a 29-year-old intelligence contractor, Edward Snowden, admitted via the Guardian that it was he who disclosed the information about the surveillance programs to the media. Snowden has said that he worked as a contractor with the consulting firm, Booz Allen Hamilton, at a National Security Agency (NSA) office in Hawaii. It was later confirmed that he was systems administrator at an NSA Threat Operations Center and responsible for detecting threats to government computer systems. Before that, Snowden claimed to have worked at the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

Snowden was cited as saying, "My sole motive is to inform the public as to that which is done in their name and that which is done against them." Snowden seemed to understand he would likely face prosecution for leaking classified information to the public. It was certainly possible that Snowden could face a similar fate as Army Private Bradley Manning who could spend his life in prison under military law if convicted for releasing classified documents through Wikileaks. Snowden said in an interview with the Washington Post that he intended to request asylum "from any countries that believe in free speech and oppose the victimization of global privacy." Snowden expected to be assisted in his asylum search by Iceland's International Modern Media Institute.

It should be noted that Snowden made these remarks from Hong Kong where he believed he was not at risk for extradition to the United States. But Snowden's presence in Hong Kong, which is ultimately under China's jurisdiction, raised questions about his understanding of free speech, democratic governance, and transparency. Stated differently, the power center in Beijing is not known to be a center of freedom and openness.

The identity and plight of Snowden aside, the news of these surveillance programs raised the ire of civil liberties advocates, while simultaneously earning robust defense from national security experts. Indeed, the same debate that arose in the aftermath of the 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States was resurfacing again over how much privacy must be relinquished in order to ensure national security.

For example, Congressman Peter King pointed out that the leaks provided terror enclaves, such as al-Qaida, with information about the United States' telecommunications security apparatus, and were thus gravely harmful to

national security. Congressman Mike Rogers was more scathing in his condemnation of the media's publication of the leaked materials, saying that journalists "have no clue how this thing works; neither did the person who released just enough information to literally be dangerous." Senator Mark Udall acknowledged that the disclosures were disturbing but that it was time for the country to have a serious discussion about privacy in the age of modern terrorism. He said. "I am not happy that we've had leaks and these leaks are concerning, but I think it's an opportunity now to have a discussion about the limits of surveillance, how we create transparency, and above all, how we protect Americans' privacy."

While the revelations about the phone and Internet surveillance programs appeared to shock the American public, in fact, hints of such measures have been available to the public for about a decade -- ever since the enactment of the Patriot Act, which has been repeatedly re-authorized (in 2005, 2009, 2010, and 2011) with broad and overwhelming bipartisan support in both houses of Congress. It should be noted that the specific surveillance programs at issue were originally part of the former Bush administration's warrant-less surveillance program, although it was subsequently brought under the aegis of legal jurisdiction via updated versions of the Patriot Act. The programs are authorized for limited three-month periods at a time, thus facilitating regular court oversight.

As noted by Senator Dianne Feinstein in an interview with MSNBC News, the provisions of the programs authorized under the Patriot Act were not only legal, but have been available for members of the upper chamber to scrutinize, while the legislation itself has been litigated, discussed thoroughly, and overwhelmingly passed into law via Congress. Clearly, despite House Speaker John Boehner's incredulous claim that the revelations about the surveillance programs raised questions about civil liberties, he -- along with all members of Congress -- were aware of, and complicit with -- the development of these programs in the first place.

That being said, President Barack Obama's administration, which was viewed by civil liberties advocates as a welcome shift from the national security state installed by the previous Bush administration, was taking heat for the continuation of these (arguably) invasive surveillance programs. Indeed, while the phone surveillance program did not include actual content of phone conversations, the indiscriminate and sweeping collection of the phone data certainly raised eyebrows. Former Vice President Al Gore, who facilitated the development of the Internet, posed the following question via Twitter: "Is it just me, or is secret blanket surveillance obscenely outrageous?"

For his part, President Obama defended the surveillance practices, which he emphasized were both legal and overseen by a secret Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court (FISA) in the judicial sphere. He dismissed the notion that American citizens' calls were being monitored or recorded, asserting emphatically, "Nobody is listening to your telephone calls. That's not what this program is about." President Obama also noted that tough choices have to be made in democratic societies with complicate landscapes that include serious threats of terrorism. To this end, the president said: "It's important to recognize that you can't have 100 percent security and also then have 100 percent privacy and zero inconvenience. We're going to have to make some choices as a society."

Snowden -- the aforementioned source of the leaks on the secret surveillance programs -- has argued that despite the government's claims that the programs are tightly regulated, circumscribed, and subject to supervision by a secret court, in fact, analysts can target anyone. He said, "Any analyst at any time can target anyone. Any selector. Anywhere. Where those communications will be picked up depends on the range of those sensor networks and the authority that that analyst is empowered with." Snowden further noted, "Not all analysts have the power to target anything. But I, sitting at my desk, had the authority to wiretap anyone, from you or your accountant to a federal judge to even the president if I had a personal email."

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These claims were strongly challenged by government officials. As noted by a former NSA official in an interview with the Washington Post, "When he [Snowden] said he had access to every CIA station around the world, he's lying." That former official noted that such information would only be available to high level executives, thus suggesting that the documents were garnered in a clearly unauthorized manner. Moreover, the very statement by Snowden that he had "the authority to wiretap anyone" smacked of exaggeration since all wiretaps actually require court orders, which obviously was not given in blanket form to Edward Snowden. Put differently, circumventing the law to access calls or records is not the same thing as possessing all-encompassing "authority" to do so.

Snowden's disturbing claim that he could wiretap anyone, "including the president," was addressed by NSA Director Keith Alexander during Senate intelligence committee hearings. Alexander foreclosed that notion. He said of Snowden's assertion: "False. I know of no way to do that."

Perhaps not surprisingly, there was also emerging concern over the fact that Snowden -- a high school "dropout" who commanded a six-figure income job with a private security contractor -- was offered a high level of access to sensitive government information. Accordingly, intelligence investigators were examining how Snowden was able to access top-secret NSA documents, given the highly compartmentalized information structure of the agency. Of particular anxiety was the matter of how a contract employee at a NSA satellite office in Hawaii was capable of accessing not simply sensitive documents, but a copy of the highly classified legal order (re: the phone records case) from the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court (FISA). As noted by a former NSA official in an article in the Washington Post, such court orders are normally available to "maybe 30 or maybe 40" individuals in total, most of whom were likely centered in the general counsel's office. Of course, the answer to that question likely resided in the fact that the nature of Snowden's work involved information technology systems, making it possible for him to bypass normal security protocols and illegally access such material.

From the perspective of government officials, the fact of the matter was that Snowden's disclosures were damaging and likely compromised national security. According to NSA Director Keith Alexander during Senate intelligence committee hearings on June 12, 2013, "Great harm has already been done by opening this is up and the consequence, I believe is our security has already been jeopardized." He added that the United States and its allies would "no longer be as safe as we were two weeks ago."

As troubling as that assertion might seem, it was certainly conceivable that foreign terrorists now had greater insight as to how they were being monitored and were thusly better positioned to evade detection.

Alexander additionally emphasized the fact that the NSA surveillance programs successfully disrupted several terror plots. He said, "It's dozens of terrorist events that these [programs] have helped prevent." Alexander said that in the interests of improved transparency -- one of the central themes at issue -- the NSA would brief the intelligence committee on the details of the surveillance programs, and would seek to declassify some aspects of the programs for the public. He said, "We do want to get this right and it has to be vetted across the community so what we give you, you know, is accurate." But the NSA chief warned that some elements would have to remain classified because "if we tell the terrorists every way that we're going to track them, they will get through and Americans will die." Alexander said he was willing to endure public criticism for this decision, rather than "jeopardize the security of this country."

Meanwhile, Snowden reportedly departed the hotel where he was registered in Hong Kong, leaving his whereabouts a mystery at the time. Before he departed, Snowden managed to tell a Hong Kong newspaper, the South China Morning Post, that he had evidence of the United States hacking into Chinese computer networks, and adding that there were several cyber spy operations being undertaken by the United States government. It was difficult to characterize this claim by Snowden as much of a disclosure since the very existence of a clandestine service in the form of the Central Intelligence Agency would suggest that spying on foreign powers was not a new

or revelatory development. That being said, Snowden's presence in China, armed with some of the United States' most sensitive documents, along with the fact that Snowden chose to reveal this strategic information to a foreign entity (along with emphasis on his possession of such "evidence"), were factors not likely to help his cause. Indeed, these very factors clearly undermined Snowden's claim that he was acting in the interests of his country.

Intelligence officials soon characterized Snowden's declaration about the United States spying on China to be a betrayal. In the publication, The Hill, United States Representative Dutch Ruppersberger was on the record asserting: "Some people are saying that he's a hero. He's broken the law. We have laws in the United States for whistleblowers, for people that think there's an injustice being done. All he had to do was raise his hand. Under the whistleblower law, he is protected. Yet he chose to go to China."

As reported by ABC News on June 13, 2013, United States intelligence officials were now treating the Snowden/NSA leak case as

a possible incidence of foreign espionage, given the fact that the Snowden was moving in the direction of acting in a manner blatantly contrary to the interests of the United States.

Regardless of Ruppersberger's claim, supporters of Snowden have argued that he is, indeed, a whistleblower attempting to draw attention to the broad sweeping powers of the surveillance activities of the NSA. The countervailing view has come from some legal experts who have asserted that Snowden does not fall into this category that covers persons, such as Daniel Ellsberg, who was responsible for the release of the Pentagon Papers decades ago related to the government's decision-making on the Vietnam War. Of primary relevance was the fact that Ellsberg did not flee United States jurisdiction with classified intelligence documents; instead, he surrendered to the United States authorities to face the consequences of his actions.

Secondly, whistleblower laws apply to employees who expose misconduct, such as dishonest or illegal activity occurring at an organization. Whistleblowers enjoy protection from such retaliatory actions as wrongful dismissal, demotion, blocked promotions, or barriers to proper compensation. But these whistleblower laws do not apply to employees or contractors working for the intelligence agencies. Instead, legislation known as the Intelligence Community Whistleblower Protection Act, applies to persons employed in intelligence positions. However, even this particular law would not classify Snowden as a whistleblower since he did not reveal any illegal activity, abuse, fraud, or waste -- the incidences covered by the act. As discussed above, regardless of the disapproval by civil liberties advocates, the fact of the matter was that the sweeping surveillance powers of the NSA were enshrined legally.

Thirdly, even if Snowden had actual illegalities or abuses to reveal, he would have been compelled to report such matters to either the NSA's inspector general or a member of one of the congressional intelligence committees with the proper security clearances. Disclosing his concerns to the public was, in and of itself, regarded as a violation.

On the basis of these parameters, a professor at the Washington College of Law at American University, Steve Vladeck, was asked by NBC News if Snowden would have qualify for whistleblower protection; Vladeck replied: "None."

Meanwhile, on June 16, 2013, the White House chief of staff said that President Barack Obama did not believe that the surveillance of phone records and Internet data violated the privacy of United States citizens. In an interview with CBS's "Face the Nation" program, Denis McDonough was asked whether President Obama believed that he

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violated the privacy of Americans. McDonough replied, "He does not." Still, McDonough acknowledged that "the existence of these programs obviously have unnerved many people."

McDonough noted that the president welcomed a public debate on the matter of privacy rights versus national security, and declared, "we have to find the right balance, and we will not keep ourselves on a perpetual war footing."

Senator Mark Udall of Colorado appeared to welcome that debate saying in an interview on "Meet the Press," "We owe it to the American people to have a fulsome debate in the open about the extent of these programs." He continued, "My number one goal is to protect the American people, but we can do it in a way that also respects our civil liberties."

But as June 2013 entered its final week, the debate of the domestic surveillance program had shifted to the question of whether Snowden was acting against the national security interests of the United States for nefarious reasons, rather than being driven by his self-proclaimed agenda of sharing information with American citizens. At issue was the revelation that Snowden allegedly shared the details of the United States's computer network intelligence gathering activities on China. According to the South China Morning Post, the United States infiltrated the computer network of China's prominent Tsinghua University, as well as the computer systems of Pacnet. Clearly, by passing on the sensitive operational information about the United States' cyber intelligence activities against a quasi-adversary, such as China, Snowden was now acting in a manner that was outright damaging United States' national security interests.

On June 21, 2013, it was revealed that the government of the United States was taking legal action against Snowden, the former NSA contract employee, for absconding with sensitive intelligence documents and then disclosing that classified information. The government of the United States charged Snowden with theft of government property, unauthorized communication of national defense information to someone without a security clearance, and willful communication of classified intelligence. The latter two charges were violations covered under the Espionage Act. Each of the three charges carries a maximum prison sentence of 10 years.

The charges had actually been issued on June 14, 2013, but the document remained sealed for a week. United States officials also formally filed a petition with Hong Kong, where Snowden was in hiding, asking Hong Kong authorities to detain him while an indictment and an extradition request were in the preparation stages.

At the time, authorities from the United States indicated that the extradition process was expected to be a lengthy one since Snowden could argue that the charges against him were politically motivated; that condition could mitigate the terms of the extradition treaty between the United States and Hong Kong. That being said, United States officials said that they were working with Hong Kong counterparts to ensure that the charges filed against Snowden were consistent with the terms of the extradition treaty with Hong Kong, and harmonious with Hong Kong law. To that end, they filed a "provisional arrest warrant" against Snowden in which Hong Kong police would be asked to arrest Snowden, ultimately returning him to United States jurisdiction to face prosecution.

Speaking of this effort, United States Congressman Peter King said: "I fully support the efforts of the United States government to indict and prosecute Edward Snowden to the fullest extent of the law. He has betrayed his country and the government must demand his extradition at the earliest date."

But that possibility of extradition seemed to slip away on June 22, 2013, when news broke that the government of Hong Kong had allowed Snowden to leave the special administrative region of China. Hong Kong offered a bizarre

explanation for its decision -- suggesting that Washington improperly filled out the necessary documents and so Snowden was allowed to depart "on his own accord."

There was immediate speculation that Hong Kong's decision to allow Snowden to escape, irrespective of the prevailing process of extradition, may have been directed by Beijing. The New York Times published an article in which it suggested that Beijing did not simply grant consent for the decision to allow Snowden to leave; instead, Beijing apparently made the final decision. According to the New York Times, Beijing was making the calculation that the departure of Snowden would ensure that it was not embroiled in a thorny and protracted legal battle with the United States over extradition, while at the same time silencing the Chinese public from their displays of robust support for Snowden whom the public viewed as a hero. In effect, Beijing jettisoned the Snowden problem. The New York Times also said that Western intelligence sources believed that the Chinese government had managed to garner the contents of Snowden's cache of intelligence data that he brought to Hong Kong. If that claim proved to be true, there would certainly be no good reason for China to keep Snowden within its jurisdiction since everything of value would already be accessible to the Chinese. Of course, the decision to allow Snowden to leave Hong Kong was sure to infuriate Washington D.C., and exacerbate the grim situation at the diplomatic level.

The attention soon shifted to Russia as news reports surfaced that Snowden departed Hong Kong on a one-way ticket aboard Aeroflot, the national airline of Russia, and was expected to land in Moscow on June 23, 2013. He was reportedly accompanied by representatives of Wikileaks. Moscow was not expected to be his final destination and there were soon suggestions that Snowden would be traveling onto Cuba, with a final destination expected to be somewhere in South America -- either Venezuela or Ecuador. Venezuela initially loomed large as the final destination but when Snowden landed in Russia, the presence of diplomatic personnel from Ecuador raised the possibility that he would ultimately seek asylum in that country. That prospect was confirmed by the foreign minister of Ecuador via Twitter. Of note was the fact that Ecuador has already provided asylum to Julian Assange, the fugitive founder of Wikileaks -- a clearing house for stolen classified documents from various government agencies. Wikileaks soon issued a statement of its own asserting that Snowden was "bound for the Republic of Ecuador via a safe route for the purposes of asylum." Wikileaks confirmed that Snowden was being escorted by legal advisers and diplomats, and that his asylum request would be formally processed upon arrival in Ecuador.

The news of Snowden's escape from Hong Kong and the apparent complicity of several governments evoked angry responses from United States members of Congress -- an on a rare bipartisan basis. Senate Intelligence Committee chair, Dianne Feinstein (D-California), accused China of "having a role in this." Senator Charles Schumer (D-New York) accused Russian President Vladimir Putin of "aiding and abetting Snowden's escape." Schumer further said: "Putin always seems almost eager to stick a finger in the eye of the United States -- whether it is Syria, Iran and now of course with Snowden." House Intelligence Chairman Mike Rogers (R) excoriated Snowden for traveling to Russia to avoid extradition to the United States. He said of Snowden: "If he really believes he did something good, he should get on a plane and come back and face the consequences of his actions."

Senator Rand Paul (R-Kentucky) had a different view of Snowden, suggesting that the fugitive was a truth teller to be distinguished from the country's national intelligence director, James Clapper. He said, "I do think that when history looks at this, they are going to contrast the behavior of James Clapper, our national intelligence director, with Edward Snowden." Congressman Peter King (R) managed to combine criticism of Snowden's supporters including Senator Rand Paul (a fellow Republican), with a scathing characterization of the fugitive leaker as a traitor. He said, "As Americans we have to support the president. I wish all Americans including Senator Rand Paul would realize Snowden is no hero. I know on CNN today he compared -- Rand Paul compared Snowden to General Clapper. You know, this kind of talk -- I don't know what's happening to our country that people are making this traitor and defector into some kind of hero. At the same time, castigating true American heroes."

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For its part, there was restrained reaction from the White House, although the government of the Obama administration made clear that Snowden's passport had been revoked. White House spokesperson Jen Psaki also urged governments around the world to prevent Snowden from entry into their countries, saying, "Persons wanted on felony charges, such as Mr. Snowden, should not be allowed to proceed in any further international travel, other than is necessary to return him to the United States." Of course, it would be up to the leadership of any given country to decide whether or not they would comply with this declaration from the United States, and such leaders definitely had the latitude to decide whether or not they would allow Snowden entry without a valid passport.

On June 24, 2013, White House Press Secretary Jay Carney said the White House did not accept Hong Kong's "technical paperwork" explanation for allowing Snowden to leave on a flight for Russia. Carney also noted that Hong Kong's decision to allow Snowden to depart from that specially administered territory of China would have a "negative impact" on Sino-American relations. Secretary of State John Kerry entered the fray on June 23, 2013, and signaled the anger of the Obama administration when he referred to Snowden as "a traitor to his country." A day later on June 24, 2013, Secretary Kerry also warned that there would be "serious consequences" if Russia allowed Snowden to leave its territory.

Meanwhile, the destinations along Snowden's "world tour" of autocratic leftist countries en route to asylum in South America received marked attention. At issue was the circuitous journey of Snowden from Chinese jurisdiction in Hong Kong, to Russia, and with proposed continued travel via Cuba, onward to a final destination in Venezuela or Ecuador. Of note was the fact that bilateral relations between the United States and China and Russia have a history of stress and a particularly loaded Cold War legacy. Despite thawing relations more recently, China and Russia have occasionally enjoyed acting as thorns in the side of the United States. Meanwhile, Venezuela, Cuba and Ecuador are respectively members of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America -- a leftist bloc founded on "anti-imperialist" (and often anti-American) credentials. Congressman Mike Rogers said, "When you look at it, every one of those nations is hostile to the United States. If you could go to North Korea and Iran, he could round out his government oppression tour."

Rogers' quip about the "government oppression tour" may hold particular validity as none of these countries on Snowden's itinerary -- China, Russia, Cuba, Venezuela, or Ecuador -- can be objectively viewed as models of democracy, transparency, free speech, human rights, and civil liberties.

Indeed, all these countries can legitimately be regarded as semi-authoritarian regimes and pose questions about Snowden's intentions given his grievances against the government of the United States.

While Hong Kong is semi-autonomous in many respects, the Chinese government still has ultimate say. As such, the Hong Kong authorities do not investigate claims about Chinese intimidation of its critics in Hong Kong. In fact, two Chinese citizens were sentenced to "re-education" labor camp for participating in pro-democracy rallies in Hong Kong. As well, police in Hong Kong use "overly restrictive methods" in controlling assembly, according to Human Rights Watch. Snowden's choice to go initially to Hong Kong can be viewed as an ironic selection in some respects.

The irony of Snowden being charged on espionage grounds and standing safely on Russian ground cannot be ignored as authorities in Moscow are not restrained in their treatment of individuals accused of the same charges. In fact, according to Amnesty International, the definitions of treason and espionage in Russia are so all-encompassing that they include sharing information with or "providing miscellaneous assistance" to foreign states whose activities are "directed against security of the Russian Federation." Clearly, by Russian standards, Snowden's activities against the United States would easily be regarded as treason and espionage. Human Rights Watch has also accused Russia of having a flawed system of jurisprudence that does not meet international

standards of fairness, cracking down on civic action, restricting freedom of expression, and carrying out torture and "other ill treatment" against government antagonists.

Cuba, which may be an interesting in-transit destination along Snowden's journey, is described by Human Rights Watch as "the only country in Latin America that represses virtually all forms of political dissent." Human Rights Watch further notes that Cuba enacts its repression by using "short-term detentions, beatings, public acts of repudiation, travel restrictions, and forced exile." On a longer term basis, the Cuban government habitually sentences dissidents to substantial prison terms following summary trials that are not open to the public. Again, the irony of Snowden touching down in a communist state with a policy of repressing and restricting free speech, and of preventing dissidents from recourse for their objections to the government, cannot be overstated.

Venezuela under Chavez saw a precipitous decline into autocracy, and the scenario has been maintained under Maduro. Presidential power was consolidated in such a way as to "intimidate, censor, and prosecute Venezuelans who criticize the president or thwart his political agenda," according to Human Rights Watch. Members of the judiciary, press, media, and human rights groups complain of being intimidated by the government for their criticism. But perhaps most germane to the Snowden case has been the fact that Venezuela has laws on the books that "dramatically reduce the public's right to obtain information held by the government," according to human rights agencies. The original grievance by Snowden against the United States government has been the matter of the public's right to access information held by the government.

Finally, Ecuador -- Snowden's likely destination according to reports at the time of writing -- is ruled by leftist President Rafael Correa, who holds a clear anti-American orientation, and who gave asylum to Wikileaks founder Julian Assange. In a particularly stunning case of irony, Correa justified his decision to give Assange asylum in the embassy of Ecuador, by asserting that there was no room for secrecy in modern times. He said to Assange: "We believe, my dear Julian, that the only things that should be protected against information sharing and freedom of speech are those set in the international treaties... The rest, the more people find out about it, the better." But in actual fact, there is 2011 decree from Correa on the books in Ecuador allowing the government to monitor the activities of all international entities with offices in Ecuador, and rescind their authorizations to operate. As well, journalists critical of the government are subject to "public denunciation and retaliatory litigation," according to Human Rights Watch. Further, a recent media law authorizes criminal penalties against journalists and citizens who tarnish Ecuador's "good name." Finally, Ecuador makes liberal use of its "terrorism and sabotage" section of the criminal code to crack down on dissent.

Thus, despite the lip service paid by Correa to openness and transparency, governance in Ecuador is marked by government monitoring, media repression, restrictions on free speech, and a hardline stance against dissent.

Is Snowden trapped in Russia?

In the waning days of June 2013, Snowden had not boarded a flight from Moscow to Havana, as anticipated. Wikileaks founder Julian Assange said that Snowden was "healthy and safe" and awaiting an asylum ruling from Ecuador; by process of elimination, the general consensus was that Snowden was still in Russia.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov confirmed that Snowden was located at the "in transit" area of Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport, which he [Lavrov] suggested was not technically Russian territory. Lavrov said Snowden "has not crossed the Russian border." At the same time, Russian President Vladimir Putin foreclosed the notion of honoring United States requests for to extradite Snowden to the United States, saying the fugitive leaker had not

broken Russian laws. According to the state-financed Russia Today, Putin asserted that Russian authorities had not been in contact with Snowden saying "The Russian special services are not engaged with him and will not be engaged."

Putin also suggested that Russia was not interested in getting involved in the Snowden case at all, due to the unfavorable ratio of political costs to political benefits. Putin was quoted as saying: "It's like shearing a pig -- too much squeaking, too little wool." That being said, there were some reports that irrespective of Putin's public claims, Russian secret police had, in fact, questioned Snowden.

Russian interests aside, the fate of Snowden was very much a murky consideration. Since the United States had already invalidated and revoked Snowden's passport, and presumably because he did not have either a Russian visa or a final acceptance of asylum status in Ecuador or Venezuela, Snowden was essentially existing in diplomatic limbo.

For its part, the government of Ecuador said it was considering Snowden's asylum bid but Foreign Minister Ricardo Patino warned that it would be a lengthy process, given the fact that his country took two months to grant asylum to Wikileaks founder Julian Assange. He said, "It took us two months to make decision in the case of Julian Assange, so do not expect us to make a decision sooner this time."

Nevertheless, Ecuador seemed to entrench into a pro-Snowden position in the last week of June 2013. At issue was a threat from the United States Congress to block preferential trade benefits to Ecuador if it granted Snowden political asylum to Snowden. The chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator Robert Menendez of New Jersey, issued a statement on the status of the Andean Trade Promotion and Drug Eradication Act that read as follows: "Our government will not reward countries for bad behavior. Trade preferences are a privilege granted to nations, not a right." Ecuador reacted with immediacy and defiance to this perceived threat by unilaterally withdrawing from the preferential trade pact with the United States.

Secretary of Communications Fernando Alvarado said of President Rafael Correa's decision: "Ecuador doesn't accept pressure or threats from anybody, and it doesn't trade its principles or give them up for commercial interests, no matter how important."

But on June 30, 2013, despite its defiant stance outlined above, Ecuador loosened its embrace of Snowden. In an interview with the Associated Press, Ecuadorean President Rafael Correa said that Snowden was "under the care of the Russian authorities" and was unable to leave the airport in Moscow without their consent. Correa further explained, "He doesn't have a passport. I don't know the Russian laws, I don't know if he can leave the airport, but I understand that he can't. At this moment he's under the care of the Russian authorities. If he arrives at an Ecuadorean Embassy we'll analyze his request for asylum."

These statements by Correa seemed to indicate that Snowden's chances of garnering asylum in Ecuador might be fading, although the Ecuadorean president did not seem to completely foreclose that possibility. At issue appeared to be President Correa's desire to dispense with the perception that Julian Assange and Wikileaks were the main decision-makers in the Snowden affair, with Correa and the Ecuadorean government simply doing their bidding. Indeed, in the same interview with the Associated Press, Correa then seemed to disparage his own diplomatic consulate in the United Kingdom, suggesting that officials there committed "a serious error" by producing temporary "safe passage" documents for Snowden without consulting his government in Quito (but apparently at the behest of Assange and Wikileaks).

Also at issue for Ecuador was the growing recognition that there might be consequences for going against the will of the United States on a lucrative trade deal.

The renewed appreciation for the American point of view appeared to have been sparked by a conversation with United States Vice President Joe Biden. Correa said Vice President Biden requested that Snowden -- a fugitive from justice -- be returned to the United States if he ever arrived in Ecuador. Referring to that conversation and the request from the United States' second-in-command, Correa said of Snowden: "If he really could have broken North American laws, I am very respectful of other countries and their laws and I believe that someone who breaks the law must assume his responsibilities. But we also believe in human rights and due process." Correa also said that he appreciated Biden's "cordial" call and noted that it was a marked contrast from the threatening tones levied by United States lawmakers against Ecuador.

Meanwhile, the motives behind Snowden's leaking activities were receiving even greater scrutiny. As discussed above, Snowden expanded his leaking agenda beyond the realm of exposing the NSA's surveillance activities to sharing information about the clandestine infiltration of the Chinese computer network intelligence with the Chinese themselves. Accordingly, it seemed that Snowden crossed the line into the realm of foreign espionage.

Snowden offered a sense of his motivation for this line-crossing during a live online chat with the Guardian newspaper on June 24, 2013. Snowden declared: "All spying is wrong." Apparently, from the perspective and personal judgment of Snowden, no covert activities by the United States targeting foreign governments were acceptable.

Left unconsidered for Snowden was the matter of whether or not his fellow Americans concurred with his stance, or, if Americans might appreciate the utility of long-standing clandestine intelligence services in the interests of keeping the citizenry safe. Still, Snowden believed he was on a mission to expose this "wrongdoing" to the world.

The matter of how to go about accomplishing that goal was revealed in an interview with Snowden that was published by the South China Morning Post on the morning he departed Hong Kong. In that South China Morning Post interview, the fugitive leaker admitted that he took the job as an NSA contract worker with Booz Allen Hamilton for the specific purpose of acquiring and releasing sensitive classified intelligence. Snowden was now on the record stating the following: "My position with Booz Allen Hamilton granted me access to lists of machines all over the world the NSA hacked. That is why I accepted that position about three months ago." This admission was unlikely to strengthen his credibility, since it suggested that Snowden did not simply happen upon data he believed should be shared with the citizenry. Instead, he actively sought employment as a contractor to the NSA for the expressed purpose of acquiring classified intelligence data, which he then illegally released not only to the public -- but also to foreign powers.

For his part, President Barack Obama weighed in on the Snowden affair on June 27, 2013, when he dismissed the notion of personally pressuring his Chinese and Russian counterparts regarding extradition. Speaking from a news conference in Senegal (Africa) where he was on an overseas trip, the president said that he was concerned about the documents Snowden might have in his possession. "That's part of the reason why we'd like to have Mr. Snowden in custody," Obama said. The president continued, said. "But what I think we're going to continue to do is make sure that we are following the various channels that are well established and the rules that are well established to get this thing done." President Obama dismissed the notion of using tactics beyond the traditional outlets available, saying that he was "not going to be scrambling jets to get a 29-year-old hacker."

Snowden appeared to draw closer to a future in Russia on July 1, 2013, when the fugitive leaker applied for political asylum in Russia. The Russian Foreign Ministry confirmed that the asylum request was made late on June 30, 2013. The application was delivered by a legal representative of Wikileaks. Noteworthy was the fact that around the same time, Russian President Putin pugnaciously asserted that Moscow had "no intention" of handing over Snowden to the United States. The Russian leader opened the door for Snowden to successfully find asylum in his country, pending one condition. Putin said: "If he [Snowden] wants to stay here, there is one condition: He must stop his activities aimed at inflicting damage on our American partners, no matter how strange it may sound coming from my lips."

For his part, United States President Obama addressed the unfolding imbroglio with Russia over the Snowden affair as follows: "We don't have an extradition treaty with Russia. On the other hand, Mr. Snowden, we understand, has traveled there without a valid passport and legal papers. And we are hopeful the Russian government makes decisions based on the normal procedures regarding international travel and the normal interactions law enforcement have."

The prospects of a Russian home for the fugitive leaker faded when Snowden withdrew his asylum application in the early hours of July 2, 2013. The Russian Kremlin indicated that President Putin's condition that Snowden stop releasing classified information played into the decision. As noted by Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov, "After learning of Russia's position yesterday, voiced by President Putin... he abandoned his intention [of staying] and his request to be able to stay in Russia."

It should be noted that Snowden actually issued multiple asylum requests to as many as 20 countries. Among the Western countries rejecting Snowden's bids for asylum were Norway, Finland, Austria, Poland, Ireland, Switzerland, and Spain. Most of these countries claimed that their rejections were levied on procedural grounds, however, the Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski gave a more detailed response saying that Snowden's application "did not meet the requirements for a formal application for asylum...Even if it did, I would not give a positive recommendation." On July 2, 2013, India joined the group of countries rejecting Snowden's asylum request, while Brazil noted that while it had received an asylum application from Snowden, it did not intend to respond to it.

With asylum from Russia now receding (at least for the moment), and with several Western and non-Western countries foreclosing asylum for Snowden, possible destinations for the fugitive leaker pointed to South America.

Indeed, the Venezuelan angle was not quite dead at the start of July 2013. The government of Venezuela said it would consider an asylum request from Snowden. Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro said, "We have not received an official request. But in the event we were to receive one, we would evaluate it as we understand Ecuador is doing similarly." Speaking from Russia where he was en route to Belarus, Maduro posed the following question: "Who must protect Snowden? This is the question. This young man of 29 was brave enough to say that we need to protect the world from the American imperial elite, so who should protect him?"

As well, Bolivia was entering the equation with leftist Bolivian President Evo Morales saying, "Bolivia is ready to accept people who disclose espionage if one can call it this way." Morales, speaking from Russia where he was signing a gas deal with that country, used the occasion to deliver a blistering set-down of the United States' effort to apprehend Snowden. Saying in an interview with Reuters News that Snowden "deserves the world's protection" from the United States, Morales went on to declare: "Why are they persecuting him? What has he done? Did he launch a missile and kill someone? Did he rig a bomb and kill someone? No. He is preventing war."

Morales himself was placed at the center of the Snowden affair on July 2, 2013, when his jet was diverted amidst suspicions that the NSA leaker was aboard that aircraft. France, Spain, and Portugal respectively closed their air space to the flight carrying the Bolivian president from Russia to his home country, based on the belief that Snowden might also be on that flight in an effort to avoid extradition to the United States. The flight was rerouted and landed in Austria where officials from that country said that Snowden was not, in fact, on that plane.

France apologized to Bolivia for refusing to allow Morales' aircraft into its airspace based on what French authorities called "conflicting information." But France also made it clear that French President Francois Hollande issued permission for the aircraft to fly over French air space once he was informed that the plane was carrying the Bolivian leader. Spain also noted that it made its own decision based on erroneous information suggesting Snowden was on Morales' plane.

For its part, the government of Bolivia railed against the West over the incident, referring to the suspicions of Snowden being aboard Morales' flight as being "a lie."

Bolivian Foreign Minister David Choquehuanca said, "We don't know who invented this lie, but we want to denounce to the international community this injustice with the plane of President Evo Morales." Bolivia also made it clear that it intended to close its American embassy following the international incident. Bolivian President Morales was quoted by Agence France Presse as saying, "My hand would not shake to close the U.S. embassy."

For its part, the United States seemed undeterred by accusations of high-handed tactics against Morales' plane. In fact, the United States Congress seemed eager to make it clear to the international community that there would be serious consequences for those believed to be assisting Snowden. Indeed, there was bipartisan support for the idea of re-assessing trade policies and aid to any country granting asylum to Snowden. In an interview with CNN, House Intelligence Committee, Representative Mike Rogers, said the United States should "send a very clear message that we won't put up with this kind of behavior." Striking a similar note, Senator Robert Menendez, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said during an NBC interview: "Clearly such acceptance of Snowden to any country ... is going to put them directly against the United States, and they need to know that."

Snowden himself continued to attempt to issue asylum bids to various countries. The incident involving Bolivian President Morales' official aircraft acted as a catalyst for a handful of leftist-ruled Latin American countries to accept Snowden's asylum request. Indeed, Bolivia, Venezuela, and Nicaragua all made offers of political asylum to Snowden.

During a speech marking Venezuela's Independence Day, President Nicolas Maduro said: "As head of state and government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, I have decided to offer humanitarian asylum to the young U.S. citizen Edward Snowden so he can come to the fatherland of Bolivar and Chavez to live away from the imperial North American persecution." Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, a central leader in the left-wing Sandinista movement which was opposed by the United States' Reagan administration, seemed pleased to offer Snowden a home in his country. He said: "We are open, respectful of the right to asylum, and it is clear that if circumstances permit it, we would receive Snowden with pleasure and give him asylum here in Nicaragua."

On the other side of the equation, Snowden's hope that he might end up in Iceland -- his first choice -- died a quick death when the country's parliament refused to debate the issue of Icelandic citizenship for the NSA leaker. Although the proposal to grant Snowden citizenship (brought by Wikileaks) was tabled before parliament, the vast majority of members of parliament in Iceland voted against the citizenship request being placed on the agenda.

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Note that the Icelandic citizenship bid was intended to circumvent the fact that an actual asylum bid has to be made while on Icelandic soil.

Russia seemed eager to end its association with Snowden, and effectively end its Snowden problem. Alexei Pushkov, a well-known Russian member of parliament and the chairman of the the international affairs committee, urged Snowden to take Venezuela's asylum offer. He said via Twitter: "Venezuela is waiting for an answer from Snowden. This, perhaps, is his last chance to receive political asylum."

Of course, the logistics of Snowden actually reaching the soil of another country remained a challenge as he would need valid travel documents and the ability to fly on an aircraft with a route capable of gaining entry into foreign air space en route to his new home country. The international incident involving Bolivian President Morales' plane was, in and of itself, a warning of what was to come in terms of logistical challenges for Snowden.

Earlier, in a statement released via Wikileaks, Snowden had argued that the United States condemned him to a life of "the extra-legal penalty of exile" as a punishment for his crimes. He continued, "Although I am convicted of nothing, it has unilaterally revoked my passport, leaving me a stateless person." Left unstated by Snowden was the fact that on June 21, 2013, the United States government levied legal charges of theft of government property and two violations covered under the Espionage Act. Clearly, in so doing, there was nothing "extra-legal" being undertaken by the United States government. It should also be noted that the revocation of a passport is standard procedure for persons charged with crimes and deemed to be flight risks. According to federal law, an American citizen's passport can be revoked due to "an outstanding federal warrant of arrest for a felony" as provided under Title 22 of the U.S. Code. Thus, despite Snowden's claim that he was now left a stateless person due to the revocation of his passport, in truth, he remained a citizen of the United States, retaining all constitutional rights as a United States citizen, while at the same time being subject to prosecution on United States soil for his violations of the law.

It should be noted that Snowden soon reversed his decision not to seek asylum in Russia, and in mid-July 2013 was indicating that he would pursue temporary refuge in that country. Until he could be guaranteed "safe passage" to an unspecified Latin American country, Snowden was hoping to remain in Russia.

Snowden made this announcement while meeting with human rights activists and politicians at Moscow's Sheremetyevo airport where he also condemned the West for preventing him from reaching his ultimate destination in Latin America. This was an apparent reference to the fact that the Bolivian president's aircraft was denied access to certain European countries' air space on suspicion that Snowden was aboard. Snowden said, "Some governments in Western European and North American states have demonstrated a willingness to act outside the law, and this behavior persists today... This unlawful threat makes it impossible for me to travel to Latin America and enjoy the asylum granted there in accordance with our shared rights." In fact, sovereign states are fully within their rights to control access to their air space, even if the outcome produces diplomatic imbroglios.

Left unsaid by Snowden was whether or not he would be meeting the conditions of the Russian government that he refrain from further harming the interests of the United States if he wanted to take refuge in Russia. It was not known how Russia intended to respond to this request from Snowden, given an impending meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and United States President Barack Obama at a summit in Russia in September 2013. Obviously, by granting Snowden even temporary asylum in Russia, there would be a deleterious effect on relations with the United States. Indeed, the decision to allow Snowden to meet with human rights activists and political figures at Moscow's Sheremetyevo airport was already raising the ire of the United States.

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As noted by the White House itself, the prospect of Russian asylum would violate Moscow's own stated position that Snowden should avoid further damage to American national security. White House Press Secretary Jay Carney said: "Providing a propaganda platform for Mr. Snowden runs counter to the Russian government's previous declarations of Russia's neutrality and that they have no control over his presence in the airport. It's also incompatible with Russian assurances that they do not want Mr. Snowden to further damage U.S. interests."

Of course, Russia made it clear that while it did not welcome Snowden's presence, it would nonetheless maintain its refusal to hand the fugitive leaker over to the United States. Without a feasible means of moving from the Moscow's in transit area and onto a flight that will not encounter the air space of the United States or its allies en route to Latin America, Snowden's prospects were limited. This scenario likely led to Snowden's aforementioned desire to apply for temporary asylum in Russia.

On July 15, 2013, Russian President Putin responded to this scenario when he said that United States authorities had effectively trapped Snowden in Russia. As before, Putin did not seem eager to display any alliance with Snowden or his plight. When asked about Snowden's future, the Russian leader replied, "How should I know? It's his life." He added, "He came to our territory without invitation. And we weren't his final destination... But the moment he was in the air... our American partners, in fact, blocked his further flight... They have spooked all the other countries, nobody wants to take him and in that way, in fact, they have themselves blocked him on our territory."

NSA leaker finally escapes Russian airport purgatory and accepts asylum in new homeland of Russia

On Aug. 1, 2013, Edward Snowden was finally able to leave Russian airport purgatory and enter asylum in new homeland of Russia. Snowden's Russian lawyer said that his client received the legal documents necessary to exit the Sheremetyevo Airport's in-transit zone and enter Russian territory. Anatoly Kucherena declined to comment on the details of Snowden's Russian living arrangement, saying, "His location is not being made public for security reasons, since he is the most pursued man on the planet." He did, however, disclose that Snowden would be staying in a private home of American expatriates. Kucherena also acknowledged that Snowden intended to "build a new life in Russia" and noted that the NSA fugitive leaker was looking forward to learning about Russian culture. Kucherena added that while Snowden's legal permit allowed him temporary asylum for one year, the fugitive leaker did not foreclose the possibility of pursuing Russian citizenship in the future.

The movement of Snowden into Russian territory, and with Snowden's activities indicating a clear pursuit of a life in his new Russian homeland, marked a shift in Snowden's status. Indeed, it reflected Russia's official decision to support the NSA leaker wanted by the United States government. The move would invariably and deleteriously affect United States relations with Russia.

Yury Ushakov, foreign policy adviser to President Putin, tried to make light of the situation, saying the Snowden affair was "rather insignificant" and should not negatively impact relations with the United States. However, the United States seemed to be taking Russia's decision to grant asylum to Snowden quite seriously. White House Press Secretary Jay Carney said: "We're extremely disappointed that the Russian government would take this step despite our very clear and lawful requests in public and in private to have Mr. Snowden expelled to the United States to face the charges against him."

With United States President Barack Obama due to travel to Russia to attend the G-20 summit, the fact of the matter was that the Snowden affair could potentially cause the United States leader to cancel his planned private meeting with Putin, his Russian counterpart. As noted by White House Press Secretary Jay Carney, "We're evaluating the utility of a summit in light of this and other issues." Democrat Senator Chuck Schumer was more forthright in his assessment of the situation. He said Russia's decision to grant Snowden asylum was a "stab in the

back" and recommended that President Obama consider relocating the G-20 summit to a country other than Russia.

Not surprisingly, in the first week of August 2013, President Obama cancelled his meeting with President Putin, although the United States president did intend to travel to Russia to attend the G-20 summit in St. Petersburg. A statement from the White House read as follows: "We have reached the conclusion that there is not enough recent progress in our bilateral agenda with Russia to hold a U.S.-Russia Summit." The White House statement continued, "We believe it would be more constructive to postpone the summit until we have more results from our shared agenda."

The Russian Kremlin expressed disappointment over President Obama's decision. As before, Putin's foreign policy adviser, Ushakov, tried to downplay the situation and move toward more productive ground, saying, "Russian representatives are ready to continue working together with American partners on all key issues on the bilateral and multilateral agenda." But at home in the United States, it seemed that White House national security advisers had unanimously backed the decision to cancel the meeting with Putin.

Multilateral Tensions

Meanwhile, the fate of Snowden aside, the United States was facing criticism over revelations that the NSA may have spied on embassies and offices of European Union allies. The office of German Chancellor Angela Merkel observed that "bugging friends is unacceptable... We are no longer in the Cold War." The office of French President Francois Hollande was more outspoken in its reaction, warning that a major trade deal between the United States and the European Union might be at risk unless Washington could offer assurances that its surveillance of the European Union was over. French President Francois Hollande further called on the European Union to take a unified stand in response to the United States' spying efforts on its European allies. As well, the European Commission demanded "clarity and transparency" from Washington. But even European countries were coming under fire themselves as new revelations showed that British and French intelligence agencies were operating similar data collections gathering schemes to that of the United States.

Special Entry

Relations with Afghanistan ahead of withdrawal of United States troops

In mid-2013, dissonance between Afghan President Karzai and United States President Obama led the Obama administration to consider a complete withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan ahead of the scheduled timeline to exit Afghanistan in 2014. The Obama administration was also considering whether or not to bypass the option of retaining a residual presence past the 2014 deadline.

Note that peace talks were on the agenda in Afghanistan a month earlier -- in June 2013 -- between the Afghan government and the Taliban. However, less than 24 hours after the Taliban opened an office in Qatar, and before the discussion could ever commence, the Afghan government walked away from the negotiating table. It should be noted that Afghanistan also broke off talks with the United States on future military cooperation beyond 2014 -- when United States forces were scheduled to fully withdraw from Afghanistan.

United States and NATO officials have been consistent advocates of bilateral negotiations between the government of Afghanistan and the Taliban, as they believe that some sort of ceasefire agreement must be forged between the two sides if Afghanistan hopes to have a stable future. But previous proposals for peace have ended in failure, and this effort was already on the rocks.

Afghan President Karzai said he was protesting the United States' outreach to the Taliban, which apparently Karzai viewed as objectionable. Of particular concern to Karzai was the title of the Taliban office in Qatar, as well as the

Taliban flag flying over the office compound. A spokesperson for President Karzai said "We oppose the title -- the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan -- because such a thing doesn't exist." The spokesperson continued, "The U.S. was aware of the president's stance." From the point of President Karzai, the Taliban was attempting to portray itself as a government in exile. Accordingly, the Afghan president made clear that the country officials would not be engaging in peace talks unless those activities were "Afghan-led."

Continued dissonance between Afghan President Karzai and United States President Barack Obama in July 2013 led the Obama administration to consider a complete withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan ahead of the scheduled timeline to exit Afghanistan in 2014. The Obama administration was also considering whether or not to bypass the option of retaining a residual presence past the 2014 deadline. Increasing tensions between President Barack Obama and Afghan President Hamid Karzai appeared to be at the heart of the matter.

Those tensions were sparked by Karzai's reaction to the United States outreach to the Taliban and the coordination of formal peace talks in Qatar. However, the tensions increased following a particular fractious telephone call between the two leaders. The result was that President Obama was not looking into a "zero option" that would withdraw all forces from Afghanistan, including residual counter-terrorism and advisory force that were expected to remain in Afghanistan even after the exit of United States military troops in 2014.

White House Press Secretary Jay Carney insisted that President Obama had not yet made a decision on the matter and was in no hurry to do so. Carney said, "I want to make clear, today's story notwithstanding, that this is not a decision that is imminent. And we are talking about a residual force, a potential residual force, in a year and a half. So these are ongoing conversations."

It should be noted that earlier in the year, the president's deputy national security adviser, Ben Rhodes, said that the "zero option" would be considered if all the United States' goals in Afghanistan were met. To that end, Rhodes said: "The objective of the bilateral security agreement negotiations is not to accomplish a number of U.S. troops in a country. It is to accomplish the two goals of denying a safe haven to al-Qaida, and training and equipping Afghan national security forces."

President Obama himself addressed the fact that those objectives when he said, "We achieved our central goal, which is -- or have come very close to achieving our central goal, which is to de-capacitate al-Qaida, to dismantle them, to make sure that they cannot attack us again."

That being said, in the last week of July 2013, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) began closing down its clandestine bases in Afghanistan. The move coincided with the United States' military withdrawal from Afghanistan, as well a shift in focus as the United States was now likely to concentrate its counter-terrorism efforts in more active hotspots, such as Yemen and North Africa where al-Qaida is more active, and possibly look towards monitoring the complicated landscape in Syria. The closure of CIA bases in Afghanistan also indirectly exemplified the transition over the last decade of the spy agency being a predominantly -- and classically -- espionage entity to one with military capability at its disposal, such as the use of bases and drones.

In November 2013, the governments of Afghanistan and the United States were forging a security deal. At issue was an agreement for United States military forces remaining in Afghanistan beyond the 2014 deadline when most NATO-led international forces, including those from the United States, were due to officially withdraw. Of particular concern was a key provision that would give United States military personnel immunity from prosecution in Afghanistan. In the last week of November 2013, the council of tribal elders who make up Afghanistan's Loya Jirga convened a meeting to decide whether to approve the Bilateral Security Agreement with the United States. At the conclusion of the meeting, the Loya Jirga approved the document and urged that the deal be signed at the end of the year (2013), as requested by the United States. The declaration read as follows: "Given the current situation in,

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and Afghanistan's need... the contents of this agreement as a whole is endorsed by the members of this Loya Jirga. The Loya Jirga requests the president to sign the agreement before the end of 2013."

Presumably to show that he was an independent actor and not beholden to the United States, which was ironically ensuring the safety of Afghanistan for more than a decade, Afghan President Hamid Karzai said he was toying with the idea of waiting until 2014 to sign the agreement. The United States reacted to this move by Karzai by warning that there would be no delay. United States Department of State spokesperson Jen Psaki, said: "We believe that signing sooner rather than later is essential to give Afghans certainty about their future before the upcoming elections, and enable the United States and other partners to plan for U.S. presence after 2014. It is neither practical nor possible for us to further delay because of the uncertainty it would create."

As November 2013 came to a close, President Karzai maintained his stance in refusing to sign the security deal with the United States until 2014, when a new president was elected to power in Afghanistan. The United States warned that delay on a matter of such importance could result in the "zero option" of withdrawing all United States troops from Afghanistan in 2014.

In a meeting with United States National Security Advisor Susan Rice in Kabul, Karzai also added further conditions to the deal, demanding that the United States immediately end military raids on Afghan homes. He also called for the United States to return any Afghan detainees currently being held at Guantanamo Bay. The Obama administration responded to these new demands by nothing that Karzai was making it clear that he was not prepared to sign the bilateral security agreement. A statement by National Security Advisor Rice warned, "Without a prompt signature, the U.S. would have no choice but to initiate planning for a post-2014 future in which there would be no U.S. or NATO troop presence in Afghanistan."

The continuing violence at the start of 2014 highlighted the security challenges facing Afghanistan. Of concern was the matter of how the country would deal with the violence when international forces exited Afghanistan at the close of the year (2014). To that end, there was the pending security agreement (discussed above) under consideration to be forged between Afghanistan and the United States.

That proposal would mean that as many as 10,000 United States troops would be remain in Afghanistan after the 2014 deadline for a withdrawal of international forces; that remaining contingent would be responsible for counter-terrorism and training of Afghan forces. President Karzai has not been quick to sign the agreement and the United States has made it clear that without a signed agreement, it would fully exit Afghanistan at the close of 2014, as planned to this point. To date, relations between the United States and the Karzai government in Afghanistan have been decidedly conflicted, with the United States frequently frustrated by Karzai's erratic and unstable behavior, marked occasionally by Karzai's threats to "join the Taliban."

In February 2014, the United States made clear that it was entertaining the possibility of withdrawing all its troops from Afghanistan unless the security agreement is soon signed. Indeed, on Feb. 12, 2014, White House spokesperson Jay Carney emphasized that the Obama administration had no intention of renegotiating the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA). At a White House briefing, he said, "Planning has to place around the contingencies that exist -- with either a signed BSA or a BSA that is not signed. And as time progresses into this year, it becomes more difficult to plan for a post-2014 troop presence."

Meanwhile, around the same period in February 2014, reports were emerging from Afghanistan about talks between President Karzai's government and the Taliban. A spokesperson for the Karzai government, Aimal Faizi, said in an interview with the New York Times, "I can confirm that ... Taliban are willing more than ever to join the peace process. Contacts have been made and we are also in touch with them."

The United States issued a statement supportive of such overtures of reconciliation. Jen Psaki of the United States Department of State said, "It's important to note here that we've long strongly supported an Afghan-led reconciliation, which would, of course, be Afghans talking to Afghans. So the notion that we wouldn't support that dialogue is inaccurate." That being said, she made it clear that the United States was not involved in any peace talks with the Taliban.

The United States was not so sanguine about the news that Karzai allowed the release of 65 detainees from the high-security Bagram prison to the north of Kabul. The United States had strenuously urged Afghanistan not to release these detainees, warning that there were extremist Taliban fighters who were responsible for the deaths of international forces, including both Afghan and American soldiers, as well as civilians. But Karzai went forward with the release of these extremists in defiance of the United States' expressed request. The move was sure to further complicate already dismal relations between the governments of the two countries.

Special Entry

United States orders closure of embassies in Middle East, Asia, and Africa amidst security worries

At the start of August 2013, the Obama administration in the United States ordered the closure of several of its embassies in the Middle East and North Africa due to threats of a possible terrorist attack by militant extremists. At issue were interceptions of messages from the senior leadership of the terror enclave, al-Qaida, indicating that a major terrorist attack was in the works. The messages involved conversations between al-Qaida leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and Nasser al-Wuhayshi, the leader of al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula, discussing a plan to carry out a major terrorist attack on an embassy. The closures were initially supposed to be enforced for a few days but were extended in many cases for up to a week with the United States authorities noting there was a strong possibility of an al-Qaida inspired attack in the Middle East and North Africa.

Meanwhile, the United States Department of State issued a global travel alert, which it said would remain in effect until the end of the month. Like the embassy closures, the travel alert was also issued due to security concerns. Explaining the rationale for the travel alert, the United States Department of State said: "Current information suggests that al-Qaida and affiliated organizations continue to plan terrorist attacks both in the region and beyond, and that they may focus efforts to conduct attacks in the period between now and the end of August." The travel alert urged American citizens to be vigilant and warned against "the potential for terrorists to attack public transportation systems and other tourist infrastructure."

Given this guidance, several other Western countries moved to close select diplomatic missions in the region of the Middle East and North Africa, with the United Kingdom (and the United States) paying particular attention to Yemen. The United Kingdom Foreign Office was advising British nationals to leave that Middle Eastern country and urging its citizens to avoid travel to Yemen, noting that there was "a high threat from terrorism throughout Yemen." Several European countries also temporarily shut missions in Yemen. The United States had itself withdrawn its diplomatic staff from Yemen and urged United States citizens to depart that country amid concerns over security threats. At issue were emerging concerns that al-Qaida operatives were arriving in the Yemeni capital of Sanaa, and were preparing for a major terror incident that would target both the Yemeni military and international diplomatic interests.

Separately, Yemeni authorities were claiming success in foiling al-Qaida plot to seize two of the country's main ports and blow up oil pipelines. This foiled plot was being described as distinct from the security alert on diplomatic missions across the Middle East and North Africa. That being said, a spokesperson for the Yemeni government, said in an interview with international media that the al-Qaida plot involved taking over two ports in the south of the country used in exporting Yemeni oil, seizing control of the Canadian-administered al-Dhaba oil terminal, and killing

or kidnapping foreign workers. The plot also involved plans to bomb and destroy oil pipelines at Balhaf. The entire plot appeared to be driven by revenge for the killing of senior al-Qaida figure, Said al-Shihri, in a drone strike months prior. Meanwhile, the United States appeared to be stepping up its drone attacks on Yemen with seven suspected Islamic extremist militants reported to have been killed in one strike in the south eastern part of the country. It was one of several strikes in a two-week period.

Pakistan was also the focus of particular scrutiny when the United States withdrew its diplomatic staff from the office of the consulate-general in the city of Lahore. The United States Department of States said the evacuation move was being made in response to a "credible threat" to the consulate. The United States Department of States additionally warned its citizens against non-essential travel within Pakistan. The travel warning included this explanation: "The presence of several foreign and indigenous terrorist groups poses a potential danger to United States citizens throughout Pakistan."

Special Report on Syrian Crisis:

Report of chemical weapons usage surfaces and exacerbates Syrian Crisis; has the "red line" been crossed and will international powers now involve themselves in the Syrian civil war?

Summary:

Since early 2011, anti-government protests have spread and escalated across the Arab world; Syria emerged as an addition to the list of countries experiencing unrest in March 2011. At first, protesters stopped short of demanding the resignation of President Bashar al-Assad, instead demanding greater political freedom and efforts to end corruption. For his part, President Assad announced he would advance a reform agenda, which would include lifting the emergency laws that had been in place for decades, and increased rights to the country's disenfranchised Kurdish population. These moves were aimed at quelling the rising climate of unrest gripping the country. But over time, as protests continued, and as the Assad regime carried out a **hard line** crackdown on dissent, tensions escalated between the government and the protesters.

In mid-2011, the United Nations Security Council and the Arab League respectively issued condemnations of the violence in Syria. As well, the United Nations Human Rights Council called for an independent inquiry into the violent crackdown on dissent. Meanwhile, global leaders were calling for President Assad to step down from power, given the brutality of the Syrian regime's crackdown on protesters. As of 2012, the bloody crackdown by the Assad regime on anti-government protesters was ongoing. In fact, the crackdown appeared to become more relentless in places such as Homs and Aleppo. Despite widespread condemnation from the West, a United Nations Security Resolution on the situation in Syria was subject to veto by Russia and China. A subsequent vote in the United Nations General Assembly overwhelmingly condemned Syria for its brutal crackdown. A prevailing truce, brokered by the joint United Nations/Arab League envoy, Kofi Annan, was established in the interests of preventing further bloodshed; however, it was revealed to be an exercise in theory rather than practice and eventually the United Nations monitoring mission ended in failure.

Syria has, meanwhile, been subject to sanctions by various countries and was sliding into pariah status in the international community. Assassinations, alleged massacres, geopolitical tensions with Turkey and Israel, and most recently, suspicions about the use of chemical weapons, have since mired the Syrian landscape. Indeed, it was increasingly **clear** that Syria had slipped into a state of civil war and was facing a devastating humanitarian crisis. That crisis reached new heights in August 2013 with claims that Syrian forces launched a chemical attack on the outskirts of Damascus. Was this the **clear** sign that United States President Barack Obama's "red line" had definitively been crossed? And would the international community become more involved in the Syrian crisis? The answers to those questions were yet to be determined.

Chemical weapons issue resurfaces:

On Aug. 21, 2013, Syrian opposition activists and rebels said that chemical weapons had killed hundreds of people on the outskirts of Damascus. They said that government forces launched a major bombardment on rebel forces in the area of Ghouta using rockets with toxic agents. The Syrian government dismissed the accusations as "illogical and fabricated." The Syrian military further said that rebel forces were suffering major defeat and were using claims of chemical attacks to draw attention away from the fact that they were losing the war.

The claims and counter-claims set up rival theories that could not be verified simply by looking at the videotaped footage of victims that immediately surfaced online. Stated differently, while the international media was able to obtain visual evidence of victims who had died, that footage could not prove whether they died as a result of conventional military bombardment or due to exposure to toxic substances. However, there was an increasing chorus of disturbing assertions by medical staff that the victims, particularly children, appeared to have suffered suffocation and blurred vision. As well, further videotaped footage was starting to surface about the purported attacks, this time showing victims enduring convulsions or distinctly encountering breathing problems. In an interview with BBC News, Professor Alexander Kekule of the Institute for Medical Microbiology at Halle University in Germany, admitted that the videotaped images of the victims certainly suggested they had been subject to a chemical agent of some kind. However, he made a point of noting that none of the victims showed signs that they had been exposed to chemicals such as sarin or organophosphorous nerve agents.

The international community seemed initially wary to accept the claims of chemical attacks, perhaps with the memory of the inconclusive chemical weapons claims so fresh in their minds from earlier in the year (2013). Only recently, United Nations investigators traveled to Syria to look into those earlier claims. In August 2013, the United Nations convened an emergency meeting to discuss the newest chemical attack claims and its immediate response was to seek clarification on the situation in Syria. As noted by Maria Cristina Perceval, Argentina's United Nations Ambassador, "There is a strong concern among council members about the allegations and a general sense that there must be clarity on what happened and the situation must be followed closely."

That being said, individual countries -- such as France and the United Kingdom-- were going further and demanding that United Nations inspectors who were already investigating the earlier allegations of chemical attacks in Syria now look into these fresh claims. The United States echoed their call via White House spokesperson Josh Earnest, who said: "The United States is deeply concerned by reports that hundreds of Syrian civilians have been killed in an attack by Syrian government forces, including by the use of chemical weapons, near Damascus earlier today. We are formally requesting that the United Nations urgently investigate this new allegation. The United Nations investigative team, which is currently in Syria, is prepared to do so, and that is consistent with its purpose and mandate." Both the European Union and the Arab League entered the fray, adding their own voices to the call for United Nations inspectors to go look into the matter.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Russia had a different view and noted that the timing of the fresh claims of chemical attacks came just as United Nations inspectors were in Syria to investigate the chemical claims from earlier in 2013. The Russian foreign ministry said, "This makes us think that we are once again dealing with a premeditated provocation." Indeed, there was a legitimate question as to why the Syrian government would choose to use chemical weapons at a time when United Nations inspectors were "in country" and especially given United States President Barack Obama's 2012 famous statement that his country would not be involving itself in the Syrian crisis unless the Assad regime used chemical weapons -- essentially crossing a vital "red line" -- that could augur international military action.

There was incremental movement in that direction on Aug. 22, 2013, when the United Kingdom, France, and Turkey all demanded that the international community take a strong stand against the Syrian regime, if the chemical weapons attack was verified. France went further with French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius saying that if the claims of a chemical attack proved to be true, a "reaction of force" would result. The United Kingdom

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issued a similar threat via the British Foreign Office, noting, "We believe a political solution is the best way to end the bloodshed" but also warning that the government of Prime Minister David Cameron "has said many times we cannot rule out any option that might save innocent lives in Syria." Meanwhile, Turkey goaded the United Nations about its symbolic "foot dragging" as Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu declared: "All red lines have been crossed but still the United Nations Security Council has not even been able to take a decision."

On Aug. 23, 2013, United States President Barack Obama offered comments on the alleged use of chemical weapons in Syria saying that the claims constituted a "big event, of grave concern." In an interview with CNN, President Obama noted that the conflict in Syria would have a bearing on United States national interests "both in terms of us making sure that weapons of mass destruction are not proliferating, as well as needing to protect our allies, our bases in the region." Nevertheless, the United States leader struck a cautious note, reminding journalists that his country was still in the process of seeking confirmation on the matter of chemical weapons usage; however, he asserted that if the allegations proved to be true, the crisis would "require America's attention." Left unsaid was the nature of that attention. For his part, President Obama urged prudent action, tacitly reminding people of the consequences of the reckless military intervention of his predecessor, George W. Bush, into Iraq. The United States president said: "Sometimes what we've seen is that folks will call for immediate action, jumping into stuff, that does not turn out well, gets us mired in very difficult situations, can result in us being drawn into very expensive, difficult, costly interventions that actually breed more resentment in the region."

Around this time, Russia maintained its belief that the use of chemical agents might be a provocation by the opposition. Still, Russia was now urging Syria to cooperate with an "objective investigation" by United Nations chemical weapons experts. United Kingdom Foreign Secretary William Hague indirectly addressed this suggestion that the use of chemical agents was a provocation by rebel forces saying, "I know that some people in the world would like to say this is some kind of conspiracy brought about by the opposition in Syria. I think the chances of that are vanishingly small and so we do believe that this is a chemical attack by the Assad regime on a large scale."

United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon demanded an immediate investigation to clear up the matter. He said: "I can think of no good reason why any party -- either government or opposition forces -- would decline this opportunity to get to the truth of the matter." Ban also emphasized the fact that any use of chemical weapons -- by any actor or party -- would be a violation of international law, which would inevitably result in "serious consequences for the perpetrator."

United States weighs its options:

Meanwhile, even as the evidence was increasing to support the claim of a chemical weapons attack in Syria, the political will to build an international coalition to act against Syria was eroding. At issue was a parliamentary vote in the United Kingdom's House of Commons urging an international response to the Syria chemical weapons crisis. The vote came amidst British Prime Minister David Cameron's vociferous condemnation of Syria's apparent use of chemical weapons, and his suggestion that the United Kingdom would join the United States and France in delivering some kind of punitive action against Syria. But when the parliamentary vote went down to defeat in the House on Commons on Aug. 29, 2013, it was apparent that the United Kingdom would not be a player in any kind of military intervention.

Irrespective of the political developments across the Atlantic, in the United States, President Barack Obama on Aug. 30, 2013, made clear that he was still considering the full range of options in response to Syria's use of chemical weapons against its own citizens. Referring to the aforementioned report on the suspected chemical weapons usage in Syria released by Secretary of State Kerry, President Obama said, "As you've seen, today we've released our unclassified assessment detailing with high confidence that the Syrian regime carried out a chemical weapons attack that killed well over 1,000 people, including hundreds of children. This follows the horrific images that shocked us all."

With an eye on showing why the use of chemical weapons required a response, President Obama said, "This kind of attack is a challenge to the world. We cannot accept a world where women and children and innocent civilians are gassed on a terrible scale." He continued, "So, I have said before, and I meant what I said that, the world has an obligation to make sure that we maintain the norm against the use of chemical weapons." In this way, the United States president was making it clear that the international community had an obligation to respond to Syria's use of chemical weapons -- an act that was undertaken in defiance of international law and in contravention to international norms.

President Obama indicated that several options were under review, as he noted, "Now, I have not made a final decision about various actions that might be taken to help enforce that norm. But as I've already said, I have had my military and our team look at a wide range of options." That being said, President Obama noted that a long-term campaign involving a ground force in Syria (reminiscent of Iraq) were not among those possibilities. He expressly said, "We're not considering any open-ended commitment. We're not considering any boots on the ground approach. What we will do is consider options that meet the narrow concern around chemical weapons." Evidently, although President Obama believed there was a moral obligation to act against Syria for its use of chemical weapons, he was not eager to see the United States mired in another war in the world's most volatile region. Stated differently, it was through the prism of the Iraq debacle that the United States leader was viewing his options for dealing with Syria.

Syria's stance:

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has repeatedly denied that his forces launched any chemical attacks. The Syrian leader has warned of a wider Middle Eastern war if foreign countries decide to move forward with military action against Syria. That wider war could occur if Assad decided to react to a yet-to-occur military strike by international powers on Syria. Some of the possibilities available to Assad would include retaliatory attacks on pro-Western allies of the United States, such as Israel, Jordan, and Turkey. But the reality was that Syria's military already had its hands full fighting the civil war at home. Moreover, Syria likely could not risk sparking the ire of Israel, with its own well-armed military, or Jordan, which hosts United States fighter jets, missiles and troops, or Turkey -- a NATO member state. Indeed, an attack on any NATO country, such as Turkey, would prompt a response from the entire security alliance.

Note on Russia's position:

Russia has maintained the view that the notion of a chemical attack by the Syrian government was inconceivable. Russia has also indicated that it would block a resolution in the United Nations Security Council authorizing a use of force against Syria. However, in early September 2013, Russian President Putin indicated some softening of his stance as he noted that he could be persuaded to change his mind if provided with clear evidence of a chemical attack. Russia has also long advocated for a negotiated or diplomatic settlement to the Syrian crisis.

Status update:

On Sept. 8, 2013, the European Union called for no action to go forward with regard to Syria until the findings on the chemical agents were made available by the United Nations investigative team. As well, plans for a full vote in the United States Congress authorizing use of force against the Syria regime were cancelled.

An issue was an unexpected diplomatic breakthrough that emerged when United States Secretary of State John Kerry uttered a (seemingly) off-hand remark during a news conference in London on Sept. 9, 2013 with British

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Foreign Secretary William Hague. Secretary of State Kerry said that President Assad could prevent a military strike on Syria if he handed over "every single bit" of his chemical weapons to the international community. At the time, Secretary of State Kerry said that he did not expect Assad to respond to this call; but, in fact, the remark appeared to have sparked fresh possibilities for a diplomatic solution with Russia championing the idea of subjecting Syria's chemical weapons stockpile to international auditors, and then placing them under the aegis of international jurisdiction. Syria -- Russia's client state in the Middle East -- was almost immediately scrambling to say that it would be willing to move in this direction. That stance by Syria functioned also as an admission by the Syrian regime that it was, in fact, in possession of chemical weapons. Until that moment, the Assad regime would not even acknowledge that reality.

On Sept. 10, 2013, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem offered a public admission of the Assad regime's chemical weapons stockpile when he said: "We are ready to inform about the location of chemical weapons, halt the production of chemical weapons, and show these objects to representatives of Russia, other states and the United Nations." He continued, "Our adherence to the Russian initiative has a goal of halting the possession of all chemical weapons."

On the night of Sept. 10, 2013, United States President Obama delivered a national address on the Syrian issue. Originally, the speech had been regarded as an opportunity for the president to build congressional support -- then, at anemic levels -- for authorizing strikes against Syria, and assuring a war-weary and skeptical nation that such action was necessary. Now, however, the speech had a two-fold purpose -- to bolster that aforementioned case against Syria, but also to address the emerging diplomatic channel.

As regards the former objective, President Obama presented a succinct case for acting against Syria. President Obama emphasized his conviction that the Assad regime was responsible for the chemical toxins attack that ensued around Ghouta on Aug. 21, 2013, characterizing the scene of death as "sickening," reminding the global community that such an attack was a violation of international law, and warning Americans that it posed a threat to United States national security.

But the president also opened the door to a negotiated settlement on the issue of Syria's chemical weapons arsenal and usage. He said that the Russian plan to report Syria's chemical weapons arsenal and place them under the aegis of international jurisdiction constituted "encouraging signs" and announced that he would pursue a "diplomatic path." The president said that his top diplomat, Secretary of State Kerry, would travel to Geneva in Switzerland to meet his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, with an eye on pursuing a negotiated settlement on the issue of dealing with Syria's chemical weapons.

President Obama offered cautious support for this path forward, saying, "It's too early to tell whether [the plan] would succeed, and any agreement must verify that the Assad regime keeps its commitments. But this initiative has the potential to remove the threat of chemical weapons without the use of force, particularly because Russia is one of Assad's strongest allies." President Obama defended his decision to consider military strikes against Syria, arguing that the current diplomatic opening was only possible as a result of the credible threat of military force by the United States. Accordingly, the United States leader made it clear that his country's armed forces would maintain their posture, saying: "Meanwhile, I've ordered our military to maintain their current posture, to keep the pressure on Assad and to be in a position to respond if diplomacy fails."

On Sept. 11, 2013, Russia officially handed over its plan for placing Syria's stockpile under international control to the United States. Discussion over its contents was expected to take place in Geneva, Switzerland, between United States Secretary of State Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov. Those negotiations would be of a bilateral nature. The Obama administration announced that in addition to Secretary of State Kerry's meeting with Foreign Minister Lavrov, the United States' top diplomat would also meet with the United Nations-Arab League special envoy on Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi.

The diplomatic path was not without serious obstacles. Russia was demanding that the United States withdraw its threat of force, while France -- the United States' ally on the issue of action against Syria -- was crafting a United Nations Security Council resolution that would include a provision for precisely such action, should Syria fail to comply with the dictates of the plan. At issue was France's inclusion of a Chapter VII provision (of the United Nations charter), which would effectively authorize the use of force if Syria failed to adhere to its stated obligations. For its part, Russia advocated for a non-binding declaration supporting its initiative.

At stake in that initiative was a demand for Syria to provide a full audit of its chemical weapons -- including varieties of toxins and storage locations -- within 15 days, as well as procedures facilitating the transfer of control over those chemical substances, and ultimately, their destruction. Of course, the issue of destruction itself presented a disagreement between Russia and Syria with the latter not keen on that aspect of the plan. Still, with the client state of Syria reliant on Russia to save the regime from United States strikes, it was likely that the arsenal of chemical toxins would ultimately be set for elimination.

Complicating the diplomatic path was an opinion editorial piece penned by Russian President Vladimir Putin, which was published by the New York Times. At the more conventional level, the piece included a fulsome plea for diplomacy by Putin as follows: "The potential strike by the United States against Syria, despite strong opposition from many countries and major political and religious leaders, including the pope, will result in more innocent victims and escalation, potentially spreading the conflict far beyond Syria's borders."

Putin also urged international action via global instruments of jurisprudence, noting that any actions should go through the United Nations Security Council, which stood as "one of the few ways to keep international relations from sliding into chaos." Putin also offered the reasonable argument that the United Nations could go down the road of obsolescence as its precursor, the League of Nations, if "influential countries bypass the United Nations and take military action without Security Council authorization." Left unstated by the Russian leader, however, was the fact that his country's penchant for United Nations authorization for the use of force was not at play during the Soviet Union's invasion of Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Afghanistan, or even its limited engagement in the Georgian territory of South Ossetia most recently.

The most incendiary element in Putin's editorial was perhaps his chastisement of President Obama's declaration on United States' exceptionalism. Putin argued against that claim, stating: "And I would rather disagree with a case he made on American exceptionalism, stating that the United States' policy is What makes America different...it's what makes us exceptional. It is extremely dangerous to encourage people to see themselves as exceptional, whatever the motivation." This statement was a stunning example of irony coming from a world leader who declared to his fellow Russians in February 2013: "We are a victorious people! It is in our genes, in our genetic code!"

The Obama administration responded to this provocative opinion piece by Putin a day later on Sept. 12, 2013 with White House Press Secretary Jay Carney saying, "It's worth also pointing out there's a great irony in the placement of an op-ed like this, because it reflects the truly exceptional tradition of this country of freedom of expression." Carney then went on to note that freedom of expression and free speech were "on the decrease in Russia." Carney also used the occasion to place the burden of the success of a diplomatic path on Russia, noting that the Russian president had placed his "prestige and credibility on the line" in offering a proposal to Syria to turn over its chemical weapons.

The Putin versus Obama contretemps aside, the diplomatic channels remained open. On Sept. 12, 2013, the United Nations announced that it had received documents from Syria, effectively acceding to the Chemical Weapons Convention, which prohibits the production and use of chemical weapons. Syrian Ambassador to the United Nations, Bashar Ja'afar, said, "Legally speaking Syria has become, starting today, a full member of the (chemical weapons) convention."

Meanwhile, negotiations were ongoing in Geneva (Switzerland) between the top diplomats from the United States and Russia respectively -- Secretary of State Kerry and Foreign Minister Lavrov -- with leaks indicating that the two men enjoyed good rapport. The negotiations were being characterized as "constructive" and went late into the wee hours of Sept. 14, 2013, suggesting that climate was ripe with the possibility of forging a deal.

Chemical Weapons Deal

On Sept. 14, 2013, United States Secretary of State Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov announced that a breakthrough agreement had been reached and that diplomacy had won the day. Speaking at a joint news conference with his Russian counterpart, Foreign Minister Lavrov, Secretary of State John Kerry said of the concord: "If fully implemented, this framework can provide greater protection and security to the world."

The agreement, titled "Framework for Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons," calls for a full accounting of its chemical weapons stockpile within one week, the destruction of all production equipment by November 2013, and the elimination or transfer of the arsenal of chemical weapons by the middle of 2014. Achieving the objectives of the agreement promised to be difficult. A one week deadline for a full audit of Syria's chemical weapons arsenal was strenuously aggressive. As well, the destruction of production equipment and chemical toxins by 2014 was considered unprecedented since previous processes of this nature have typically taken several years to complete. Moreover, there would be complicated questions yet to address, such as how to ensure the safety of international inspectors in Syria.

It should also be noted that agreement on a United Nations Security Council resolution mandating Syrian disarmament on chemical weapons still promised to be potentially fractious. Russia was reluctant to the notion of adding a Chapter VII provision (authorizing the use of force if Syria reneged on its obligations) to the resolution, although Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov intimated that the provision could be added in the future in a worse case scenario. As such, the United States was not expected to press for that particular inclusion at this time.

The diplomatic breakthrough and the agreement itself were thus being lauded by all veto-wielding members of the United Nations Security Council (the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, and China), as well as the broader United Nations and NATO. But with the same lack of diplomatic restraint shown by Russian President Putin in his opinion editorial in the New York Times, Syria's Assad regime hailed the breakthrough agreement as a "victory" for that country. Syrian Reconciliation Minister Ali Haidar declared in an interview with Russian media, "It's a victory for Syria achieved thanks to our Russian friends."

United States Secretary of State Kerry quelled Assad regime's bravado warning on Sept. 15, 2013 that the United States retained its right to carry out punitive strikes against Syria, if that country did not meet its publicly stated international obligations. Secretary of State Kerry said, "If diplomacy has any chance to work, it must be coupled with a credible military threat." "We cannot have hollow words in the conduct of international affairs," Kerry added.

Already, President Obama in the United States had reminded the Syrian regime that while the agreement was "an important step" in the right direction, his country reserved the right to act against Syria for failing to meet its obligations. The United States leader said, "If diplomacy fails, the United States remains prepared to act." Indeed, the United States Pentagon noted that the United States military remained in a posture poised for military strikes against Syria.

Within the rebel ranks, the agreement was being regarded with scorn and bitterness. Indeed, the military leader of the anti-Assad Free Syrian Army, General Salim Idriss, dismissed the deal as irrelevant, saying, "All of this initiative does not interest us. Russia is a partner with the regime in killing the Syrian people." Idriss also cast the deal as a Russian plan intended to gift the Assad regime with more time, and as such, he vowed to keep up the fight.

Special Report:

U.S. special forces carry out terrorist raids in Libya, Somalia, and Afghanistan

In October 2013, United States special forces raided terrorist enclaves in Libya, Somalia, and Afghanistan.

In Libya, the action by United States special forces ended in the capture of a senior al-Qaida official -- Nazih Abdul-Hamed Nabih al-Ruqai'i, also known as Anas al-Libi -- a stalwart of the notorious terrorist Jihadist leader, Osama Bin Laden. Al-Libi has long been regarded as the orchestrator of the 1998 bombings of the United States embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, and has thus been on the radar of United States anti-terrorism officials for some time. Now, in 2013, he was captured from the Libyan capital of Tripoli.

Following his capture, al-Libi was detained on a United States vessel in the Mediterranean for a week during which he was interrogated by intelligence officials. He was then transferred to the United States to face justice for his alleged role in the United States embassy bombings in the Kenyan capital of Nairobi and the Tanzanian capital of Dar-es-Salaam in 1998. It should be noted that al-Libi has denied having a role in the two embassy bombings in 1998. In a New York federal court on Oct. 15, 2013, he entered a plea of not guilty. The hearing was then adjourned until Oct. 22, 2013. In Libya, the government demanded an explanation for the raid that resulted in al-Libi's capture. In the United States, Secretary of State John Kerry defended the actions of his country saying that the actions of al-Libi made him a "legal and appropriate target."

There was less information available on a separate raid on the Somali town of Barawe. There, commandos were targeting a "high value" terrorist from al-Shabab -- the Somali terror group that is allied with al-Qaida. Because al-Shabab fighters responded with heavy fire, United States commandos chose to retreat from the scene although there was some suggestion that one al-Shabab terrorist was killed. It was not known if the person killed was Mukhtar Abu Zubeyr, also known as Ahmed Godane -- the leader of al-Shabab. It was later revealed that the target of that action was Abdukadir Mohamed Abdukadir, a Kenyan al-Shabab commander also known by the name "Ikrima." It should be noted that the al-Shabab, which is aligned with the terror enclave al-Qaida, claimed responsibility for the horrific terrorist attack on the Westgate shopping mall in the Kenyan capital of Nairobi.

A third United States raid by special forces was carried out in eastern Afghanistan, ultimately ending in the capture of a senior Pakistan Taliban commander, Latif Mehsud. Few details were made available following this operation, although Afghan officials admitted that Latif Mehsud was seized as he was returning from negotiations over a prison exchange deal in the eastern Afghan province of Logar and transferred to the Bagram base close to the Afghan capital of Kabul. The incident apparently raised the ire of Afghan President Hamid Karzai, however, the United States seemed undeterred and confident in the wisdom of its action. The United States Department of State noted that Latif Mehsud was a "terrorist leader," a stalwart of the Pakistani Taliban leader, Hakimullah Mehsud, and the Pakistani Taliban was believed to be responsible for the attempted bombing of Times Square in New York in 2010. Furthermore, around the same time that Latif Mehsud was seized, Hakimullah Mehsud said in an interview that the Pakistani Taliban would continue to target "America and its friends" in its campaign of terror.

Special Report

Drone strike kills leader of the Pakistani Taliban

Reports emerged at the start of November 2013 confirming that Hakimullah Mehsud, the leader of the Pakistani Taliban, was killed in a drone strike on his vehicle in the northwestern region of North Waziristan. Four other individuals were killed in the strike, including two of Mehsud's bodyguards.

The elimination of Hakimullah Mehsud occurred in the aftermath of a raid by United States special forces in eastern Afghanistan, which ultimately ended with the capture of a senior Pakistani Taliban commander, Latif Mehsud. Few details were made available following that October 2013 operation, although Afghan officials admitted that Latif

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Mehsud was seized as he was returning from negotiations over a prison exchange deal in the eastern Afghan province of Logar and transferred to the Bagram base close to the Afghan capital of Kabul. It should be noted that while both held leadership positions in the Pakistani Taliban, Latif Mehsud was no relation to the terrorist entity's leader, Hakimullah Mehsud, whose death was confirmed at the start of November 2013, as discussed here.

To that end, senior United States officials confirmed that Hakimullah Mehsud's vehicle was struck in Dande Darpakhel, a few miles to the north of the region's main town of Miranshah. Hakimullah Mehsud came to the fore of the Pakistani Taliban in 2009 following the death of the previous terrorist leader, Baitullah Mehsud, who was himself killed in a United States drone strike in South Waziristan.

For its part, the Pakistani Taliban vowed revenge against the United States for the death of Hakimullah Mehsud. A spokesperson for the terrorist Islamist group, Azam Tariq, promising: "Every drop of Hakimullah's blood will turn into a suicide bomber. America and their friends shouldn't be happy because we will take revenge for our martyr's blood."

Not surprisingly, the government of Pakistan condemned the drone strike, asserting via a statement that such action constituted a "violation of Pakistan's sovereignty and territorial integrity." Pakistani officials also lamented that the elimination of Hakimullah Mehsud via a drone strike likely spelled the end of hopes for a peace deal with the Taliban -- a goal of newly-elected Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. As noted by Pakistan's Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan, "This is not just the killing of one person, it's the death of all peace efforts." Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan further accused the United States of "scuttling" overtures to commence peace negotiations with the Taliban and warned that "every aspect" of Pakistan's bilateral relationship with the United States would thus be placed under review.

These two arguments -- the violation of Pakistan's sovereignty and the death knell to yet-to-be launched peace effort -- were unlikely to find resonance by the Obama administration in the United States. First, the Obama administration has made it clear it was willing to penetrate Pakistan's sovereign territory in order to target Islamist extremist terrorists whom the Pakistani government has been unwilling to bring justice. Indeed, United States President Barack Obama had already in 2011 ordered the killing or capture of terrorist leader, Osama Bin Laden, who had taken refuge at a compound in the Pakistani town of Abbottabad -- the very city that housed the Pakistani Military Academy. Accordingly, it strained credulity that some faction of the Pakistani government was completely unaware that something suspicious was afoot at a multi-level building in the town. President Obama has also increased drone strikes against terrorists in the Pakistani tribal region, irrespective of rising criticism about the collateral damage in such strikes. For the Obama administration, the capture and/or killing of terrorists was the paramount consideration, the hopes of a non-existent peace deal notwithstanding.

Special Note

NSA leaks case and revelations about spying causes bilateral tensions across the globe

In late October 2013, the German publication, Der Spiegel, reported that according to leaked clandestine documents from the National Security Agency (NSA) dispersed by former contractor Edward Snowden, the United States had been spying on Germany. Of primary interest was the suggestion that that United States had been spying on Angela Merkel -- the German head of government -- via her mobile phone. The report indicated that the United States' surveillance of Merkel dated back to 2002 -- before she became Chancellor of Germany.

The revelations have spurred outrage in Germany and even caused Chancellor Merkel to call United States President Obama to register her disapproval. There was also an announcement that German intelligence officials would be sent to the United States to seek answers on the news of spying. President Obama reportedly apologized to Chancellor Merkel for the phone monitoring but assured his German counterpart that he would have stopped the practice, had he known about it. Another German publication, Bild, disputed this claim by the United States

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president, citing intelligence sources who said President Obama had been briefed about the operation that included monitoring of Merkel. However, the National Security Agency in the United States issued a statement maintaining that the matter was never discussed with President Obama. Regardless, the issue soured bilateral relations between the two countries.

German intelligence officials traveled to the United States to seek answers regarding the allegations of phone-tapping Chancellor Merkel's mobile phone. A meeting between Germany's national security adviser, Christoph Heusgen, and the German chancellery intelligence coordinator, Guenter Heiss on one side -- and -- White House national security adviser, Dr. Susan Rice, and United State Director of National Intelligence James Clapper on the other side -- sought to calm the rising bilateral tensions on the matter. One possible path to resolution being considered by President Obama was a ban on eavesdropping on leaders of allied countries.

Diplomatic relations between the United States and other countries have already been compromised as result of NSA revelations. Indeed, Spain was demanding answers about the news that millions of Spanish phone calls were intercepted by the NSA. As well, the Spanish government summoned the United States ambassador to Spain to answer questions about the United States' espionage practices. Already, the governments of France, Brazil, and Mexico had reacted in anger over news that the United States' espionage targets involved their countries.

Soon thereafter, despite international outrage over the United States eavesdropping program, new revelations in November 2013 indicated that many other countries were also conducting similar spying programs themselves. For example, Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff was supposedly so concerned about the news that the NSA had infiltrated the computer network of state-run oil company, Petrobras, that she cancelled a state visit to the United States in protest. But months later, it was revealed that Brazil had its own spying program. Under fire for the inconsistency on the matter, Brazilian Justice Minister Jose Eduardo Cardoso insisted that his country's surveillance program was "completely different" from that of the United States, and asserted that his country's clandestine agents who gathered information on diplomats from the United States, Russian, and Iran were acting lawfully. Likewise, Germany was reminded that many friendly countries -- other than the United States -- had their own clandestine service. At issue was the discover that the British embassy in Berlin housed sophisticated apparatus for eavesdropping and other covert surveillance activities. Thus, Germany summoned the British ambassador for an explanation on the matter.

These diplomatic grievances aside, the fact of the matter was that revelations of this sort could taint bilateral relations and cooperation that could assist in detecting and fighting against acts of terrorism. As noted by British Prime Minister David Cameron, such clandestine information could assist terrorists in understanding "how to evade and avoid detection." He continued, "It is going to make our world more dangerous." In an interview with CBS News, deputy director and acting director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) echoed this anxiety, noting that the leaked NSA documents damaged efforts to track possible terror threats. He said, "What Edward Snowden did has put Americans at greater risk because terrorists learn from leaks, and they will be more careful, and we will not get the intelligence we would have gotten otherwise."

While President Obama said he was initiating a review of the surveillance gathering operations, the intelligence community in the United States was defending its tactics. In testimony before the intelligence panel of the United States House of Representatives, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper asserted that the United States did not "indiscriminately" spy on other countries but that it was a "kind of a basic tenet" of intelligence-gathering to determine the intentions of other world leaders and to cross-check that "what they are saying gels with what's actually going on." Clapper explained that the goal was to discern foreign leaders' intentions, saying, "Leadership intentions is kind of a basic tenet of what we collect and analyze."

Clapper also put into words what should have already been known by most students of world affairs -- that the United States' allies also spy on United States officials and that clandestine activities of this type was routine. As stated by Clapper, "It [reciprocal spying] is one of the first things I learned in intelligence school in 1963... It's a fundamental given." Stated in pedestrian terms -- most countries with intelligence services spy on one another.

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The difference, of course, was that few countries have the vast array of clandestine intelligence technologies or human assets when compared to the United States. Clapper was unapologetic regarding the United States' surveillance program

It should be noted that National Security Agency (NSA) director, General Keith Alexander, who also testified at the House hearing characterized claims that the NSA gathered data on millions of telephone calls across Europe as "completely false." In response to a Wall Street Journal report that intelligence services in France and Spain had collected phone records of their citizens and turned them over to the NSA, General Alexander said, "This is not information we collected on European citizens. It represents information that we and our NATO allies have collected in defense of our countries and in support of military operations." In fact, General Alexander implicated European governments in its surveillance activities, noting that large swaths of data cited by international news organizations had actually been gathered by European intelligence services and shared with the NSA. General Alexander also echoed Clapper's unapologetic tone as he declared, "It is much more important for this country that we defend this nation and take the beatings than it is to give up a program that would result in this nation being attacked."

U.S. and Japan fighter jets fly through China's newly declared defense zone in East China Sea

In late November 2013, China tested the patience of the international community by declaring a new defense zone in the East China Sea. To that end, China announced it was deploying warplanes in the new air defense identification zone (ADIZ) for surveillance purposes. However, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Qin Gang noted that if disputes occurred in the region, his country hoped to resolve them through "peaceful means via friendly negotiation."

China's self-declaration of dominion over the territory and its warning that all airplanes passing through the area were to file flight plans and identify themselves or be prepared to deal with "defensive emergency measures" likely raised the ire of neighbors. Indeed, the new air defense identification zone (ADIZ) included contested territory claimed not only by China, but also Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea. Of particular note were uninhabited but disputed islands in the area known as Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyu by the Chinese. Their significance has, in the past, focused on fishing rights and shipping lanes; however, there was also the possibility of fossil fuel reserves in the area.

The United States Department of State characterized China's newly declared defense zone as "an attempt to unilaterally change the status quo in the East China Sea" and accordingly warned that it would "raise regional tensions and increase the risk of miscalculation, confrontation and accidents." In defiance of China's decision to declare the new ADIZ, the United States and Japan respectively ordered fighters jets to be flown through this area of the East China Sea. China was thus prompted to scramble warplanes to monitor those American and Japanese fighter jets crossing through the ADIZ.

For both Japan and the United States, the message was clear: they did not officially recognize China's newly declared defense zone in East China Sea. That being said, the United States was quick to note that its decision to fly fighter jets through the ADIZ was not intended to be a provocative act. An official for the United States military told CNN News that its aircrafts and a number of other Japanese military aircraft flew through the ADIZ without incident and as part of scheduled routine operations. The military official was quoted as saying, "This is status quo. We are not changing what we are doing. We are not trying to make a point with China. We fly U.S. aircraft daily in international airspace in the region. This is normal."

South Korea also reportedly dispatched a military aircraft on a routine patrol flight into the ADIZ and did not alert China of its flight plan. An official from the South Korean Defense Ministry said the flight was routine and carried out twice a week; the South Korean official said the patrols would continue irrespective of China's newly declared defense zone in East China Sea.

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Still, several commercial airlines, such as Qantas Airlines and Singapore Airlines, were not prepared to take any chances of their own and made it clear that they intended to act in accordance with China's new regulations. As well, the United States advised American commercial carriers to comply with China's new requirements for filing flight plans when they traverse the newly declared ADIZ over the East China Sea for obvious security reasons. It was to be seen if the matter would spark a dispute, especially since at least two Japanese airlines announced they would not be complying with the new Chinese-dictated regulations.

Complicating matters was an announcement from South Korea on Dec. 8, 2013 that it was expanding its own air defense zone, which that area partially overlapping with China's zone. At issue was the leodo rock claimed by both countries and controlled by South Korea. As noted here, South Korea was already challenging China's ADIZ by flying its military aircraft through that zone. The moves were expected to raise already-heightened tensions in eastern Asia.

Meanwhile, in the first week of December 2013, while United States Vice President Joseph Biden was on a trip to Asia, the matter of China's self-declare air defense zone was a matter of discussion. In a joint appearance with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in Tokyo, Vice President Biden said, "We, the United States, are deeply concerned by the attempt to unilaterally change the status quo in the East China Sea. This action has raised regional tensions and increased the risk of accidents and miscalculation." Biden said the United States was monitoring the situation with Japan and South Korea and noted that "we will remain steadfast in our alliance commitments." He continued, "The United States has an interest in the lowering of tensions in this vital region. This underscores the need for crisis management mechanisms and effective channels of communication between China and Japan to reduce the risk of escalation."

Vice President Biden then engaged in "very direct" talks regarding the ADIZ with Chinese officials. While China asserted its view that its self-declare air defense zone was consistent with "international law and practice," Vice President Biden pointed out that the move had caused "apprehension" in Asia and he noted that China had "increasing responsibility to contribute positively to peace and security." But Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei said: "During the talks the Chinese side repeated its principled position, stressing that the Chinese move accorded with international law and practice." Thus, it was clear -- at least in the public purview -- that neither the United States nor China were prepared to step back from the expressly-stated stances.

Special Note: Israel announces arrest of Palestinian al-Qaida cell with plans to attack U.S. embassy

On Jan. 22, 2014, Israel announced it had foiled a terror plot by a Palestinian al-Qaida cell in East Jerusalem. Israeli authorities from the Shin Bet security service said that they had arrested three Palestinians who were recruited in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank and were planning terror attacks. Those planned attacks included an operation against the United States embassy in Tel Aviv, an attack on a conference center in Jerusalem, and the abduction of Israeli soldiers from a Jerusalem's bus station. The Islamist extremist Hamas movement, which controls the Gaza Strip, dismissed Shin Bet's allegations, casting them as "silly fabrications," and suggesting that Israel was just trying to find justifications for its military strikes in Gaza. However, Shin Bet had fairly detailed claims against the cell saying that the operative were headed to Syria for weapons training and were in possession of fake Russian documents. As well, Shin Bet also noted that the Palestinian operatives used their Israeli resident cards to procure intelligence on their intended terrorism targets.

U.S. prepared full withdrawal from Afghanistan following Karzai's failure to sign security agreement

Continuing violence in the first part of 2014 has highlighted the security challenges facing Afghanistan. Of concern was the matter of how the country would deal with the violence when international forces exited Afghanistan at the close of 2014. To that end, there was a pending security agreement under consideration to be forged between Afghanistan and the United States.

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That proposal would mean that as many as 10,000 United States troops would be remain in Afghanistan after the 2014 deadline for a withdrawal of international forces; that remaining contingent would be responsible for counter-terrorism and training of Afghan forces. President Karzai has not been quick to sign the agreement and the United States has made it clear that without a signed agreement, it would fully exit Afghanistan at the close of 2014, as planned to this point. To date, relations between the United States and the Karzai government in Afghanistan have been decidedly conflicted, with the United States frequently frustrated by Karzai's erratic and unstable behavior, marked occasionally by Karzai's threats to "join the Taliban."

In February 2014, the United States made clear that it was entertaining the possibility of withdrawing all its troops from Afghanistan unless the security agreement is soon signed. Indeed, on Feb. 12, 2014, White House spokesperson Jay Carney emphasized that the Obama administration had no intention of renegotiating the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA). At a White House briefing, he said, "Planning has to place around the contingencies that exist -- with either a signed BSA or a BSA that is not signed. And as time progresses into this year, it becomes more difficult to plan for a post-2014 troop presence."

Meanwhile, around the same period in February 2014, reports were emerging from Afghanistan about talks between President Karzai's government and the Taliban. A spokesperson for the Karzai government, Aimal Faizi, said in an interview with the New York Times, "I can confirm that ... Taliban are willing more than ever to join the peace process. Contacts have been made and we are also in touch with them."

The United States issued a statement supportive of such overtures of reconciliation. Jen Psaki of the United States Department of State said, "It's important to note here that we've long strongly supported an Afghan-led reconciliation, which would, of course, be Afghans talking to Afghans. So the notion that we wouldn't support that dialogue is inaccurate." That being said, she made it clear that the United States was not involved in any peace talks with the Taliban.

The United States was not so sanguine about the news that Karzai allowed the release of 65 detainees from the high-security Bagram prison to the north of Kabul. The United States had strenuously urged Afghanistan not to release these detainees, warning that there were extremist Taliban fighters who were responsible for the deaths of international forces, including both Afghan and American soldiers, as well as civilians. But Karzai went forward with the release of these extremists in defiance of the United States' expressed request. The move was sure to further complicate already dismal relations between the governments of the two countries.

As February 2014 came to a close, the White House in the United States announced that President Barack Obama had ordered the Pentagon to prepare to withdraw all United States troops from Afghanistan by the end of the year. President Obama issued the order in the face of Karzai's dithering over the Bilateral Security Agreement that would allow the United States to keep a limited contingent of troops in Afghanistan after 2014. President Obama apparently delivered the news directly to President Karzai during a telephone call.

Around the same period, the violence continued in Afghanistan; a suicide bomb attack in the southern province of Uruzgan left several people dead and at least a dozen others injured. With the aforementioned withdrawal in the offing, the United States was intensifying its operations to damage the terror networks, such as the Taliban and Haqqani network, which were operating in the Afghan-Pak region.

Special Report:

Pope Francis, Politics, and Poverty

At the start of 2014, it was announced that United States President Barack Obama would meet for the first time with Pope Francis in March 2014. It should be noted that it would not be the United States leader's first meeting with his counterpart in the Holy See as President Obama met with Pope Benedict in 2009. This meeting in 2014

between Pope Francis and President Obama would focus on the shared interest of the two leaders in fighting inequality. Of concern to both Pope Francis and President Obama has been the ever-increasing chasm between rich and poor in countries across the world.

President Obama's meeting with Pope Francis would be part of a spring visit to Europe that would also include meetings with Italian President Giorgio Napolitano and Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi in Rome, as well as his attendance at a Nuclear Security Summit hosted by the Dutch government. President Obama would also be present at a European Union summit in Brussels; indeed, it would be President Obama's first official visit to European Union institutions.

Regarding President Obama's upcoming meeting with Pope Francis, White House spokesperson Jan Carney, said: "The president looks forward to discussing with Pope Francis their shared commitment to fighting poverty and growing inequality."

Whereas Pope Francis' pastoral interest in poverty alleviation finds its roots in his background as a priest in Buenos Aires, President Obama's socio-political interest in poverty and inequality can likely be linked to his time as a community organizer in Chicago. Francis has received accolades for his impassioned calls for Catholics to attend less to social issues such as abortion and birth control, and more to caring for the struggling and the impoverished. Meanwhile, President Obama's attention to income inequality in the United States has been criticized by rival Republicans who have, in many states, even attacked persons requiring government assistance to make ends meet.

In an 84-page apostolic exhortation, titled "Evangelii Gaudium" (The Joy of the Gospel), which was published in November 2013, Pope Francis invited secular leadership on the matters of poverty and inequality, writing: "I beg the Lord to grant us more politicians who are genuinely disturbed by the state of society, the people, the lives of the poor."

Just over a week later, President Obama offered a landmark speech on economic strife in the United States, characterizing the fight against inequality "the defining challenge of our time." In fact, President Obama even referenced Pope Francis' poverty alleviation stance, saying, "Some of you may have seen just last week, the pope himself spoke about this at eloquent length." He went so far as to evoke Pope Francis' poignant challenge: "How can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points?"

For his part, Pope Francis has made quick work of establishing himself of something of a papal maverick if not an outright radical. He was willing to address the claims of corruption at the Vatican Bank by naming a special commission to investigate the entity, and delved into the disturbing sex abuse scandals that have long plagued the church by naming a new commission to investigate the matter. He has made international news for exemplifying austerity by carrying his own luggage, dressing in plain robes rather than papal garb, living in a Vatican guest house rather than the Apostolic Palace, and even suspending a bishop in Germany for spending lavishly on church residences rather than ministering to the poor.

From his willingness to pose for photographs with youth visitors to the Vatican, to washing the feet of female convicts, and embracing a man with a deformed face, Pope Francis has softened the image of the Catholic Church, making it a more accessible and inclusive venue to many who viewed it as a distant and aging institution. On social issues that often resonate quite differently with younger generations (vis a vis the church establishment), Pope Francis has moderated the actual message of the Catholic Church. He has said of women who consider abortion due to poverty or rape, "Who can remain unmoved before such painful situations?" On the matter of homosexuality, he has said, "If a homosexual person is of good will and is in search of God, I am no one to judge."

But it has been his passionate criticism of the capitalist paradigm -- the very economic system that defines most of the West -- that marks Pope Francis as a trailblazer of sorts. Returning to his November 2013 exhortation mentioned above, Pope Benedict struck at the heart of the free market capitalist structure (also known as supply side economics or trickle down economics by conservatives). He declared the following: "Some people continue to defend trickle down theories, which assume that economic growth, encouraged by a free market, will inevitably succeed in bringing about greater justice and inclusiveness in the world. This opinion has never been confirmed by the facts."

For those unwilling to believe that the head of the Catholic Church and the leader of the Holy See would actually impugn the global free market system, Pope Francis removed all doubt by outright attacking "unfettered capitalism," which he cast as "a new tyranny." Indeed, he emphasized the church's obligation "to eliminate the structural causes of poverty." As noted by veteran Vatican analyst, John Thavis, Pope's Francis' views -- as expressed verbally and via "Evangelii Gaudium" -- could well be regarded as a "Magna Carta for church reform."

Perhaps it was not surprising that at the close of 2013, the pope who took the name of a humble saint -- Francis of Assisi, the 13th century patron saint of the poor -- was named as Time magazine's "Person of the Year."

Pope Francis and President Obama finally met for the first time in the heart of the Vatican in the last week of March 2014. President Obama's meeting with the pontiff occurred as part of a series of meetings with European leaders in the Netherlands and Belgium. Upon meeting Pope Francis, President Obama said, "It is a great honor. I'm a great admirer. Thank you so much for receiving me." President Obama also presented him with a variety of fruit and vegetable seeds used in the White House garden and invited the pope to visit that venue. Pope Francis responded affirmatively to the invitation saying, "For sure." For his part, Pope Francis gifted President Obama with two medals and a leather-bound copy of his aforementioned book, *Evangelii Gaudium*. President Obama received that particular gift, saying, "I actually will probably read this when I'm in the Oval Office, when I am deeply frustrated, and I am sure it will give me strength."

In addition to poverty -- a "simpatico" issue for the United States and Holy See leaders, the two men also discussed more contentious social issues, such as abortion and birth control, where the Obama administration is at odds with the Catholic Church. Also on the agenda were discussions of immigration reform and human trafficking where the two sides found far more concurrence.

Special Entry

U.S. refuses visa request for Iranian diplomat involved in 1979 hostage crisis

In April 2014, Iran put forth a controversial candidate -- Hamid Aboutalebi -- as its selection to be that country's ambassador to the United Nations. Aboutalebi was reported to be one of the individuals who stormed the United States embassy in Tehran in 1979, and then held 52 United States hostages for 444 days. It should be noted that Aboutalebi has insisted that he simply acted as a translator during the hostage crisis; however there was little likelihood that the United States was prepared to distinguish between "levels" of involvement in one of the darkest chapters of modern foreign relations history.

Given this background, the Obama administration in the United States made clear that Iran's choice of Aboutalebi to be ambassador to the United Nations was not acceptable. As stated by White House press secretary, Jay Carney, "The U.S. government has informed the government of Iran that this potential selection is not viable."

Adding to Aboutalebi's woes was a bill in the Senate that barred him from entering the United States due to his active involvement in the Iranian hostage crisis. Carney noted that the Senate bill was reflective of the White House's concerns, as he said, "We share the Senate's concerns regarding this case and find the potential nomination extremely troubling." A similar bill in the House of Representatives also barred Aboutalebi from entering the United States due to his role in the Iranian hostage crisis.

There were some hopes that the White House's stated position on Aboutalebi, augmented by the legislation in the United States Senate and House of Representatives, would together place pressure on Iran to withdraw the appointment. However, it was also possible that Iran would hold steady, thus placing the United States in the position of possibly refusing to process Iran's application for a visa for Aboutalebi.

To that end, Iran insisted that Aboutalebi had been selected for the post at the United Nations because of his diplomatic credentials and stood by his appointment. In response to Iran's intransigence, the Obama administration in the United States refused to grant Aboutalebi a visa, emphasizing its position that it would be impossible to grant diplomatic protection to a person who was involved in the flagrant deprivation of protection to American diplomats.

The move effectively prevented Aboutalebi from taking the post of ambassador at the United Nations, since its diplomatic offices are based in New York and on United States soil. Iran's mission to the United Nations condemned the move, casting it as "regrettable," and noting that the refusal to process Aboutalebi's visa was not in keeping with international law. Indeed, a 1947 agreement requires the United States to approve visa requests for designated diplomats from United Nations member states.

Nevertheless, as April 2014 entered its last week, the United Nations' Committee on Relations with the Host Country opted to take no action against the United States for its refusal to grant a visa to Aboutalebi. At home in the United States, President Barack Obama underlined his country's stance on the matter of individuals who act against the United States. He signed into law a bill that would prohibit anyone from entering the United States as a diplomatic representative who carried out espionage or terrorist activity and who may pose a threat to national security.

Note: It was to be seen if the dissonance over the United States' refusal to issue the Iranian diplomat a visa would affect the Iranian nuclear deal.

Special Entry

Middle East Peace Plan Falter

Summary

Since mid-July 2013, United States Secretary of State John Kerry has been traveling to the Middle East in another effort of "shuttle diplomacy" as he attempted to revitalize the peace process between Israelis and Palestinians. The process has been beset by challenges although Kerry's diligence has kept the peace process moving along through the spring of 2014. But by April 2013, the peace process hit significant obstacles and United States Secretary of State Kerry cancelled a scheduled trip to the Middle East. As the month was drawing to a close, the two rival Palestinian factions -- the Fatah wing of the Palestinian Liberation Organization and the extremist Islamist entity Hamas -- forged a reconciliation deal, essentially dooming the prospects of progress on peace. Indeed, Israel made it clear that it would exit the peace process unless the Palestinians abandoned their arrangement with Hamas.

Background

Going back to mid-2013 when the United States-sponsored attempt to pursue Middle East peace began, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu welcomed Secretary of State Kerry's efforts, and noted that the re-engagement with the Palestinians was of "vital and strategic interest" to Israel. Prime Minister Netanyahu intimated that challenges in the region from Iran and Syria demanded that the Israeli-Palestinian issue be settled for the long run. He said, "It is important in itself to try and end the conflict between us and the Palestinians and it is important in light of the challenges we face from Iran and Syria."

As part of an apparent good faith agreement, Israel announced plans to release a number of high value Palestinian prisoners who had been in jail for decades. The actual release of the prisoners would ensue on a phased basis. On the other side of the equation, the Palestinians committed to participating in "serious negotiations" over the course of a minimum nine-month period.

Contentious issues, such as the matter of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, did not appear to be part of the immediate agreements. However, they found their way into the initial discussions anyway. A senior Palestinian official was reported to have said, "Our position remains clear: resumption of negotiations should be based on the two-state solution and on the 1967 borders." But Israel made clear that it would not be accepting the Palestinians' demands that a future Palestinian state be crafted on the basis of 1967 borders. Israeli Strategic Affairs Minister Yuval Steinitz asserted: "There is no chance that we will agree to enter any negotiations that begin with defining territorial borders or concessions by Israel, nor a construction freeze."

As well, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu promised to subject any future peace deal with the Palestinians to a referendum. He said there was a need for a potential peace deal to be ratified directly by Israelis in order to "prevent a rift among the people." He continued, "Any agreement that is not approved by the people is not worthy of being signed." That being said, Netanyahu noted that peace was the ultimate objective for his country. He said, "Achieving peace is a crucial goal for Israel." Critics of Netanyahu said that subjecting such a major policy decision to a popular referendum would be akin to tacitly sabotaging the peace process; however, the actual proposition for a referendum (which was approved by the Israeli cabinet), would relate to a peace deal involving territorial concessions.

Secretary of State Kerry noted that both Israelis and Palestinians had an important foundation for the resumption of direct peace talks after an impasse that had lasted three years. Secretary of State Kerry's peace agenda was also supported by the Arab League, which indicated that it would also be interested in moving forward with some variant of its earlier "land for peace" deal that did not really gain traction about a decade earlier. The actual peace talks were set to begin at the end of July 2013. The White House said the task ahead would be "an enormous challenge."

On July 28, 2013, the United States Department of State announced that Israeli and Palestinian negotiators would resume peace talks on July 29, 2013. After those talks, United States Secretary of State John Kerry announced that the two sides had agreed to remain engaged in sustained peace negotiations for at least a nine-month period, with the goal of forging a peace treaty. Secretary Kerry explained: "The parties have agreed here today that all of the final-status issues, all of the core issues, and all other issues are all on the table for negotiation, and they are on the table with one simple goal: a view to ending the conflict, ending the claims." Speaking of the difficulty of the task at hand, Secretary Kerry said, "We all appreciate -- believe me, we appreciate the challenges ahead. But even as we look down the difficult road that is before us and consider the complicated choices that we face, we cannot lose sight of something that is often forgotten in the Middle East, and that is what awaits everybody with success."

The next round of talks would resume in mid-August 2013. Before those talks resumed, the contentious issue of Jewish settlements emerged when Israel approved the construction of close to 1,200 new Jewish homes in east Jerusalem as well as the West Bank. Palestinian negotiators said the move undermined Israel's good faith in the peace process. In an interview with Reuters, chief Palestinian negotiator, Saeb Erekat, said, "If the Israeli government believes that every week they're going to cross a red line by settlement activity, if they go with this behavior, what they're advertising is the unsustainability of the negotiations." But Israeli Housing Minister Uri Ariel defended the move saying that no country in the world would take orders on where its citizenry could build its homes. He said: "No country in the world takes orders from other countries [about] where it can build and where it can't."

Meanwhile, some political analysts have suggested that the settlement move had less to do with the government's attitude to the peace process, and was more about satisfying the right-wing base of the Likud-led Israeli coalition government. That hardline base has been outraged over the Israeli government's concession to release Palestinian

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prisoners. Rather than flagrantly undermining the peace process, the Israeli government very well may have been throwing the hard-right flank a proverbial "bone" ahead of the resumption of peace talks and just as 26 of the 100 Palestinian prisoners were released from captivity.

The peace process was challenged in mid-August 2013 when Hamas militants fired rockets from the Gaza Strip into Israeli territory, spurring the Israeli military to respond by launching an airstrike on Gaza. There were no casualties in either incident but the scenario was a reminder of the ongoing tensions on both sides at a time when peace talks were set to resume in Jerusalem.

It should be noted that on Aug. 22, 2013, militants fired rockets from southern Lebanese territory into Israel, yielding damage at a kibbutz close to the coastal town of Nahariya. One rocket was intercepted using the Iron Dome missile defense system. Israel did not place the blame on Lebanon-based Hezbollah, with whom Israel was engaged in a short war in 2006, but instead on global jihadists. It was unknown if this incident was in response to ongoing peace efforts.

Months of shuttle diplomacy by United States Secretary of State John Kerry followed but in November 2013, United States-brokered Middle East peace talks hit a snag. Palestinian negotiators resigned over a lack of progress and in protest over Israel's continued settlement in Palestinian areas.

As noted by chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat, "In reality, the negotiations stopped last week in light of the settlement announcements." At issue was the news that Israel announced plans for new Jewish settler homes in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Palestinian negotiators reacted negatively to that development by walked away from the peace negotiations.

United States Secretary of State John Kerry entered the fray to note that the settlement plan undermined the peace process, and he urged Israel to limit its settlement activity in the interests of creating "a climate for these talks to be able to proceed effectively." Secretary of State even went so far as to move away from the usual stance by the United States in characterizing settlement expansion as "unhelpful." In this case, the United States top diplomat cast the settlement activity as "illegitimate." He said, "Let me emphasize that the position of the United States is that we consider now, and have always considered, the settlements to be illegitimate."

Perhaps cognizant of the negative effect on the peace process that the settlement activity might have on negotiations, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu intervened into the brewing crisis. He said that he has no knowledge of the Israeli Housing Ministry's decision to grant construction permits and called for a halt on the settlement projects. That being said, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu blamed the Palestinians for the current obstacle to the peace process, accusing them of creating "artificial crises." Prime Minister Netanyahu nevertheless indicated his hopes that the talks could return to more positive footing thanks to the presence of United States Secretary of State John Kerry.

For his part, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas made clear that the resignation of his negotiating team did not signal a death knell to the peace process, and that he would be willing to appoint a new team, if needed. He said, "Either we can convince it to return, and we're trying with them, or we form a new delegation."

It should be noted that the Palestinian leader had his own problems in trying to meet the needs of a Palestinian people lacking a sense of political unity. The goal for the Palestinian political establishment has been the formation of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip; however, Gaza has long been under the control of the Islamist militant group, Hamas, which is hostile to the Jewish state and opposes peace with Israel. Hamas could hardly be regarded as a partner in the peace process.

By the first week of December 2013, United States Secretary of State John Kerry was back in Israel for peace talks. The United States' top diplomat, Secretary of State Kerry noted that progress had been made and security

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proposals were under consideration with an eye on addressing Israel's main concerns. He said, "We are closer than we have been in years in bringing about the peace and prosperity and security that all the people in this region deserve and have been yearning for." Striking a positive tone during a news conference with Secretary of State Kerry, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu said that Israel was ready for historic peace with the Palestinians based on a two-state solution.

In an ironic twist, despite the positive tone taken by the Israeli prime minister, the Israeli foreign minister suggested the peace talks were at a "dead end." Avigdor Lieberman argued that no deal was in sight, even indicating that the two sides were at an impasse as he said, "We are at a dead end." Although Lieberman was not playing a part in peace negotiations, he suggested that there was simply not enough trust between the two sides to hold credible negotiations. He said, "...Something simple like trust and reliability. The trust between the two sides is non-existent. It is hard to make peace when you don't believe the other side." On the issue of the prospects of a peace deal, Lieberman said, "My feeling is that there is great desire but I don't think it's possible. It is not easy to bridge the gaps. We are not even close to a deal, not even an interim one. That is my estimate."

Peace Process Falters

By mid-December 2013, the "mixed" report on the progress of peace negotiations continued. Palestinian negotiators accused United States Secretary of State Kerry of dooming the peace process by adopting the Israeli position on security arrangements, which they said would short-circuit all the other issues under consideration.

At issue was the Israeli demand that it retain a security presence along the Jordan River -- something the Palestinian Authority has rejected as a non-starter. One possible compromise might be the notion of an Israeli Jordan River presence for a limited period of time for 10 to 15 years.

Nevertheless, Israeli Justice Minister Tzipi Livni, Israel's chief negotiator, said that progress was being made although the process would be difficult and laborious. She also made it clear that Israel should not take positions that would impair the peace process -- such as the construction of settlement. During an address to students at Tel Aviv University, Livni said: "My choice is clear -- peace and security, and not settlements and isolation." She continued by noting, "We are capable of making a decision that will lead to two states," but the process "will be gradual, and its implementation will be gradual."

Disagreements over measures and obstacles to the peace process have continued to crop up at the start of 2014. The decision by Israel to continue to build Jewish settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem raised the ire of Palestinians, who questioned Israel's commitment to a long-term "two-state solution," given these moves. But Israel has also questioned the proposed security arrangement in the Jordan Valley between a future Palestinian state and Jordan (discussed above) charging that there remained a serious security demand for Israeli forces to retain its military presence in flashpoint areas.

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas dismissed the Israelis' demand that it retain a military presence in the West Bank for decades into the future on the basis of security reasons. Abbas said the Palestinian Authority would prefer a three-year transition period. Abbas said, "A transitional period cannot exceed three years, during which Israel can withdraw gradually. We are willing to allow a third party to take Israel's place, during and after withdrawal to soothe our concerns and Israel's." The vast distance between three years and several decades suggested that there was a major negotiating chasm yet to be bridged.

Meanwhile, bilateral tensions flared between Israel and its closest ally, the United States in January 2014. At issue were what the United States called the "offensive" comments of Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon regarding United States Secretary of State John Kerry. For his unrelenting efforts to advance peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians, Secretary of State Kerry was rewarded with insult instead of accolades.

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According to Israel's Yediot Ahronot newspaper, Israeli Defense Minister Yaalon said, "John Kerry -- who has come to us determined and is acting out of an incomprehensible obsession and messianic fervor -- cannot teach me anything about the conflict with the Palestinians." Yaalon further disparaged the security plan recommended by Kerry saying, the proposal presented to Israel was "not worth the paper it was written on."

The United States -- the one country that has stood steadfastly by Israel as most of the Western world moved to support the Palestinians' bid for recognition at the United Nations, and which has provided unrelenting security support to Israel for decades -- reacted with outrage. The White House in the United States condemned Yaalon's comments, characterizing them as "offensive" and rebuking Israel for this "inappropriate" stance, given the United States' support to Israel's security. White House spokesman Jay Carney, speaking on behalf of the government of the United States, further added the following condemnation: "Secretary Kerry and his team have been working non-stop in their efforts to promote a secure peace for Israel because of the deep concern the United States has, and the deep commitment the United States has for and to Israel's future and the Israeli people....To question his motives and distort his proposals is not something we would expect from the defense minister of a close ally."

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, perhaps realizing the extent of the bilateral damage, distanced himself from his own defense minister, saying, "Even when we have disagreements with the United States, they always pertain to the matter at hand, and are not personal." However, the Israeli defense minister was forced to issue an apology of his own. A statement issued by Yaalon's office read as follows: "The defense minister... apologizes if the secretary was offended by words attributed to the minister." Yaalon further added that he had no intention of "causing offense" and expressed gratitude for the United States' top diplomat's work in advancing peace, saying that Israel and the United States shared "a common goal" of advancing peace talks with the Palestinians and that his country appreciated "Secretary Kerry's many efforts towards that end."

Israel withdraws from peace process

By April 2014, the peace process was not simply faltering- it was on its symbolic "death bed." At issue was the decision by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to sign 15 international conventions pertaining to the Palestinians' attempt to be recognized as an independent country by the United Nations. The attempt to bypass the peace process and seek independent recognition at the United Nations has long been a contentious issue and one that the United States has opposed in favor of a negotiated settlement with both Israelis and Palestinians as stakeholders. For his part, Abbas said he was reacting to Israel's decision to issue 700 new tenders for settlements in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Gilo across the so-called Green Line (i.e. sometimes referred to as the "pre-1967 borders" but actually the line of demarcation set out in the 1949 Armistice Agreements between Israel and its neighbors following the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. Throughout, Israel's intermittent decisions to move forward with Jewish settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem have been cause for consternation among Palestinians, and have frustrated the United States as it attempts to broker peace.

From the point of view of the United States, which was acting as the peace negotiations broker, both the Israelis and Palestinians were acting in bad faith. As such, Secretary of State Kerry signaled his outrage over their actions by cancelling his visits to Jerusalem and Ramallah respectively. He stopped short of casting the renewed Middle East peace effort as being in a state of crisis, and instead issued the following call: "We urge both sides to show restraint." Secretary of State Kerry also indicated that the peace effort would continue for a month as he said, "Abbas has given me his word that he will continue to negotiate until end of April." However, Kerry also intimated that there was no hope for peace without the commitment of the Israelis and the Palestinians, as he added, "It is up to the parties to make decisions." Israel itself was making its stance known as it decided not to go forward with a planned release of Palestinian prisoners -- a central element of the confidence-building measures in the larger peace process.

The fate of the peace process moved in a negative direction on April 4, 2014, when Secretary of State Kerry noted that the Obama administration in Washington was evaluating whether or not to continue its role as a broker in the

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Middle East peace talks. During a visit to Morocco, Kerry warned there were limits to his country's efforts. He said, "This is not an open-ended effort, it never has been. It is reality check time, and we intend to evaluate precisely what the next steps will be."

Efforts were underway to try to rescue the peace process as April 2014 moved into its second week, although hopes for a breakthrough remained limited since the negotiations schedule was set to expire on April 30, 2014.

Those remaining hopes for a breakthrough were dimmed on April 23, 2014, when the Palestine Liberation Organization (largely dominated by the more moderate Fatah wing of Palestinian President Abbas) decided to enter into a reconciliation agreement with the extremist Palestinian entity, Hamas, which has refused to recognize the right of Israel to exist and has been responsible for countless terror attacks against Israel. The agreement would facilitate a unity Palestinian government.

For several years, the Palestine Liberation Organization and Hamas have been at odds with one another. The so-called "seven-year schism" resulted with the Palestine Liberation Organization holding sway in the more moderate West Bank and Hamas controlling the more extremist Palestinian elements in the Gaza Strip. Peace talks between Palestinians and Israelis have been involved the government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority, with Hamas essentially left out of the equation and uninterested in pursuing peace with a country it has expressly sought to destroy. Now, however, rapprochement between the two Palestinian sides was sure to augur further stress and pressure on an already fragile United States-sponsored peace process.

Not surprisingly, on April 24, 2014, one day after the announcement of the reconciliation deal between the Palestine Liberation Organization and Hamas, the government of Israel decided that it would suspend the peace talks. Following a six hour meeting of select members of the cabinet, Israel made it clear that under no circumstances was it prepared to negotiate with a Palestinian administration backed by a terrorist organization, such as Hamas.

A statement dispatched by the office of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu read as follows: "Whoever chooses the terrorism of Hamas does not want peace." The government of Israel also warned that there would be retaliatory measures implemented against the Palestinians for forming a unity government with the Gaza-based Hamas, which has made no secret of its rejection of the State of Israel. That statement read as such: "Israel will respond to unilateral Palestinian action with a series of measures."

For his part, Prime Minister Netanyahu observed that the reconciliation deal between the Palestinians "was signed even as Israel is making efforts to advance the negotiations with the Palestinians." Regarding that move as a betrayal of the peace process, Netanyahu added, "It is the direct continuation of the Palestinians' refusal to advance the negotiations." In interviews with both BBC News and MSNBC News, Netanyahu emphasized the fact that there would be no resumption of peace talks unless Abbas abandoned his pact with Hamas. On MSNBC News, during an interview with Andrea Mitchell, Netanyahu outlined the parameters for future talks with the Palestinians, saying, "I hope (Abbas) changes his mind...I will be there in the future if we have a partner that is committed to peace. Right now we have a partner that has just joined another partner committed to our destruction. No-go."

It should be noted that earlier in the month of April 2014, the peace process was plunged into a stalemate when the Palestinians signed 15 United Nations conventions and Israel decided not to move forward with the prisoner release. There were some suggestions that Palestinian President Abbas' decision to refocus on rapprochement with Hamas was a tactic intended to revitalize negotiations and force Israel into concessions. However, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu instead seized upon Abbas' move as a legitimate rationale for exiting the peace process entirely. It was no secret that Netanyahu and the right-wing flank of the political spectrum in Israel had little enthusiasm for the peace process as exemplified by the "offensive" comments by Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon regarding United States Secretary of State John Kerry's peace efforts (discussed above).

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On the other side of the equation, there was no sign that the Palestinians were willing to acknowledge the destructive impact of the reconciliation agreement with Hamas on the peace process. Instead, Wasel Abu Yousef, a Palestine Liberation Organization official, rejected what he called "Israeli and American threats."

A day later on April 26, 2014, Palestinian President Abbas issued a collection of confusing statements that only added to the perception that he had bungled the Palestinian side of the negotiations. He suggested that he was still prepared to move forward with peace talks with Israel, and insisted that his new unity government partner, Hamas, would renounce violence and recognize the state of Israel. But Hamas quickly refuted this claim, declaring that the militant entity "will not give any cover for any negotiations with the enemy." It was hardly the language of a group interested in a peace process with Israel and suggested that Abbas himself was not sufficiently cognizant of the actual political dynamics at play.

Meanwhile, the United States appeared to be weary of the tactics and bad faith employed by both Israel and the Palestinians in this latest peace effort, with President Barack Obama saying that it was time for a "pause."

The collapse of the peace process was thus to be regarded as an unfortunate blow to United States Secretary of State John Kerry and his peace envoy, Martin Indyk, who have diligently attempted to bridge the gaps between the two sides. At the start of the process, there was cautious optimism about the cause of advancing the peace agenda in the Middle East, and inching closer to achieving a two-state solution with Israel living peacefully beside an independent Palestine. Now, however, that mixture of anticipation and optimism had given way to anxiety and despondency.

Special Report

President Obama announces all combat troops will withdraw from Afghanistan in 2016; outlines doctrine of multilateralism and restraint on foreign policy; U.S. prisoner of war released in exchange

President Obama announces all combat troops will withdraw from Afghanistan in 2016; outlines doctrine of multilateralism and restraint on foreign policy; U.S. prisoner of war released in exchange

On May 27, 2014, United States President Obama announced that a complete withdrawal of American combat troops from Afghanistan would be completed at the end of 2016. That new "date-certain" timeline would be an extension of a previous 2014 exit schedule announced by President Obama in the past, but would nevertheless bring a conclusion to the United States military engagement in Afghanistan, which commenced following the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington D.C.

President Obama's new schedule would call for a pullout of the majority of United States troops from Afghanistan at the end of 2014, but would leave in place 9,800 troops in that country through 2015, when that number would be reduced by half. The remaining troops would then be withdrawn in 2016. The new schedule, including the decision to keep in place a select number of combat troops through 2016 was due to the fact that President Obama wanted to see further training for Afghan security forces along with the ability to launch counterterrorism missions in the interests of maintaining the progress made in a war that has gone on for more than a dozen years and left more than 2,000 United States troops dead.

Of course, this plan would be contingent upon the signing of a new bilateral security agreement between the United States and Afghanistan. With the increasingly eccentric President Hamid Karzai at the helm in Afghanistan, there has been no progress in forging such an agreement. However, with fresh leadership in the offing following the conclusion of the 2014 presidential elections in Afghanistan, there were indications that a new Afghan government would be highly interested in signing onto such an agreement.

It should be noted that while liberals in the United States were frustrated that a complete exit from Afghanistan -- and an end to a war that had been ongoing for more than a decade -- would not come at the end of 2014, some

Republicans in Congress criticized President Obama's exit schedule from Afghanistan. For conservatives, such as Senators John McCain, Lindsey Graham, and Kelly Ayotte, issuing a date-certain deadline was tantamount to surrender. The three Republicans issued a statement that read as follows: "The president's decision to set an arbitrary date for the full withdrawal of U.S. troops in Afghanistan is a monumental mistake and a triumph of politics over strategy."

But President Obama was vociferous in his stance that the engagement of United States military forces in Afghanistan was coming to an end, and the specific mission in Afghanistan was on the verge of being completed. According to the United States president, it was time for Afghans to take responsibility for their country. As noted by President Obama in his drawdown announcement from the White House's Rose Garden, "We have to recognize that Afghanistan will not be a perfect place, and it is not America's responsibility to make it one."

President Obama made clear that significant progress had been made in the years since the 2001 terror attacks -- a time when Afghanistan was the locus of the terrorist Islamist group, al-Qaida. Indeed, United States military forces since that time have carried out a relentless assault on the terrorist group, eliminating its leadership, and preventing Afghanistan from being used as a safe haven and a base for attacks against the United States. With the death of Osama bin Laden -- a perilous operation authorized by President Obama himself in 2011 -- the United States president could conceivably argue that the time to exit Afghanistan had come. However, the president was clearly looking towards a phased withdrawal, and one on a somewhat more protracted timeline than he had indicated in recent years. To this end, he said: "Now we're finishing the job we've started."

Another bone of contention for Republicans came as a result of a deal that secured the release of a United States prisoner of war -- Army Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl -- from Afghan militants. Because Bergdahl was released in exchange for five Afghan detainees from Guantanamo, several Republican lawmakers attacked the administration for "negotiating with terrorists."

However, as noted by National Security Advisor Susan Rice in an interview with CBS News, Bergdahl was not actually a "hostage," but a "prisoner of war, taken on the battlefield," and that the United States had a "sacred obligation" to free such prisoners of war. In an interview with CNN, Rice also clarified that the United States did not, in fact, negotiate with the Haqqani network, but with the government of Qatar, which was responsible for holding the five Afghans for a period of one year. Rice also addressed Republicans' complaint that the Obama administration did not provide Congress with the required 30-day notice required for releasing prisoners of war, noting that Congress had already been notified that negotiations intended to secure Bergdahl's release were in process. Several member of Congress -- from across party lines -- complained that limited communications years prior on the matter of a prisoner exchange did not constitute a proper notification.

It should be noted that the questionable circumstances of Bergdahl's disappearance in Afghanistan fueled accusations that he was a military deserter and thus, undeserving of the efforts to bring him home. In truth, however, the precise circumstances remained murky and would be the subject of military investigation, with the possibility of court martial, dishonorable discharge, or other legal measures in the offing.

Those pathways were yet to be taken since the immediate discussion in the American political purview was whether the return of one prisoner of war was worth the release of five Afghan detainees (albeit into Qatari custody for one year). Also in the political purview was the question of whether the negotiations brokered by the government of Qatar, which led to the prisoner exchange deal, constituted "negotiations with terrorists" as alleged by many Republicans.

For his part, President Barack Obama made no apologies for the deal, saying "I make absolutely no apologies for making sure we get a young man back to his parents." He continued, "We had a prisoner of war whose health had deteriorated and ... we saw an opportunity and we seized it, and I make no apologies for that." In answer to the question of whether the price of a prisoner exchange was worth the security risks posed, especially if Bergdahl did

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turn out to be a deserter, President Obama pointed to a guiding principle of the United States that "we do not leave anybody wearing the American uniform behind" and emphasizing, "We don't condition whether we make the effort to get them back."

Meanwhile, with his Afghanistan exit schedule announced, President Obama used a speech to graduates at the United States Military Academy at West Point to outline his foreign policy for the remainder of his second term in office. The two key principles of the Obama doctrine of foreign policy enshrined in that speech could be understood by the words: restraint and multilateralism.

Looking to the future, President Obama wanted to see the United States work through international frameworks to solve global problems, saying, "Skeptics often downplay the effectiveness of multilateral action. For them, working through international institutions, or respecting international law, is a sign of weakness. I think they're wrong." Pointing to progress in using harsh international sanctions to drive Iran to the negotiating table over its nuclear program, President Obama could certainly show evidence of success in this realm. While the crisis in Ukraine was yet to see the effects of international action, President Obama made note of the international community's largely unified condemnation of Russia's annexation of Crimea.

President Obama had a more difficult time showing how international action and multilateral venues had done much good to resolve the civil war in Syria. Indeed, the United Nations -- one of the two international institutions praised by President Obama (the other being NATO) -- has proven to be largely ineffectual in addressing the Syrian conflict due to the competing political agendas of its veto wielding permanent members of the Security Council. Nevertheless, as noted by President Obama, multilateral negotiations and international action compelled Syria to destroy its arsenal of chemical weapons.

While not foreclosing unilateral force in situations where vigorous diplomacy might be exhausted, President Obama emphasized the strength of multilateral action and international consensus. He declared: "We must broaden our tools to include diplomacy and development; sanctions and isolation; appeals to international law and -- if just, necessary, and effective -- multilateral military action." The United States president continued, "We must do so because collective action in these circumstances is more likely to succeed, more likely to be sustained, and less likely to lead to costly mistakes." Those "costly mistakes" were being interpreted as a reference to the Iraq war waged by the previous Bush administration. Indeed, that war raised the ire of many countries across the world, was largely condemned as a tragic episode of American adventurism abroad, and damaged the United States standing internationally.

Explaining the United States' continued interest in Afghanistan, President Obama noted that extremism and terrorism remained key concerns on the national security front. He said, "The most direct threat to America at home and abroad remains terrorism." However, President Obama called for multilateral and international approach to addressing the threat posed by terrorism saying, "I believe we must shift our counter-terrorism strategy -- drawing on the successes and shortcomings of our experience in Iraq and Afghanistan -- to more effectively partner with countries where terrorist networks seek a foothold." He continued, "We need a strategy that matches this diffuse threat; one that expands our reach without sending forces that stretch our military thin, or stir up local resentments."

In a rebuke to neoconservatives at home intent on going after all extremists globally, President Obama said, "A strategy that involves invading every country that harbors terrorist networks is naïve and unsustainable." He continued that such a heavy-handed strategy likely fueled further terrorism. As noted by President Obama, the United States "must not create more enemies than we take off the battlefield."

Clearly, the Obama doctrine's internationalist orientation, marked by military restraint, was a sharp departure from the neoconservative path, with its hegemonic ambitions that seeks to imprint the United States stamp on the larger world. It was to be seen if his doctrine of restraint and multilateralism would present a continuing influence past 2016 when President Obama left office, especially in a world where extremists and Jihadists continue to pose serious threats. Conversely, it was to be seen if the Obama doctrine would be transposed into a fleeting

conception, such as the Bush doctrine of "regime change," which in the aftermath of that administration has been eschewed by a war-weary United States citizenry, tired of costly and lengthy engagements across the world.

Special Report:

United States captures top suspect in Benghazi embassy attack

In mid-June 2014, as the result of a secret operation ordered by President Barack Obama, United States Special Operations forces captured Ahmed Abu Khattala, the suspected leader of the 2012 attack on the United States' diplomatic mission in Benghazi, Libya, that resulted in the death of Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and other Americans. Khattala was removed from Libya and would ultimately face justice in the United States.

The capture of Khattala was the culmination of a two-year long investigation, which was made more difficult as a result of the politically tumultuous landscape in Libya. At home in the United States, Republicans have long sought to make political hay of the Benghazi tragedy, trying to link it to poor handling of embassy security by the Obama White House and then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. It should be noted that a commission led by diplomatic veteran, Thomas R. Pickering, and Admiral Mike Mullen, the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, concluded that while there were "systemic failures" and "management deficiencies" by State Department officials in protecting the Benghazi diplomatic mission, there was simply no evidence of a cover-up by the Obama administration, as alleged by some Republicans.

The plans for the capture of Khattala was in the works for some time but required approval from President Obama whose administration wanted to ensure that all the evidence and witness testimony was intact for a successful prosecution in the future. Also of concern to the Obama administration was the question of whether a United States commando operation on Libyan soil would present complications for the fragile Libyan government dealing with ongoing political chaos. Now, however, in June 2014, President Obama made the decision to go forward with the operation, which -- much like the operation to capture or kill Osama bin Laden in a raid into Pakistani territory -- also ended in success. This time, however, the suspect was apprehended alive and would face justice in the United States.

A statement from the United States Pentagon made it clear that all special operations personnel had departed Libya safely with Khattala in custody. That statement read as follows: "All U.S. personnel involved in the operation have safely departed Libya."

President Obama, for his part, noted that the capture of Khattala was a partial fulfillment of his promise to locate those responsible for the attack on the United States diplomatic mission in Benghazi, and bring them to justice. He said, "Since the deadly attacks on our facilities in Benghazi, I have made it a priority to find and bring to justice those responsible for the deaths of four brave Americans." Speaking of the effort by United States intelligence, law enforcement, and military personnel to locate and seize, President Obama said, "Because of their courage and professionalism, this individual will now face the full weight of the American justice system."

It should be noted that Dr. Susan Rice -- part of President Obama's national security team and the ambassador to the United Nations at the time in 2012 -- was pilloried by Republicans for saying during interviews that the Benghazi embassy attack was motivated by the (aforementioned) video that raised the ire of Muslims across the Middle East. Republicans said she was not casting the attack as terrorism even though President Obama himself characterized the Benghazi attack as such during a speech in the White House rose garden shortly after the bloodshed.

Fast-forward two years to 2014, and in a report by the New York Times, Khattala was on the record describing the reasoning for the attack as being anger over the infamous video that mocked Islam. The New York Times article noted the following: "On the day of the attack, Islamists in Cairo had staged a demonstration outside the United

States Embassy there to protest an American-made online video mocking Islam, and the protest culminated in a breach of the embassy's walls — images that flashed through news coverage around the Arab world. As the attack in Benghazi was unfolding a few hours later, Mr. Abu Khattala told fellow Islamist fighters and others that the assault was retaliation for the same insulting video, according to people who heard him."

The article continued with this other assertion by Khattala that he was not only responsible for the attack but had been driven to take revenge for the insulting video: "But Mr. Abu Khattala told other Libyans in private conversations during the night of the attack that he was moved to attack the diplomatic mission to take revenge for an insult to Islam in an American-made online video."

For Republicans, this news would likely blunt their continued attacks on Rice, who was now President Obama's national security adviser; instead, their attention remained on lingering accusations that the White House had concealed key details related to the Benghazi attack, along with displeasure that Khattala was being brought to the United States to face justice instead of being isolated at Guantanamo Bay.

U.S. general killed in Afghanistan ahead of departure of United States troops

On Aug. 5, 2014, an Afghan army soldier opened fire on international troops at the well-fortified British military base to the west of Kabul. The attack at Camp Qargha resulted with the killing of a United States army general, injuries to a German general, and the wounding of several other soldiers. The assailant was ultimately killed by a bodyguard but not before he was able to carry out his bloody assault. While the Afghan army recruit who opened fire on coalition officers was not revealed to be carrying out a Taliban operation, the Islamic extremist group nonetheless congratulated him post-humously for his efforts to hurt coalition forces operating in Afghanistan.

The general who died was identified as General Harold Greene -- the deputy commanding general for the Combined Security Transition Command, who was tasked with preparing for the withdrawal of coalition troops from Afghanistan. The death of General Harold Greene marked the highest level fatality of a member of the United States military since the start of the war in Afghanistan.

Special Entry

U.S. strike kills leader of al-Shabab terrorist group; African peacekeeping forces make gains

Joint African peacekeeping and Somali forces were making gains against Islamist terrorist group, al-Shabaab, in the southern town of Bulamareer, located close to the Islamist terrorists' stronghold of Barawe. The joint operation also saw success by recapturing territory in the surrounding areas of the Lower Shabelle region.

The effort in late August 2014 in Bulamareer -- about 50 miles to the north of Barawe -- and the surrounding region was part of an overall operation that started earlier in 2014 and had been aimed at repelling al-Shabab from towns where they have held sway. Of particular concern had been the southern part of the country, which was largely been under al-Shabab's control.

In recent times, al-Shabab has transformed from being a Somalia-focused Islamic insurgency into an extremist Jihadist entity that carries out brutal terrorist attacks both at home and in neighboring countries. While international forces operating in Somalia have placed pressure on al-Shabab, it has aligned itself with al-Qaida, taken advantage of Somalia's weak government, and relentlessly worked to destabilize Somalia the Horn of Africa.

At the start of September 2014, the United States carried out air strikes in Somalia targeting the leader of al-Shabab, Ahmed Abdi Godane. The operation used both manned and unmanned aircraft. Days after the United States Pentagon confirmed the operation, Pentagon Press Secretary Rear Admiral John Kirby confirmed that the primary target -- Godane -- had been successfully eliminated in the strikes on an encampment and convoy of vehicles to the south of Mogadishu.

For several years, Godane -- also known as Mukhtar Abu Zubair -- has stood near the top of the United States Department of State's most wanted list. He was radicalized in Sudan and Pakistan, and reportedly fought in Afghanistan, before becoming the al-Shabab's leader in 2008. A year later, he officially announced al-Shabab's alliance and allegiance to the notorious terror enclave, al-Qaida. In 2012, the United States placed a \$7 million bounty on his head. In recent years, al-Shabab's activities have expanded beyond Somalia's borders to neighboring countries with an increasingly Islamist Jihadist agenda. Of note was the horrific terror attack at a Kenyan shopping mall in 2013.

While the United States has not been known to be actively involved in operations in Somalia, it has nonetheless supported African Union forces tasked with repelling al-Shabab from Mogadishu. As well, the United States has gone after high value al-Shabab targets in Somalia before. To that end, in October 2013, United States special forces raided terrorist enclaves in Somalia, with the objective of going after a "high value" terrorist from al-Shabab. Because al-Shabab fighters responded with heavy fire, United States commandos chose to retreat from the scene although there was some suggestion that one al-Shabab terrorist was killed. It was later revealed that the target of that action was Abdukadir Mohamed Abdukadir, a Kenyan al-Shabab commander also known by the name "Ikrima."

Now, in September 2014, the United States could claim victory for eliminating one of the world's most important terrorists, and specifically, the leader of al-Shabab -- Godane. In this way, the successful strike operation struck a heavy blow to the al-Shabab terror group, which did not have an obvious successor to Godane.

In Somalia, President Hassan Sheikh Mohamed used the opportunity to urge al-Shabab to lay down arms. He announced a 45-day amnesty for terrorists aligned with the group to renounce their association in al-Shabab. It was to be seen if al-Shabab would respond affirmatively to the offer, or simply regroup and re-emerge once again. Last British combat troops exit Afghanistan and U.S. forces begin phased withdrawal even as Taliban continues its wave of violence

On Oct. 13, 2014, a suicide car bomber struck a convoy carrying foreign nationals along the Jalalabad Road -- a major thoroughfare in Afghanistan's capital of Kabul upon which a United Nations housing compound and a United States military base were located. At least one person was reported to have died and several others were injured as a result of the attack. The Taliban, via a spokesperson Zabihullah Majahid, soon claimed responsibility for the bloodshed. The violence was evidence that security in Afghanistan continued to be a challenge, especially given the proposed exit of international troops from Afghanistan.

Less than a week later on Oct. 18, 2014, those security challenges were illustrated by two deadly attacks by the Taliban in Afghanistan. Logar province in eastern Afghanistan was the site of one incident of violence where Taliban terrorists targeted security posts, killing at least four soldiers. Ghor province in central Afghanistan was the venue for the second incidence of bloodshed when as many as 500 Taliban terrorists attacked two villages. The level of casualties were unknown at the time of writing but promised to be disturbing. The attacks underlined the challenges posed in rescuing Afghanistan from the threat of terrorism, especially with a withdrawal of United States troops from the country in the offing.

In late October 2014, United States and United Kingdom forces exited their main military bases in Helmand province, effectively turning security over to Afghan forces. While the complete withdrawal of United States forces would not ensue until 2016, a phased draw-down was certainly taking place and would continue over the course of the next year. At the same time, this particular exit from Helmand was significant for the United Kingdom as it marked the withdrawal of the last British combat forces from Afghanistan after being in the Afghan combat zone for more than a decade. For its part, the Afghan military said that it was prepared to take responsibility for the security of the country, pointing to the fact that increasingly, support from United States and United Kingdom forces had become more psychological than in the battlefield.

U.S. and South African hostages killed after failed rescue attempt in Yemen

In the latter part of 2014, United States and South African hostages were killed following a failed rescue attempt by United States SEAL Team 6 special forces in the southern province of Shabwah in Yemen. The rescue operation was actually launched to rescue Luke Somers, a United States photojournalist, who was being held by al-Qaida in Yemen. United States forces were unaware that Somers was being held along with a South African national, Pierre Korkie. Both men were killed by their al-Qaida captors as the rescue effort unfolded.

South African sources said that the timing was unfortunate since there was a clandestine effort underway to pay a ransom to secure Korkie's release. However, United States sources noted that they were unaware of that Korkie was being held with Somers, or that there was a South African relief organization's plan afoot to secure his release by paying a ransom. Instead, they were focused on the rescue operation, which was authorized by President Barack Obama because of prevailing fears that Somers' life was in "imminent danger."

While the operation by United States special forces ended in failure and the loss of life, the United States defended its policy of trying to rescue hostages held by Islamic militants. The United States also defended its policy of neither negotiating with terrorists, nor paying ransoms to kidnappers, both of which the United States has said only facilitates further acts of terrorism. A statement by President Obama read as follows: "As this and previous hostage rescue operations demonstrate, the United States will spare no effort to use all of its military, intelligence and diplomatic capabilities to bring Americans home safely, wherever they are located."

U.S. air strike kills al-Shabab militant

Note that at the end of December 2014, United States air strikes in Somalia reportedly targeted and killed an al-Shabab leader. Abdishakur, who was also known as Tahlil, led the Amniyat unit of the terror group deemed to be responsible for a spate of suicide attacks in Mogadishu.

NATO formally ends its 13-year combat mission in Afghanistan

The close of 2014 marked the conclusion of NATO's 13-year long combat mission in Afghanistan, which began in late 2001 following the horrific terror attacks by al-Qaida on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in the United States. While the NATO combat mission had come to an end, a residual force of approximately 12,000 NATO troops were expected to remain in Afghanistan as part of a non-combat operation. The new operation, referred to as "Resolute Support," was set to begin on Jan. 1, 2015, and was aimed at supporting local Afghan troops. As the NATO flag for the International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) was lowered during a ceremony marking the occasion in the Afghan capital of Kabul, mission commander General John Campbell paid tribute to the United States-led NATO effort, saying, "We have lifted the Afghan people out of the darkness of despair and given them hope for the future." Meanwhile, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg released a statement that read as follows: "The security of Afghanistan will be fully in the hands of the country's 350,000 Afghan soldiers and police. But Nato allies, together with many partner nations, will remain to train, advise and assist them." The task ahead for local Afghan troops would be formidable with 2014 being marked as a particularly bloody year in the war against the Taliban and other Islamist extremists in the region.

United States slaps sanctions on North Korea in response to alleged cyber-attack on Sony

At the start of 2015, the United States imposed new sanctions on North Korea in response to an alleged cyber-attack on Sony Pictures Entertainment. Of note was the fact that United States sanctions against North Korea were already in place as a result of Pyongyang's provocative and dangerous nuclear program. This new tranche of sanctions was being imposed as a retributive measure promised by the Obama White House in response to a cyber-attack on Sony Pictures, which the United States government charged was carried out by agents of North Korea. While some cyber-experts have cast doubts on the claim that North Korea was behind the cyber-attack, the United States government has held steadfastly to that claim.

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The cyber-attack on Sony Pictures began when the so-called Guardians of Peace hacked and released data from Sony's computers, exposing embarrassing electronic mail correspondence. The group soon took its attack to new heights, threatening theaters intending to screen Sony's satirical comedy, *The Interview*, which featured a humorous assassination plot against the leader of North Korea. Those threats caused Sony to cancel its cinema release of the movie, ultimately earning the rebuke of United States President Obama who suggested that decision by Sony was "a mistake." To that end, Sony later reversed its decision and released the film in some theaters and in online formats.

Meanwhile, North Korea's response to the hacking drama plaguing Sony was confusing. Powers in that country at first praised the cyber-attack, casting it as a "righteous deed," and even implying it might be the work of its own agents; later, they denied culpability altogether. However, as noted above, the United States made clear that it placed the blame for the Sony cyber-attack on North Korea, with Obama administration officials warning of a "proportional response" in the offing.

By late 2014, there was speculation that a disruption or "blackout" of Internet service in North Korea may have been part of the package of consequences promised by the Obama administration against North Korea. However, the United States government refused to acknowledge whether or not it was responsible for cutting off Internet connectivity in North Korea.

By contrast, at the start of 2015, the Treasury Department in the United States was utterly forthright when it publicly named three entities as well as 10 North Korean government officials in its sanctions announcement. The United States Treasury's list of targets included individuals working in Iran, Syria, China, Russia and Namibia. The three entities covered by the sanctions were as follows: The Reconnaissance General Bureau -- North Korea's primary intelligence organization; the Korea Mining Development Trading Corporation (Komid) -- North Korea's primary arms dealer; and Korea Tanguin Trading Corporation -- a defense research agency. It should be noted that the targets of the new sanctions were not necessarily linked to the cyber-hacking attack on Sony Pictures. Instead, it appeared that the United States was simply augmenting its sanctions regime already in place against North Korea. The intent was to isolate North Korea's defense industry as a deterrent against future cyber-attacks.

For his part, President Barack Obama signed an executive order on Jan. 2, 2015, officializing the sanctions, while the White House released a statement that read as follows: "We take seriously North Korea's attack that aimed to create destructive financial effects on a U.S. company and to threaten artists and other individuals with the goal of restricting their right to free expression. Today's actions are the first aspect of our response." The White House added, "This step reflects the ongoing commitment of the United States to hold North Korea accountable for its destabilizing, destructive and repressive actions, particularly its efforts to undermine U.S. cyber-security and intimidate U.S. businesses and artists exercising their right of freedom of speech."

U.S. President delivers annual State of the Union address to joint session of Congress

President Barack Obama delivered his annual State of the Union address on Jan. 20, 2015. For the first time since becoming president, Barack Obama was able to say in his annual report to a joint session of Congress that the state of the union was strong. His opening remarks were as follows:

"Tonight, after a breakthrough year for America, our economy is growing and creating jobs at the fastest pace since 1999. Our unemployment rate is now lower than it was before the financial crisis. More of our kids are graduating than ever before; more of our people are insured than ever before; we are as free from the grip of foreign oil as we've been in almost 30 years. Tonight, for the first time since 9/11, our combat mission in Afghanistan is over. Six years ago, nearly 180,000 American troops served in Iraq and Afghanistan. Today, fewer than 15,000 remain. And we salute the courage and sacrifice of every man and woman in this 9/11 Generation who has served to keep us safe. We are humbled and grateful for your service. America, for all that we've endured; for all the grit and hard work required to come back; for all the tasks that lie ahead, know this: The shadow of crisis has passed, and the State of the Union is strong."

On the economy, the president took something of a victory lap, reminding Americans that the United States was in better shape than its allies across the Atlantic and elsewhere. To this end, he said, "Since 2010, America has put more people back to work than Europe, Japan, and all advanced economies combined." Still President Obama argued for key moves in the economic arena including the need for need affordable, high-quality childcare, which he insisted was not a woman's issue but a "national economic priority." The president also demanded that the minimum wage be raised, saying, "I say this: If you truly believe you could work full-time and support a family on less than \$15,000 a year, go try it. If not, vote to give millions of the hardest-working people in America a raise."

On energy security, the president paid homage to significant energy strides, saying: "And today, America is number one in oil and gas. America is number one in wind power. Every three weeks, we bring online as much solar power as we did in all of 2008. And thanks to lower gas prices and higher fuel standards, the typical family this year should save \$750 at the pump."

On foreign policy, in a rebuke to the neoconservative policy of his predecessor George W. Bush, which landed the United States in a protracted war in Iraq, President Obama advocated for a smart approach. He said, "When we make rash decisions, reacting to the headlines instead of using our heads... then we risk getting drawn into unnecessary conflicts... I believe in a smarter kind of American leadership. We lead best when we combine military power with strong diplomacy; when we leverage our power with coalition building; when we don't let our fears blind us to the opportunities that this new century presents. That's exactly what we're doing right now – and around the globe, it is making a difference."

Championing his smart sanctions approach to dealing with Russian aggression, President Obama delivered a reproach to his Republican critics, saying, "Last year, as we were doing the hard work of imposing sanctions along with our allies, some suggested that Mr. Putin's aggression was a masterful display of strategy and strength. Well, today, it is America that stands strong and united with our allies, while Russia is isolated, with its economy in tatters."

President Obama also highlighted his landmark shift in policy towards Cuba, as the United States pursued re-engagement with that country, saying, "In Cuba, we are ending a policy that was long past its expiration date. When what you're doing doesn't work for fifty years, it's time to try something new. Our shift in Cuba policy has the potential to end a legacy of mistrust in our hemisphere; removes a phony excuse for restrictions in Cuba; stands up for democratic values; and extends the hand of friendship to the Cuban people."

The president also reserved the right to continue to go after terrorists across the globe, asserting the following: "We will continue to hunt down terrorists and dismantle their networks, and we reserve the right to act unilaterally, as we've done relentlessly since I took office to take out terrorists who pose a direct threat to us and our allies."

On the environment, President Obama swept away the conservative objections to addressing climate change as he declared: "2014 was the planet's warmest year on record. Now, one year doesn't make a trend, but this does – 14 of the 15 warmest years on record have all fallen in the first 15 years of this century. I've heard some folks try to dodge the evidence by saying they're not scientists; that we don't have enough information to act. Well, I'm not a scientist, either. But you know what – I know a lot of really good scientists at NASA, and NOAA, and at our major universities. The best scientists in the world are all telling us that our activities are changing the climate, and if we do not act forcefully, we'll continue to see rising oceans, longer, hotter heat waves, dangerous droughts and floods, and massive disruptions that can trigger greater migration, conflict, and hunger around the globe. The Pentagon says that climate change poses immediate risks to our national security. We should act like it."

These aspects aside, the line of the night came when President Obama noted that he would not be running again for office. Republicans reacted with laughter, cheers and applause, but the president ad libbed a zinger that was not included in the transcript, as prepared for delivery. The president quipped: "I have no more campaigns to run... I know because I won both of them."

A full transcript of the State of the Union -- as prepared for delivery -- can be found at the White House website: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/20/remarks-president-state-union-address-january-20-2015>

Note: Freshman Senator Jodi Ernst of Iowa delivered the Republican response.

United Kingdom and United States announce plans for counter-terrorism cooperation

During a state visit to the United States, United Kingdom Prime Minister David Cameron joined his American counterpart, President Barack Obama, in announcing a plan for counter-terrorism cooperation. Among the measures to be implemented were the establishment of a counter-terrorism task force and the deployment of more drones aimed at targeting the terror group, Islamic State. In the effort to track terrorists, the two leaders were advocating greater cooperation with technology companies, with an eye on accessing encrypted communications that terrorists may use to plot attacks.

The leaders of the two countries emphasized the closeness of the trans-Atlantic partnership, with both men offering fulsome assurances of their personal friendship as well as the strength and depth of the United Kingdom-United States alliance. Prime Minister Cameron and President Obama made clear that their two countries were committed to sharing information, intelligence, and expertise in the effort to prevent Islamist radicalism and to address "violent extremism" in their respective countries.

Speaking of the threat posed by Islamist terrorists in the wake of the Paris attacks, Prime Minister Cameron noted that his country, along with the United States, faced a "poisonous and fanatical ideology." He said: "We face a poisonous and fanatical ideology that wants to pervert one of the world's major religions, Islam, and create conflict, terror and death. With our allies we will confront it wherever it appears." President Obama struck a similar tone, saying that his country would work with the United Kingdom and other allies "seamlessly to prevent attacks and defeat these terrorist networks." Explaining the challenge posed by radicalized extremists who carry out acts of terror, he said "This is a problem that causes great heartache and tragedy and destruction. But it is one that ultimately we are going to defeat."

U.S. President Obama and Indian PM Modi announce new era in bilateral friendship and cooperation

During his official visit to the world's largest democracy -- India -- United States President Barack Obama planted a tree and laid a wreath at the memorial for Mahatma Gandhi at Raj Ghat in New Delhi. Paying his respects to the father of independent India, President Obama paused for contemplation at Gandhi's memorial, and placed two handfuls of rose petals on top. President Obama also was the main guest at India's Republic Day celebrations where he was warmly received by the enthusiastic Indian people.

It should be noted that Indian Prime Minister Modi broke protocol to personally receive President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama as they arrived at the airport in New Dehli. Prime Minister Narendra Modi hailed President Obama's historic visit, noting that India and the United States were now embarking on a "new journey" of cooperation. President Obama struck a similar tone, saying that his country welcomed its friendship with India.

In the realm of foreign relations, on Jan. 25, 2015, President Obama issued a joint announcement with Indian Prime Minister Modi on civilian nuclear cooperation. At issue was a breakthrough pact that would facilitate the supply of American civilian nuclear technology to India. Also on the agenda were new renewable energy options. United States Ambassador Richard Verma said: "It opens the door for US and other companies to come forward and actually help India towards developing nuclear power and support its non carbon-based energy production." The United States and India also agreed to cooperate on fighting terrorism.

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At the start of February 2015, Indian officials said that the "breakthrough" civilian nuclear deal could be finalized later in the year. United States officials have said that two items were pending before the agreement could be finalized:

1. India would have to ratify a United Nations nuclear convention -- the International Atomic Energy Agency's Convention on Supplementary Compensation for Nuclear Damage (CSC); and
2. An insurance concord would have to be established preventing suppliers from being subject to draconian lawsuits in the event of nuclear disasters.

U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Johnson warns of threat to Western shopping centers by Somalia-based terror group al-Shabab

On Feb. 22, 2015, United States Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson issued a warning to Westerners regarding possible attacks on shopping centers by the Somalia-based terror group, al-Shabab. At issue was the emergence of a videotaped message from al-Shabab urging its supporters to carry out attacks at shopping malls in the United States, Canada, and the United States. An al-Sahab terrorist with a British accent specifically mentioned three large shopping malls -- the Mall of America in Minnesota, the West Edmonton Mall in Canada, and Oxford Street in London -- as desirable targets of attack.

Of significance was the fact that al-Shabab had already carried out a horrific and brutal massacre at the Westgate shopping mall in the Kenyan capital of Nairobi in 2013, killing close to 70 people. Given this record of bloodthirsty violence, the United States homeland security chief was taking this new threat from al-Shabab seriously. In an interview with CNN, Secretary Johnson said, "Anytime a terrorist organisation calls for an attack on a specific place, we've got to take that seriously." He further noted that there was a "new phase" of terrorism looming in which attacks would increasingly come from "independent actors in their homelands."

FBI arrests two Uzbeks and one Kazakh national of seeking to join Islamic State and plotting to kill President Obama

In the last week of February 2015, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in United States arrested and charged three foreign nationals with conspiracy to provide material support to a foreign terrorist organization. According to the criminal complaint, the three men sought to join the notorious terror group, Islamic State. The criminal complaint also alleged that the three men had determined that if they were unable to travel to Syria to join Islamic State, they would shift their focus and carry out attacks in the United States, including the attempted assassination of President Barack Obama.

The men -- Abdurasul Juraboev and Abror Habibov of Uzbekistan, and Akhror Saidakhmetov of Kazakhstan, came to the attention of federal authorities due to their postings on a Uzbek language website. Federal agents said that Juraboev purchased an airplane ticket to travel from New York to Istanbul, presumably with the intent of traveling on to Syria where he intended to join Islamic State. But Juraboev was also accused of conspiring to carry out the possible assassination of the United States leader, as illustrated by his posting to an Uzbek-language website, which read as follows: "I am in USA now but we don't have any arms. But is it possible to commit ourselves as dedicated martyrs anyway while here? What I'm saying is, to shoot Obama and then get shot ourselves, will it do? That will strike fear in the hearts of infidels." Meanwhile, Saidakhmetov was likewise accused of intending to join the notorious terror group, while also plotting attacks on the United States homeland. In a conversation with an informant, Saidakhmetov was reported to have said, "We will go and purchase one handgun ... then go and shoot one police officer. Boom ... Then we will go the FBI headquarters, kill the FBI People." Saidakhmetov was arrested at John F Kennedy International Airport in New York as he tried to board a flight bound for Turkey, allegedly en route to Syria where he would join Islamic State. The charges against Habibov involved providing material assistance to Saidakhmeto.

Each of the three defendants, if convicted, faced a maximum sentence of 15 years in prison. In her announcement of the arrests, United States Attorney for the Eastern District of New York, Loretta Lynch, warned that the threat of foreign nationals posing a threat to the United States and its allies was a growing one. Lynch, who was President

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Obama's nominee to replace outgoing Eric Holder as the United States new attorney general, said, "The flow of foreign fighters to Syria represents an evolving threat to our country and to our allies."

Special Entry: U.S. Ambassador to South Korea brutally attacked; North Korea calls the violence justified

In the first week of March 2015, United States Ambassador Mark Lippert was brutally attacked by a pro-North Korean activist in the South Korean capital of Seoul.

Ambassador Lippert, who was serving as the United States envoy to South Korea, was attending a breakfast aimed at a discussion of the reunification of the two Koreas. During the breakfast, the assailant pushed Lippert onto a table and slashed his face with a knife, seriously injuring him. The ambassador was then rushed to the hospital and endured 80 stitches and several hours of surgery to close his facial wound. South Korean doctors later said that Lippert narrowly survived the injury.

The assailant was soon identified as as pro-North Korean activist, Kim Ki-jong, who was known to authorities due to a previous attempt to attack Japanese Ambassador Toshinori Shigeie, for which he received only a suspended sentence. As well, there was a long record of Kim Ki-jong's participation in anti-American protests. In South Korea, activists with pro-Pyongyang sensibilities are few in number; however, they hold passionate beliefs about the contribution of foreign powers to the divisions between the Koreas.

South Korean President Park Guen-hye condemned what she cast as an "attack on the South Korea-U.S. alliance." However, the incident did not reflect well on her, the South Korean government, or South Korean security authorities. Indeed, there were vital questions arising about (1) the level of security at the high-level breakfast, and (2) the fact that the assailant -- with his known history -- was not only free, but permitted to attend a diplomatic breakfast attended by high ranking officials.

Meanwhile, North Korea entered the fray, lauding the act of violence and characterizing it as "just punishment for U.S. warmongers." On behalf of the United States, Secretary of State John Kerry asserted that his country would not be "intimidated or deterred by threats or by anybody who harms any American diplomats." For his part, Ambassador Lippert exhibited great resilience, writing after surgery via the social media outlet, Twitter, "Doing well and in great spirits... Will be back ASAP to advance US-ROK [Republic of Korea] alliance!" New exit schedule from Afghanistan announced

On a visit to the United States to meet with President Barack Obama in the spring of 2015, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani signaled a sea change in relations between the two countries as he visited the tomb of the unknown soldier to pay tribute to the lives of American soldiers lost in the war in Afghanistan. Ghani's predecessor, Hamid Karzai gained notoriety for his sharp criticism for United States troops in Afghanistan who ironically helped to liberate his country from the Taliban. Indeed, it was only as a result of international intervention and support that the path was paved for the very democratic government in Afghanistan that Karzai would eventually lead. Karzai often displayed erratic behavior, attacking the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan to stabilize his country, threatening to join the Taliban, and refusing to sign a bilateral security agreement with the United States.

In a joint news conference with President Obama, President Ghani -- who immediately signed the bilateral security agreement upon coming to power in 2014, made a point of thanking United States soldiers for their efforts to secure Afghanistan. President Ghani also went so far as to thank United States tax payers for their contributions to the stabilization of Afghanistan. Moreover, President Ghani thanked Secretary of State John Kerry, working on behalf of the Obama admin, for his unflagging diplomatic efforts to reach a reconciliation deal after the controversial elections of 2014. Those elections left Ghani in a power struggle with his rival, Abdullah Abdullah. However, a Kerry-forged agreement that officialized GHani as president and Abdullah as chief executive was credited for rescuing Afghanistan from the brink of political crisis, and has since left Afghans regarding the United States' top diplomat as a hero of sorts.

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The visit by Ghani was also marked by foreign policy business, as President Obama announced an adjustment to the United States' existing withdrawal schedule from Afghanistan. President Barack Obama's stated (read: existing) exit schedule called for a withdrawal of the majority of United States troops from Afghanistan at the end of 2014, but left in place 9,800 troops in that country through 2015, when over the course of that year, the number would be reduced by half to 4,900. The remaining troops would then be withdrawn in 2016. Now, in March 2015, President Obama was responding for a request by President Ghani for continued United States engagement in Afghanistan. That new adjusted schedule would hold the current deployment of 9,800 troops in place in Afghanistan through the end of 2015, and would outline a new phased withdrawal schedule through 2016, with any remaining troops at the end of 2016 tasked with securing the Kabul embassy. In effect, the "bones" of the 2016 exit schedule remained in place, but the pace of withdrawal was now changed, with the lion's share of the movement occurring in 2016.

A White House statement on the matter read as follows: "Based on President Ghani's request for flexibility in the U.S. drawdown timeline, the U.S. will maintain its current posture of 9,800 troops through the end of 2015. The specific trajectory of the 2016 U.S. troop drawdown will be established later in 2015 to enable the U.S. troop consolidation to a Kabul-based embassy presence by the end of 2016."

It should be noted that on March 25, 2015, while President Ghani was in the United States, a suicide attack rocked the Afghan capital of Kabul. The blast occurred in the Muradkhani district of Kabul close to the presidential palace, the defense ministry, and the finance ministry. Seven people were reported to have died and more than 20 others were wounded as a result of the attack.

Editor's Note

President Barack Obama's blueprint for the exit of United States troops in Afghanistan called for the withdrawal of the majority of troops at the end of 2014, but left in place 9,800 troops in that country through 2015, when over the course of that year, the number would be reduced by half to 4,900. The remaining troops would then be withdrawn in 2016.

It should be noted that while liberals in the United States were frustrated that a complete exit from Afghanistan -- and an end to a war that had been ongoing for more than a decade -- did not come at the end of 2014, some Republicans in Congress criticized President Obama's exit schedule from Afghanistan. For conservatives, such as Senators John McCain, Lindsey Graham, and Kelly Ayotte, issuing a date-certain deadline was tantamount to surrender. The three Republicans issued a statement that read as follows: "The president's decision to set an arbitrary date for the full withdrawal of U.S. troops in Afghanistan is a monumental mistake and a triumph of politics over strategy." But President Obama was vociferous in his stance that the engagement of United States military forces in Afghanistan was coming to an end, and the specific mission in Afghanistan was on the verge of being completed. According to the United States president, it was time for Afghans to take responsibility for their country. As noted by President Obama in his drawdown announcement from the White House's Rose Garden, "We have to recognize that Afghanistan will not be a perfect place, and it is not America's responsibility to make it one."

President Obama made clear that significant progress had been made in the years since the 2001 terror attacks -- a time when Afghanistan was the locus of the terrorist Islamist group, al-Qaida. Indeed, United States military forces since that time have carried out a relentless assault on the terrorist group, eliminating its leadership, and preventing Afghanistan from being used as a safe haven and a base for attacks against the United States. With the death of Osama bin Laden -- a perilous operation authorized by President Obama himself in 2011 -- the United States president could conceivably argue that the time to exit Afghanistan had come. However, the president was clearly looking towards a phased withdrawal, and one on a somewhat more protracted timeline than he had indicated in recent years. To this end, he said: "Now we're finishing the job we've started."

In October 2014, progress was being made in the effort to "finish the job" as United States and United Kingdom forces exited their main military bases in Helmand province, turning security over to Afghan forces. While the

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complete withdrawal of United States forces would not take place until 2016, a phased drawdown was certainly taking place. Meanwhile, this particular exit would mark the withdrawal of the last British combat forces from Afghanistan.

In November 2014, President Obama authorized United States troops to continue their combat operations against Taliban and other Islamist terrorist militants in Afghanistan, if they threatened either American forces or the Afghan government. The order also authorized the use of United States air support for Afghan combat missions. Moreover, the United States made clear that it would deploy an additional 1,000 troops to Afghanistan to deal with the security threat if needed.

In March 2015, President Obama responded to a request by the newly-elected President Ghani for continued United States engagement in Afghanistan, under the aegis of a new bilateral security agreement, and with an adjusted withdrawal schedule. That new adjusted schedule would hold the current deployment of 9,800 troops in place in Afghanistan through the end of 2015, and would outline a new phased withdrawal schedule through 2016, with any remaining troops at the end of 2016 tasked with securing the Kabul embassy. In effect, the structure of the 2016 exit schedule would be maintained, but the pace of withdrawal was now changed, with most redeployment occurring in 2016.

The schedule, including the decision to keep in place a select number of combat troops through 2016, was due to the fact that President Obama wanted to see further training for Afghan security forces along with the ability to launch counterterrorism missions in the interests of maintaining the progress made in a war that had gone on for more than a dozen years and left more than 2,000 United States troops dead.

Note: To date, more than 2,000 American and approximately 450 British soldiers have died in the war in Afghanistan that began in late 2001.

Crisis in Ukraine: Pro-Russians consolidating territory while Ukrainian forces under pressure; fresh attempt at diplomatic resolution

Summary:

Turbulence and turmoil has characterized the landscape in Ukraine. Tensions initially flared in late 2013 in response to Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich's decision not to move forward with a pending association agreement with the European Union. That decision brought more than 100,000 protesters to the streets to rally against what they saw as Ukraine's movement towards greater control by Russia. Indeed, the general consensus was that President Yanukovich had bent to pressure by President Vladimir Putin of Russia to step away from the European Union Association Agreement and instead embrace a customs union with Russia.

By the start of 2014, another flare of protests ensued in Ukraine in response to legislation passed by members of parliament loyal to President Yanukovich. The laws at stake were intended to curb the free expression of political opposition and curtail public protests. The passage of such legislation raised the ire of Ukrainians, particularly those aligned with the opposition, and alarmed the West with the United States and European Union worried about the Ukraine's slide into autocracy under Yanukovich. In a twist of irony, the very laws intended to suppress mass action actually spurred exactly that end as mass protests attracting tens of thousands of people once again rocked Ukraine. As January 2014 entered its final week, concessions by President Yanukovich to include members of the opposition in government yielded no positive results. Instead, the unrest spread to the eastern part of the country. With the situation deteriorating, the prime minister and the government resigned, and the Ukrainian parliament repealed the controversial anti-protest laws.

In mid-February 2014, the turmoil re-ignited as police tried to clear the main protest camp. Ukraine was again thrust into a renewed state of turbulence and turmoil. A truce was forged on Feb. 19, 2014, but only after more than

two dozen people died. That truce collapsed a day later, effectively returning the capital city of Kiev to a battle zone and leading to an increasing death toll. Yet another agreement was forged in which the president conceded to many of the demands of the opposition. But the deal appeared to have come too late to appease an enraged populace. By Feb. 22, 2014, President Yanukovich had fled to the eastern part of the country while his party abandoned him and joined the opposition to officially impeach him, while his political nemesis - former Prime Minister Tymoshenko - was freed from captivity.

The move was a clear message to Moscow that Ukraine would not be controlled by Russia and that Ukraine instead was looking toward Europe as it charted its future path. Indeed, to the chagrin of Russia, the new interim president of Ukraine declared the country would pursue closer ties with the European Union. The winds of change had swept across Ukraine with the "Maidan" or Independence Square stamped in the history books as "Ground Zero" of Ukraine's 2014 battleground.

But the celebration in Ukraine did not last long. The battleground terrain shifted eastward at the start of March 2014 when the Russian parliament granted Russian President Putin authorization to use force in Ukraine, and Russian forces annexed the Ukrainian territory of Crimea. Clearly, Putin and Russia felt entitled to reclaim their foothold in Ukraine, thus recalling alarming memories for the rest of the world of the Soviet invasion of then-Czechoslovakia in 1968 to subdue the independence-minded Prague Spring. Adding to the crisis was the perplexing decision by Russian President Putin to refuse to acknowledge that Russian troops were even in Crimea.

In response to Russia's actions against Ukraine, and particularly in the direction of controlling Crimea, the G7 countries (G8 minus Russia) pulled out of preparations for the G8 summit set to take place in Russia and the United States instituted targeted sanctions against Russian officials.

Talks aimed at resolving the crisis yielded no results. Indeed, an East-West conflict was intensifying as Crimea scheduled a referendum for mid-March 2014 when residents would decide whether or not to join Russia. A meeting between Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov and United States Secretary of State Kerry ended in failure. Because Russia viewed the overthrow of Yanukovich as illegal, and because the West viewed Crimea's decision to join Russia as in violation of international law, an impasse was at hand.

The United States and the European Union respectively warned that such a unilateral action would run counter to international law, and thus they would not recognize the likely ratification of Crimean unification with Russia. For its part, Ukraine insisted that it would not accept the fracturing of its territorial integrity.

Meanwhile, the West attempted to condemn Crimea's secession referendum, and issue its support for Ukraine's sovereignty, by moving forward with a resolution in the United Nations Security Council. As expected, Russia -- as a veto-wielding permanent member -- vetoed the draft. Every other Security Council member voted in favor of the measure, with the exception of China, which abstained from the vote. The inaction at the Security Council was reminiscent of the Cold war era in which both sides habitually vetoed the other's measures, essentially creating a state of diplomatic paralysis.

On March 16, 2014, ethnic Russians in Crimea voted overwhelmingly to secede from Ukraine and unite with Russia. Crimea then officially requested that the "Republic of Crimea" be admitted as a new subject to the Russian Federation. On the Russian side of the equation, Russia recognized Crimea as a sovereign entity. Russian President Putin soon responded by officially annexing Crimea.

The United States and the European Union imposed personal sanctions on Russian and Crimean officials. This punitive action was intended as a rebuke against the actions in Crimea; however, there was no sign that Russia was even slightly daunted by its decision to seize control of a territory belonging to Ukraine under the established system of international jurisprudence. As stated above, Russia justified its moves by asserting that the interim post-Yanukovich government in Ukraine was illegitimate.

Russian ambitions to regain territory lost following the collapse of the Soviet Union soon entered into the equation. Of note was the fact that in the aftermath of Russia's annexation of Crimea, Russian attention was glancing towards other parts of eastern Ukraine. Eruptions of unrest in this Russian-speaking part of Ukraine were blamed on Russia, and reminiscent of what had transpired in Crimea. Indeed, Ukraine was accusing Russia of carrying out its Crimea formula by orchestrating unrest further into Ukrainian territory.

It was to be seen if the landscape in eastern Europe in the spring of 2014 represented the foundation for a renewed Cold War between the East and West. It was also possible that President Barack Obama of the United States was correct in dismissing such a notion on the basis of the fact that Russia was no longer a super power and, instead, a regional power acting as a bully against its neighbors.

Note that a presidential election was held in Ukraine on May 25, 2014. Petro Poroshenko claimed victory in Ukraine's presidential contest but turmoil continued to rock Ukraine. Entering the fray at the start of June 2014, NATO moved to bolster its security presence in eastern Europe as a deterrent against Russian aggression.

In June and July 2014, Ukrainian forces made some progress in retaking the rebel-held parts of eastern Ukraine, while the United States intensified its sanctions against Russian companies as a punitive measure against Russia for failing to de-escalate the conflict.

The landscape in eastern Ukraine took a disturbing turn on July 17, 2014, when a civilian passenger aircraft traveling from Netherlands to Malaysia went down in eastern Ukraine. All 298 people aboard the Boeing 777 airliner perished when Malaysian Airlines flight 17 crashed in the rebel-held territory of Donetsk close to the Russian border. That event augured a geopolitical landmine as Ukraine said the Malaysian Airlines flight was shot down and placed the blame on pro-Russian separatists battling Ukrainian forces. The tragedy of the Malaysian Airlines flight occurred one day after the Obama administration in the United States unveiled harsh punitive sanctions against major Russian firms aligned with Russian President Putin.

In the aftermath of the tragic downing of the Malaysian Airlines flight, and because the majority of the victims with Dutch nationals, Europe's stance against Russia hardened. Accordingly, the West -- including the United States and the European Union -- intensified its sanctions regime against Russia.

Meanwhile, in August 2014, Ukrainian forces at first held the momentum in the fight to regain control over the pro-Russian eastern part of the country, particularly in separatist strongholds of Donetsk and Luhansk. However, Russian-backed separatists were vigorously defending what they viewed as their own territory later in the month. By the close of August 2014, NATO said that Russian forces had violated Ukraine's territory while the Ukrainian president warned that his country was on the brink of war with Russia.

At the start of September 2014, NATO announced a rapid reaction force as well as military exercises in eastern Europe. Pressure from NATO and the threat of fresh sanctions by the European Union appeared to have spurred pro-Russian separatists to go to the negotiating table with Ukrainian authorities. There, a fragile truce was soon established but sporadically violated as fighting continued in Donetsk and Luhansk, and as Ukrainian forces fought to hold the port city of Mariupol.

In September 2014, with the ceasefire still in effect, Ukraine concentrated on the process of trying to retain its territorial integrity while meeting the needs of the pro-Russian separatists. To that end, Ukraine unveiled a proposal that would convey "special status" for eastern part of country, conveying greater autonomy. Meanwhile, the Ukrainian parliament advanced its pro-Western orientation by ratifying the Association Agreement with European Union (the basis of the uprising that caused the ousting of Yanukovich in the first place), while Ukrainian President Poroshenko unveiled a package of reforms aimed at securing membership in the European Union.

By October 2014, Russian President Putin was calling for the withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukrainian border. However, NATO was warning that there was no sign of Russian troops actually retreating from the border in any significant fashion; as well, Russian forces remained active within Ukraine in violation of that country's sovereignty. Ukrainian President Poroshenko viewed the strong election performance of allied pro-Western parties as a ratification of, and a mandate for, his security plans for eastern Ukraine. However, that eastern portion of the country was moving forward with illegal elections of their own, which were rejected by Ukraine and the larger international community, but which were (unsurprisingly) being backed by Russia.

By November 2014, fighting had erupted in the east, there were reports of a build up of pro-Russian reinforcements there, and it was fair to say that the fragile ceasefire that had been in place since September 2014 was on the brink of collapse.

December 2014 saw a prisoner exchange occur between the Ukrainian government and pro-Russian separatists. As well, Ukrainian President Poroshenko said that he intended to meet with his Russian, French, and German counterparts in early 2015 for discussions on the restoration of peace in the eastern part of the country. These actions were regarded as positive steps in the arena of regional relations. However, Ukraine's decision to revoke its neutral status -- a move that could potentially facilitate future NATO membership -- was likely to raise the ire of Russia, which has opposed Ukraine's westward drift from the onset. Ironically, it was Russia's own aggressive interventions in eastern Ukraine, particularly marked by the annexation of Crimea, that actually catalyzed Ukraine's haste to move out of Russia's orbit.

At the start of 2015, the Minsk ceasefire agreement was effectively dead as fighting resumed around Donetsk and as pro-Russian separatists carried out an assault on the strategic port city of Mariupol, prompting Ukrainian President Poroshenko to warn that his forces would not bend to pro-Russian rebels and that Ukraine would protect its sovereignty. Fighting had extended to other areas in Ukraine's east as pro-Russian separatists aggressively sought to consolidate control over what they have termed "New Russia."

As the month of February 2015 began, there were reports that the Obama administration in the United States was considering additional support for Ukrainian forces in protecting Ukraine from the pro-Russian offensive. As well, NATO was considering the establishment of special command units in eastern Europe to respond rapidly to threats in the region.

Note that on Feb. 12, 2015, a new Minsk ceasefire agreement and a roadmap for peace were forged. But later in February 2015, peace in eastern Ukraine remained elusive as pro-Russians took control over the town of Debaltseve and forced Ukrainian forces into retreat. Pro-Russian forces were reportedly attacking government-held positions in eastern Ukraine -- including the area around the strategic port of Mariupol -- while Ukraine accused Russia of dispatching more troops and tanks to the region, specifically in the direction of the town of Novoazovsk on the southern coast.

Meanwhile, a year after the original Maidan uprising in Kiev ousted former pro-Russian President Yanukovich from power, Ukraine's second largest city of Kharkiv was struck by a bomb attack as demonstrators marched in a national unity rally. Despite the existence of the second Minsk ceasefire agreement, Ukraine was still occasionally mired by war and bloodshed. Europe warned of further sanctions to come if violations to the truce occurred and, indeed, a fragile peace appeared to take hold in the region. Juxtaposed against this background came a surprising admission from Russian President Putin that he had long-standing ambitions to regain Russian control over Crimea.

Special Report on U.S.-led global coalition fight against the Jihadist terror group known as "Islamic State" (alternatively referred to as Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant or ISIL and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or ISIS)

Summary:

Sunni Islamic extremist militants, under the aegis of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant or ISIL (also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or ISIS), have seized control over wide swaths of Iraqi and Syrian territory. In Iraq, ISIL held sway -- from Fallujah and Ramadi in Anbar province, to Mosul in Nineveh, as well as Tikrit -- the hometown of the ousted and late Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein. Across the border in Syria, ISIL was proving to be the most successful anti-government force in that country. It was consolidating territory held either by the Assad regime or by rival rebel entities, even ousting other Islamist insurgent and terrorist groups in the process. These gains collectively constituted a spectacular victory for ISIL, which seeks to establish a Sunni Islamic Caliphate in territory that includes Iraq and Syria.

As Syria and Iraq respectively grappled with the tumultuous security landscapes within their borders, their political spheres were also mired by turmoil. In Iraq, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's treatment of the Sunni minority, including his persecution of former Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi, a Sunni, and raids on anti-government protest camps, had alienated even the more moderate Sunni elements in that country. As a result, Salafist Sunni Jihadists from home and abroad were answering the call to fight on Iraqi soil. At the same time, the power vacuum from the Syrian civil war had provided fertile ground for ISIL to take root, not simply challenging the Assad regime but also attracting Jihadists from across the world seeking a "cause" upon which to concentrate. ISIL's ascendancy, thus, mitigated Assad's control over wide swaths of Syrian territory while simultaneously delivering a remarkable blow across the border to the Iraqi leader at the time, Shi'a Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

The year 2014 saw Iraq rocked by the worst violence and bloodshed in recent years. The violence in Iraq was the result of the aforementioned ethno-sectarian dissonance between Sunni Muslims and Shi'a Muslims, and the dramatic and escalating political conflict between the Shi'a dominated government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and the increasingly alienated Sunni opposition. In the month of June 2014 alone, more than 2,000 people -- mostly civilians -- had been killed in the violence rocking Iraq, according to the United Nations. It was the bloodiest and most deadly month in Iraq since the peak of ethno-sectarian warfare in Iraq in 2007.

Given this restive and volatile landscape, the United Nations envoy to Iraq, Martin Kobler, warned that "systemic violence" was about to explode "at any moment" in that country. Kobler called on Iraq's political leaders to "engage immediately to pull the country out of this mayhem." As stated by Gyorgy Busztin, the United Nation's Iraq representative, "The impact of violence on civilians remains disturbingly high." He also called on Iraq's leadership to take steps to end the violence saying, "Iraq's political leaders must take immediate and decisive action to stop the senseless bloodshed."

The summer of 2014 was marked by devolving chaos in Iraq as ISIL expanded their control from Fallujah and Ramadi in Anbar province, to Mosul in Nineveh, as well as Tikrit -- the hometown of the ousted and late Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein, making significant territorial gains.

Across the border in Syria, the Assad regime had been grappling with an ongoing uprising that started in the Arab Spring of 2011. President Bashar al-Assad's brutal tactics aimed at quelling that uprising against various rebel factions served only to create an even more tumultuous landscape, and eventually set the path for a full-blown civil war. That civil war pitted the Assad forces, backed by Lebanon-based Hezbollah, against a disparate cabal of anti-government entities, ranging from the rebel Free Syrian Army to several Islamist terrorist enclaves. As noted above, the power vacuum from the Syrian civil war provided a breeding ground for extremism that ISIL could exploit and use to both challenge the Assad regime and function as a recruitment tool for Jihadists.

The result was a series of strategic victories across Syria and Iraq for ISIL. Then, at the start of July 2014, the security crisis in the region was at acute levels as ISIL had declared itself to be the sovereign power over a "caliphate" ranging from Syria to Iraq and renamed itself the "Islamic State."

Throughout, the United States-trained Iraqi forces proved themselves to be ineffectual in fighting ISIL. In fact, Iraqi troops abandoned their positions, thus allowing the terrorists to make off with heavy military equipment provided to the Iraqi military by the United States. Indeed, the only defense being provided against ISIL in Iraq were the Kurds

who were now having to face ISIL terrorists armed with stolen American weaponry. While Kurdish peshmerga forces were far more engaged in the fight to save Kurdistan, they were nonetheless no match for ISIL, which now had in its possession United States-provided weapons that had been abandoned by Iraqi forces.

President Barack Obama of the United States was not eager to re-enter into a military engagement in Iraq, and as such, he advocated that leaders in Iraq work towards a political solution. That political solution remained elusive as Prime Minister Maliki refused to form an inclusive national unity government and as members of parliament failed to agree on a new government. Given the frustration over the failure of the Iraqi government in Baghdad to address the political and security crisis facing Iraq, the Kurdish president called for an independence referendum. The Kurds were also taking advantage of the power chasm by seizing control over the oil-rich city of Kirkuk.

But the scene in Iraq took an ominous turn in August 2014 as Islamic State was now pushing Kurdish peshmerga fighters into retreat. ISIL (or the so-called Islamic State) was exerting its self-declared power and authority as it carried out a rampage of barbaric violence, brutally targeting some of Iraq's historic minority communities. Certainly, Islamic State's persecution of Iraq's minority populations, particularly Christian and Yazidis, could be understood as nothing less than gross human rights abuses, even as it triggered a humanitarian crisis.

Initially, United States President Barack Obama dispatched military advisers to Iraq but ruled out renewed military engagement in that country; instead, as noted above, he called for a political solution. As the author of the withdrawal of United States troops from Iraq, President Obama was not keen to be drawn back into the Iraqi quagmire. But having recognized the dire landscape for religious and ethnic minorities in Iraq, on Aug. 7, 2014, the United States President Barack Obama ordered limited strikes in northern Iraq, released a supply of arms to Kurdish peshmerga fighters resisting Islamic State, and provided humanitarian relief supplies to civilians forced to flee their homes.

The presence of Maliki at the helm of Iraq had stood as another obstacle, as the United States was unwilling to be the unofficial military support of a Shi'a government known to have persecuted the Sunni minority population of Iraq. But the subsequent replacement of the Maliki government with a more inclusive Abadi government set the tone for an improved domestic scenario in Iraq, to the relief of the United States and the wider world. It also provided a more hospitable climate for increased United States' engagement in Iraq to fight ISIL.

That being said, the barbaric beheadings of two American journalists by ISIL fundamentally changed the calculus both for the war-weary American public as well as the American president. As a consequence, on Sept. 10, 2014, President Barack Obama outlined a counter-terrorism strategy to "degrade and ultimately destroy" ISIL -- not only in Iraq where the United States was already engaged in a limited manner, but also in Syria. To that end, the Obama administration was rallying a coalition of Western and Middle Eastern partners -- including Jordan -- to take on the threat posed to global security by ISIL.

In truth, the advance of ISIL in not only Iraq but also Syria had compounded the geopolitical crisis facing the Middle East. Suddenly, anti-Assad countries in the region were finding themselves in the uncomfortable position of sharing with Syria the goal of eliminating ISIL. For their part, Arab countries in the region were slow to respond to ISIL. Nevertheless, the Arab League was slowly coming to terms with the fact that it would have to engage in the regional security crisis and that its objectives would likely, at times, overlap with that of the Assad regime. Indeed, in September 2014, the Arab League endorsed the effort to confront Islamic States at a time when the United States was rallying allied countries to join the effort to repel and eradicate ISIL.

For his part, United States President Barack Obama made clear that his country was committed to eliminating the leadership of Islamic State (also known as ISIL or ISIS), while noting that a coalition of NATO allies and Middle Eastern partners was prepared to join the campaign against the brutality of these extremist Islamist Jihadists, and to take on the threat posed to global security by this dangerous terrorist group.

Accordingly, on Sept. 22, 2014, international coalition forces, led by the United States and including both European and Arab partner countries, commenced a campaign of air strikes against Islamist terror groups in Syria.

By October 2014, despite the active international air campaign over Iraq and Syria, ISIL continued to carry out its campaign of terror -- even extending the battlefield to Kurdish areas bordering Turkey. Irrespective of the fact that the town of Kobane (alternatively called Kobani and predominantly inhabited by Kurds) on the Turkish border was under siege, and regardless of legislation passed in Turkey's parliament authorizing action against ISIL, Turkey -- a NATO country -- showed little interest in joining the fight against ISIL, even with the protection of its own territory at stake.

Nevertheless, the United States-led global coalition was intensifying its strikes against ISIL targets; it was also air dropping weapons and military supplies to Kurdish forces.

The latter part of 2014 saw an intensification of the active air campaign over Iraq and Syria against ISIL by United States-led coalition forces. As well, United States President Obama called for more troops to be deployed to the region to assist with the training and advising of Iraqi forces.

At the start of 2015, Japan and Jordan were beset by tragedy when citizens of their countries that were being held by ISIL, were brutally killed. As has become a pattern, ISIL proudly released videotaped footage depicting their vicious acts of murder. In response, Japan promised to do its part in the international fight against ISIL while Jordanian King Abdullah warned of a "relentless war" on the Islamist terror group as it commenced a campaign of air strikes against ISIL targets in Syria.

In February 2015, the horrific killings of more than 20 Egyptian Christians working in Libya marked a new front in the war against Islamic State. Post-Arab Spring Libya was on the brink of political collapse with Islamist extremists taking advantage of the power void. The result was an emerging satellite Islamic State venue in Libya. However, Egypt -- like Jordan -- was prepared to respond to the threat posed by these Islamist Jihadists to its citizens and commenced its own air strike campaign against ISIL targets in Libya.

It was to be seen if the Jordanian and Egyptian responses would mark a turning point for the Arab and Islamic worlds, regarding the international effort to degrade and ultimately destroy the Islamist terror group, known in derogatory Arabic parlance as "Daesh."

Meanwhile, in February 2015, President Barack Obama of the United States called on the legislative branch of government in that country to advance new legislation authorizing military action against the terror group calling itself Islamic State. It was to be seen if partisan rivalries in the United States Congress would impede the process of passing a new authorization intended to carefully circumscribe the United States' military effort to degrade and destroy Islamic State.

Also at stake was a looming effort to retain control over the key Iraqi city of Mosul from Islamic State. To that end, United States military advisers were training joint Iraqi and Kurdish forces to achieve this end in what was expected to be a spring offensive operation. But before the Mosul offensive could move forward, the United States-led coalition continued to carry out air strikes in Iraq, supporting Kurdish fighters, with the goal being to drive Islamic State from the oil-rich city of Kirkuk.

In mid-April 2015, the United States Pentagon confirmed that Islamic State lost more than a quarter of the territory in Iraq it held prior to the air campaign that was launched in August 2014. With the intent to build on this success, Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi traveled to the United States to request more assistance in the air campaign against Islamic State. However, before the United States could even process this request, in mid-April 2015, on the heels of their victory in Tikrit, Islamic State was carrying out an advance on the city of Ramadi, ultimately seizing control of that city in May 2015. It was apparent in the spring of 2015 that even if Islamic State was under pressure, it was still a functional and aggressive terrorist entity.

By the start of June 2015, with Islamic State still posing a threat in Iraq and Syria, as well as to the wider Middle Eastern region, and even the global community, United States President Barack Obama acknowledged that his country's strategy to defeat the terror group remained "incomplete." He indicated that a comprehensive strategy could only be advanced with the concurrence of the government of Iraq, and intimated that there was a need for Iraqi to commit to the process of saving their own country.

It should be noted that whereas some progress had been noted in Iraq, the prevailing dynamics remained in place in Syria where Islamic State continued to hold sway over large swaths of that country.

Editor's Note on Islamic State

Islamic State (alternatively referred to as ISIL and ISIS), has gained notoriety for its particularly brutal tactics, ranging from the abductions and mass murders of religious and ethnic minorities, which they view as apostates, and their beheadings of soldiers and journalists. The group has said that it aims to establish an Islamic "caliphate" that would be ruled according to Islamic Shari'a law. Its ambitions are Jihadists and not simply limited to Iraq and Syria; in fact, ISIL has made clear that it intends to extend its control to Jordan and Lebanon. A satellite venue of Islamic State has opened up in post-Arab Spring Libya as extremists have taken advantage of the power chasm there. Another ambition for ISIL is the cause of Palestine. Adherents are required to swear their allegiance to the ISIL leader, Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim Ali al-Badri al-Samarrai, known in the public sphere as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Baghdadi's appeal has, to some degree, been fed by his mystery as he has only rarely been seen in public.

In terms of legacy, ISIL is actually an outgrowth of al-Qaida in Iraq, led by the Jordanian-born terrorist, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. After Zarqawi's death in 2006, al-Qaida in Iraq transposed itself into Islamic State in Iraq. Although it was weakened by the United States-led "surge" in Iraq to deal with the Sunni insurgency, and which included the involvement of Sahwa (Awakening) councils by Sunni Arab tribesmen, Islamic State in Iraq experienced a resurgence in 2010 under Baghdadi. Once Syria was embroiled in a civil war in 2011, Islamic State was able to establish a foothold in Syria, essentially uprooting other extremist and terror groups, such as al-Nusra Front and al-Qaida, by 2013, and ultimately holding control over wide swaths of territory from Syria to Iraq as of 2014, and extending to Libya as of 2015. ISIL's ability to take over Anbar province and then the northern city of Mosul in Iraq in 2014 were key developments in the entrenchment of ISIL in the region.

ISIL's genocidal practices have been characterized most acutely by their infamous and gruesome beheadings of foreign nationals and apostates, but have also included other revolting and repugnant means of execution, such as crucifixions, immolations, and mass shootings. These bloodthirsty techniques of terror and tactics of murder, which are professionally videotaped and disseminated for maximum effect, have been so ghastly that other militant Islamist movements have sought to distance themselves from ISIL. Indeed, the Yemeni wing of al-Qaida (known as al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula) went so far as to note that beheadings, and the videotaping of decapitations, were to be regarded as un-Islamic. Meanwhile, Lebanon-based Hezbollah, which has been deemed to be a terrorist organization by some countries of the West, made clear that ISIL's tactics of terror were inhumane. These stances by al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula and Hezbollah suggested that even among extremists, militants, Jihadists, and Islamist terrorists, there remained some degree of a "code" that ISIL had apparently violated.

It should be noted that ISIL's barbarism and brutality has had a double effect. First, the brutality appears to have functioned as a recruitment tool for other murderous Islamist extremists across the world. To date, it is not known how many ISIL fighters exist in the Middle East although estimates suggest that as many as 30,000 Islamic State fighters are in the Iraq-Syria region. These fighters come from across the world although, as Libya has slipped further into failed state status, it is believed to be the largest single source of terrorists to the cause. That being said, ISIL has attracted disgruntled youth from Europe and the Americas as well, with recruits often traveling through Turkey to enter ISIL-controlled territory. Second, even as ISIL's barbarism has been a recruitment tool, it

has simultaneously stimulated the reluctant engagement of a United States-led international coalition in an anti-Islamic State mission.

Socio-economic strife is a popular -- and often facile -- explanation for extremism and activism. It certainly applies to the roots of the Arab Spring and specifically the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia, for example, but does not apply to ISIL. Yes, the power chasms created in the wake of the Arab Spring -- specifically in Libya but also in other countries in the region -- certainly created the conditions for recruitment. But creating fertile ground for recruitment still does not address the reason why people would be attracted to ISIL. Likewise, the call for more education may have resonance in countries where young people are educated only about Islam in Madrassas, or in impoverished regions where people simply have no access to education at all. But these cases do not properly apply to ISIL recruits and sympathizers. The problem is not a lack of education -- most of these recruits are computer savvy and were recruited via the Internet while using their own laptops or in Internet cafes. Indeed, many youth ISIL recruits were from middle class or even wealthy families -- certainly not backgrounds without marked by socio-economic hardship. Recruits and sympathizers are also not necessarily from strict Muslim families; indeed, there were reports that many ISIL recruits were actually fairly new to hardline Islam with translations of instructional introductory texts on Islam being a particularly popular purchase for them.

It would seem that many recruits to ISIL appeared to be the same type of profile as vulnerable youth likely to join gang or cults, susceptible to brainwashing, and thus excellent candidates for adherence to Islamic State's religious ideology.

That being said, to properly understand the attraction of ISIL, it is imperative to address the ideological appeal of hardline and regressive Islam, which embraces barbaric practices of execution, such as beheadings and crucifixion, while integrating socio-governing practices such as conquest and the enslavement of women. Well-meaning public figures have cast these tactics of terror and abuses of humanity as "perversions" of Islam. Left unsaid is that fact that they are actually clear dictates that come from historic Islam, and which have been embraced by ISIL as the "true" path to salvation, irrespective of the fact that their practices are a violation of modern understandings of human rights.

Indeed, Islamic State must be an apocalyptic and millenarian death cult, with a strict Medieval interpretation of Islam at the core and a gruesome theatre of murder as the main attraction. Relying on apocalyptic prophesies of Islamic Jihadist ascendancy and an ultimate "Day of Judgement," the expansion of Islamic State territory in Iraq and Syria, and even Libya, was being understood as a sign of "victory." Stated differently, the rapid rate of expansion (read: victory) by ISIL in Iraq and Syria in 2014 functioned to empower sympathizers and recruits to the ISIL cause.

Given this paradigm, the only prescription for defeat would be the disruption of what looks like an unstoppable juggernaut by ISIL. That being said, the texture of that defeat would have to be carefully -- and globally -- crafted since ISIL militants believe in the apocalyptic prophesy of a "final" confrontation with the West. Rather than facilitating that end, international stakeholders have noted that the preferable path would be to target this Islamist Jihadist terror entity as part of a global coalition. With United States-led air strikes only going so far to destroy ISIL, there would ultimately be a need for ground forces. An effective strategy against ISIL would be one that looks to Arab "boots on the ground" rather than feeding the hunger by Islamists for a Crusades-style war with the West.

It should be noted that Islamic State is sometimes pejoratively referred to as "Daesh." Islamic State rejects this term of reference, which sounds roughly in Arabic to the words "Daes" which means "one who crushes something underfoot" and "Dahes" which means "one who sows discord." For precisely these negative associations, the enemies of Islamic State have increasingly used the term "Daesh" to describe the terror group in defiance.

Special Report: United States-Israeli relations at new low due to Israeli PM Netanyahu's address to Congress on Iranian nuclear program

Highlights:

- President Obama and PM Netanyahu at odds over Iranian nuclear negotiations
- Key Democrats boycott speech in protest of Speaker Boehner's invitation to Israeli PM only weeks ahead of election and in violation of White House protocols
- Mossad report differs from Netanyahu's claims in United Nations speech about timing of Iran nuclear breakout threat
- 47 Republican senators dispatch letter to leader of Iran in attempt to put curbs on diplomatic process
- Despite diplomatic contretemps between U.S. and Israel, progress still being made during multilateral nuclear negotiations with Iran

In detail:

A diplomatic contretemps was brewing between the United States and Israel in the latter part of January 2015 when United States House Speaker John Boehner (Republican) invited Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to address Congress without first consulting the White House, as is normal practice. Even with this breach of protocol, Netanyahu accepted Boehner's irregular invitation.

At the heart of Boehner's overture to Netanyahu was President Obama's State of the Union warning that he would veto any legislation from Congress for new sanctions against Iran while tough multilateral negotiations were still ongoing. At issue was the effort to forge a deal with Tehran that would prevent that country from manufacturing nuclear weapons. Those multilateral negotiations were advanced precisely with the understanding that the United States would not introduce fresh sanctions while talks continued. President Obama noted that new sanctions would deliver the message to the international community that the United States was operating under bad faith. But knowing that the Israeli prime minister has long opposed the talks with Iran in the first place, Boehner was making the calculation that Netanyahu could influence members of Congress to act on sanctions in contravention to President Obama's stance.

That very calculation to undermine the United States president by calling on a foreign leader to offer a countervailing foreign policy view in the chambers of Congress soon erupted into a foreign relations fracas. Boehner's irregular invitation to Netanyahu without first seeking concurrence from the White House was already a source of controversy. However, the situation devolved further when it was revealed that the Israeli Ambassador to the United States, Ron Dermer, planned the invitation in concert with Boehner, believing that it would boost Netanyahu's prospects at the polls in Israeli elections set for March 2015. The sordid nature of that blatantly political move was intensified when it was revealed that Dermer did not notify United States Secretary of State John Kerry of the move during a meeting with the United States' top diplomat.

Such machinations have been regarded at best as suspect, and at worst, as duplicitous. Indeed, the moves evoked condemnation from the opposition Labor bloc in Israel, which warned that Netanyahu's address would damage relations with the Obama White House. The possible consequences to United States-Israeli ties appeared to be a real risk and was being discussed among the Israeli cognescenti. In Israel's leading daily newspaper, Yedioth Ahronoth, former diplomat Alon Pinkas wrote: "These relations are the greatest strategic asset that Israel has had since its establishment. Netanyahu has harmed, weakened, and finally destroyed the interpersonal channel (with the U.S. president) and created an unprecedented rift in the relations between president and prime minister."

At home in the United States, former United States Ambassador to Israel, Martin Indyk, entered the fray, warning: "Netanyahu is using the Republican Congress for a photo-op for his election campaign....Unfortunately, the U.S. relationship will take the hit. It would be far wiser for us to stay out of their politics and for them to stay out of ours."

Thee situation devolved even further when Netanyahu asked Boehner to change the date of the proposed address to Congress from February 2015 to March 2015 -- only weeks ahead of the Israeli elections the prime minister hoped to win.

In a rebuke to Israel, the Obama White House soon announced that United President Obama would not meet with Netanyahu while the Israeli Prime Minister was in the United States at Capitol Hill in March 2015. The White House made clear that such a meeting would be entirely inappropriate, given the proximity to the Israeli elections. A more vivid view of the Obama White House's outrage was illuminated with the release of an anonymous quote by a United States official, which was published by Israel's Haaretz newspaper. That newspaper quoted the unnamed United States official as saying, "We thought we've seen everything. But Bibi managed to surprise even us. There are things you simply don't do. He spat in our face publicly and that's no way to behave. Netanyahu ought to remember that President Obama has a year and a half left to his presidency, and that there will be a price."

Note that in the first week of February 2015, Israeli Ambassador Dermer met with key Congressional Democrats in an effort to smooth tensions that had arisen over Netanyahu's irregular speech to be given before Congress. Dermer appeared to place the blame on House Speaker Boehner for the diplomatic crisis, suggesting that the speaker of the House of Representatives had misled Israel into believing the invitation was a bipartisan one. At the end of the day, those meetings did not appear to have yielded positive results for Dermer. Instead, Jewish Democrats in Congress blasted Dermer for his part in the brewing fiasco, while House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi urged that the speech be postponed, noting under the current conditions it would be "inappropriate."

Exacerbating the situation was the news that Congressman John Lewis -- a known civil rights icon -- would be boycotting the Netanyahu address. In the House of Representatives, Representative John Clyburn, one of the highest ranking Democrats in the lower chamber, along with Representative Raúl Grijalva, the head of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, Representative Jim McDermott and others all said they would not be attending the Netanyahu address. Representative Earl Blumenauer went so far as to write an article in The Huffington Post explaining his decision. In that piece, he said that the Constitution "vests the responsibility for foreign affairs in the president."

The list of prominent Democrats boycotting the Netanyahu speech grew with Senator Bernie Sanders casting the event as "wrong," and saying he would skip it. Senator Patrick Leahy not only announced his own boycott of the speech, but paired it with a searing rebuke of the Republican-led Congress. He said: "They [House leaders] have orchestrated a tawdry and high-handed stunt that has embarrassed not only Israel but the Congress itself. It has long been an unwritten rule and practice through the decades that when it comes to American foreign policy, we speak and act thoughtfully, with one voice when we can, with the national interests of the United States as our uppermost consideration, and with caution about the unintended consequences of unilateral actions like this. They have diminished that valuable precedent." Also of note was the decision by Senator Brian Schatz -- a Jewish Democrat from the president's home state of Hawaii -- who said he would not attend the Netanyahu speech "because it does more harm than good to the bipartisan U.S.-Israel alliance." Schatz also added that he believed the House Speaker issued the invitation to the Israeli prime minister for "the apparent purpose of undermining President Obama's foreign policy prerogatives."

During a press conference with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, President Obama was asked about the Netanyahu speech and, at first issued a diplomatic response, noting that it would be inappropriate to meet with any leader so soon ahead of an election. He said, "I think it's important for us to maintain these protocols --- because the U.S.-Israeli relationship is not about a particular party." But he added that as much as he loved the German leader, his White House would not have extended an invitation to her ahead of a general election in Germany, and he added, "And I am sure she would not have asked for one." Chancellor Merkel responded with an emphatic "no" headshake, making clear that she tacitly agreed that such a move would be a break in proper protocol.

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The Obama White House also delivered its own more direct message to Prime Minister Netanyahu and the government of Israel when it announced that Vice President Joe Biden -- typically a guaranteed presence at events involving foreign leaders -- would not be in attendance. The Obama White House said that Vice President Biden would be traveling on the day set for the Netanyahu address; the news could only be regarded as a snub by the administration to the current Israeli government.

A CNN poll released in February 2015, indicated that the vast majority of Americans -- 66 percent -- did not approve of House Speaker Boehner's move to sidestep President Obama and invite Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu to speak before Congress, by-passing normal protocol. For his part, Netanyahu appeared to be undeterred by criticisms of his speech, perhaps calculating that whatever ill will he was building in the United States would be vitiated by his political and nationalist gains at home just ahead of elections in Israel.

The rift between the United States and Israel deepened as February 2015 came to a close, reaching a new nadir just as Netanyahu was set to address Congress in the first week of March 2015.

Of note was Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's claim that the United States and other world powers had abandoned their vow to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear bomb. Speaking from Israel, Netanyahu accused the multilateral bloc, including the United States, of "accepting that Iran will gradually, within a few years, will develop capabilities to produce material for many nuclear weapons." Netanyahu continued, saying, "I respect the White House and the president of the United States but on such a fateful matter, that can determine whether or not we survive, I must do everything to prevent such a great danger for Israel."

Key members of the United States government hit back against Netanyahu forcefully and aggressively. United States Secretary of State John Kerry responded to the accusation from the Israeli leader by questioning Netanyahu's judgement on the issue. Indeed, Secretary of State Kerry issued a rebuke of Netanyahu, saying, "He may have a judgment that just may not be correct here." Expanding on his point after the latest round of negotiations in Europe, the United States' top diplomat said, "The president has made clear -- I can't state this more firmly -- the policy is Iran will not get a nuclear weapon."

Secretary of State Kerry went further by reminding the world of Netanyahu's questionable geopolitical acumen and strategic perspicacity when he noted that the Israeli leader "was profoundly forward-leaning and outspoken about the importance of invading Iraq under (President) George W. Bush, and we all know what happened with that decision."

Meanwhile, another official in the United States government -- this time, National Security Adviser Susan Rice -- cast the impending visit to the United States by Netanyahu as "destructive to the fabric of the [bilateral] relationship." In an interview with Charlie Rose on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), National Security Adviser Rice said, "We want the relationship between the United States and Israel to be unquestionably strong, immutable... regardless of which party may be in charge in either country." Her implication was that Netanyahu's speech, imbued now with political elements, could not be understood as anything other than partisan, and as such, would have a negative impact on the bilateral ties between the United States and Israel.

The White House itself highlighted the problem in reducing the bilateral relationship to partisanship when spokesperson, Josh Earnest, said: "The president has said the relationship between the United States and Israel can't just be reduced to a relationship between the Republican party and the Likud party."

Meanwhile, for Netanyahu, it was apparent that he was making the calculation that deteriorating ties with the leader of the free world might be worth the risk if he saw gains at the polls at home in mid-March 2015. But on the issue of a pending deal aimed at curbing Iran's nuclear ambitions, it was difficult to see what achievement Netanyahu hoped to make. Even if he were to deliver a tour de force of a speech on Capitol Hill, replete with repeated standing ovations from Republicans in Congress anxious to show their solidarity with the hardline conservative Israeli prime

minister, the multilateral talks in Europe on the Iranian nuclear deal were still going to move forward. Even if some sort of legislation was advanced in the United States Congress aimed at sabotaging such a deal (for example via fresh sanctions against Iran), the president of the United States would have the power of the veto to counteract such a move.

Netanyahu himself appeared cognizant of this reality as he said, "Can I guarantee that my speech in Congress will prevent a dangerous deal with Iran from being signed? Honestly, I don't know. But I do know this — it's my sacred duty as prime minister of Israel to make Israel's case."

To that end, the Israeli leader went to Capitol Hill on March 3, 2015, to give his address to Congress. In that speech, he warned that the nuclear deal being negotiated by global powers and Iran in Geneva, Switzerland, would actually herald a nuclearized Iran. To this end, he said, "This deal doesn't block Iran's path to the bomb, it paves Iran's path to the bomb." Disparaging the efforts being carried out by United States Secretary of State John Kerry and his counterparts from the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Russia and China, Netanyahu said: "We've been told that no deal is better than a bad deal. Well this is a bad deal, a very bad deal."

Of course, the Israeli leader had harsh words regarding Iran, reminding the chamber -- and the worlds -- that "Iran's regime is as radical as ever, the ideology is deeply rooted in militant Islam... it will always be an enemy of U.S." He also noted that the Iranian imprint was growing in the Middle East, as it meddled in the affairs of countries such as Iraq and Yemen, while backing Lebanon-based Hezbollah. To this end, Netanyahu said that Iran was on a "march of conquest, subjugation and terror."

Netanyahu's speech, despite the boycott by as many as 60 Democrats, was well-received by the Republican-dominated Congress. Indeed, Republicans in Congress made a point to giving the Israeli leader a far warmer reception, with more boisterous applause than had been conveyed to President Barack Obama at the State of the Union less than two months earlier.

For its part, the White House blasted the Israeli prime minister's address as being filled by rhetoric and short of good ideas. As noted by President Obama himself after the Netanyahu visit to Capitol Hill, "On the core issue, which is how to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon which would make it far more dangerous, the prime minister [Netanyahu] did not offer any viable alternatives."

Nevertheless, the fact of the matter was that Netanyahu's address was a political success that would likely help him with hardline voters at home, while currying favor with hardliners across party lines in the United States. Of course, it was harder to say if the Netanyahu speech was necessarily in the best interests of the United States.

The reality was that without an agreement of some sort, Iran would likely move forward with the pursuit of its nuclear program, which could potentially involve bomb production. Indeed, it was only the interim nuclear deal (set to expire in mid-2015), which created the space for nuclear negotiations to take place, that had brought any halt to Iranian nuclear activities. Before the interim agreement was forged, despite the imposition of harsh sanctions, Iran was producing centrifuges and fissile material. Without a nuclear accord going forward, Iran would be free to resume unfettered nuclear activities.

Of note was the fact that President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu have viewed the Iranian nuclear problem differently. For President Obama, the imperative has always been the same: To prevent Iran from producing a nuclear bomb. But for Prime Minister Netanyahu, the objective has been to prevent Iran from having nuclear capability. While the two respective goals overlap, they must be understood distinctly.

A good deal for President Obama would be one in which Iran's nuclear program is curtailed, regulated, and monitored to the extent that its breakout time for creating a bomb would be lengthy and difficult. No deal would likely be acceptable to Prime Minister Netanyahu, who was determined to see Iran's nuclear capability ended in totality, and all of its nuclear facilities dismantled. Short of military action, it was difficult to see how Netanyahu's

goals would be accomplished. But even military strikes would be risky since multiple sites -- from the uranium enrichment plants at Natanz and Fordo, to the heavy-water plutonium reactor at Arak, not to mention an array of laboratories and mines at stake.

Of significance was the fact that the very case by Israel (at least, as conveyed by Netanyahu) was being tarred by questions of credibility. At issue was the release of a cache of confidential intelligence documents that appeared to contradict Netanyahu's claims about Iran being imminently positioned to manufacture a nuclear bomb. Leaked cables -- reportedly from South African intelligence, but which were shared with certain news outlets -- indicated that in an address before the United Nations in 2012, the Israeli leader misrepresented Iran's progress on nuclear development, and even contradicted Israel's own Mossad secret service to make that claim.

Going back to 2012, Netanyahu famously stood before the United Nations General Assembly with a cartoon depiction of a bomb with a red line and declared that Iran would be positioned to build a nuclear weapons the following year. As such, he demanded global action to prevent Iran from achieving that end. Now, however, in 2015, the leaked documents, which were shared with Al-Jazeera and published by The Guardian newspaper, included conclusions from Israel's own Mossad intelligence agency that Iran was "not performing the activity necessary to produce weapons." The Mossad briefing did note that Iran appeared to be moving in a direction "which will reduce the time required to produce weapons." However, the Mossad briefing also asserted that Iran "does not appear to be ready" to enrich uranium to the higher levels necessary for nuclear weapons. (The manufacture of a nuclear bomb would require enrichment of 90 percent.)

It should be noted that in response to the revelations ensconced in these leaked documents, the Israeli government said there was little difference in Netanyahu's claims as compared with Mossad's findings. Both agreed that Iran was indeed seeking to manufacture a nuclear bomb.

Regardless of Iran's actual intent or the actual timeline at stake, the difficult diplomatic work of trying to forge an agreement that would prevent Iran from producing a nuclear weapon was ongoing.

It should be noted that in the aftermath of the Netanyahu speech, United States Secretary of State John Kerry warned that simply demanding Iran's capitulation was unlikely to compel that country to voluntarily halt its nuclear development program. Kerry's remarks intimated criticism for the muscular language emitted by the Israeli leader, which were heavy on rhetoric but unlikely to achieve actual results. Instead, Secretary of State Kerry noted that the diplomatic path presented a serious path forward. He said, "No one has presented a more viable, lasting alternative for how you actually prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon. So folks, simply demanding that Iran capitulate is not a plan. And nor would any of our P5+1 partners support us in that position." At the same time, Secretary of State Kerry made clear that while the hard work of diplomacy was yielding results, there remained "significant gaps and important choices that need to be made" by Iran.

In Iran, President Hassan Rouhani emphasized his country's position. Rouhani indicated that Iran was prepared to subject itself to greater scrutiny, in order to satisfy the international community's concerns about nuclear weapons production. But at the same time, he reiterated Iran's long-standing stance that it was entitled to nuclear development. Rouhani said, "If the basis of these negotiations is for increased transparency, we will accept greater transparency. But if the negotiations are trying to prevent the people of Iran from their inalienable right, in other words advancement in science and technology, it is very natural that Iran will not accept such an understanding or agreement."

Of course, concerns about Iranian nuclear development, and a potential nuclear deal, extended not only to Israel but also to the Sunni Arab world. Of note was the ever-increasing sectarian divide between Shi'ites and Sunnis in the Middle East since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the Arab Spring in 2011. With this schism only deepening, Sunni countries, such as Saudi Arabia, were increasingly concerned about an ascendant Shi'ite Iran. Indeed, Iran already had its imprint in the Syria-Lebanon area due to tacit support of Hezbollah, and had tightened its alliance

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with Iraq in the post-Saddam Hussein era, and was now believed to be clandestinely backing the Shi'ite Zaidi rebellion (known as the Houthi rebellion) in Yemen. The notion of a nuclearized Iran, already with its tentacles stretching across the region, was not regarded positively by several Arab countries. Accordingly, Secretary of State Kerry traveled to Saudi Arabia to calm the anxieties of several Sunni Arab countries, including Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia itself, regarding a potential Iranian nuclear deal.

Speaking to this issue, Secretary of State Kerry said, "For all the objections that any country has to Iranian activities in the region, and believe me, we have objections and others in the world have objections, the first step is to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon." At stake was the goal of reaching the "right deal," which Kerry said would "close off any paths that Iran could have towards fissile material for a weapon."

To that end, the diplomatic track was continuing and the latest round of multilateral talks -- involving the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Russia, and China -- appeared to be making progress, with all eyes on late March 2015 as a possible timeline for a deal, with the details ironed out and solidified by a mid-2015 deadline.

United States Secretary of State John Kerry indicated that the negotiations were productive, saying to the media: "We made progress." His Iranian counterpart, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, said they were forging "a better understanding" at the negotiating table.

The comprehensive pact appeared to be geared towards constraining Iran's nuclear breakout capability, and restricting Iran's nuclear activities for a 10-year period, with an easing of restrictions on nuclear development after that time. Under consideration was a plan to deal with most of Iran's enriched uranium externally, or to convert it to a form that would not be easily used in weapons development. Overall, there would be strict curbs on Iranian nuclear development for a decade, particularly with regard to the handling of enriched uranium and the number of centrifuges at stake. But there would also be "rewards" of sorts for Iranian compliance and cooperation in the form of gradually eased restrictions and the lifting of sanctions. The United Nations' nuclear watchdog agency, the International Atomic Energy Agency, would play a central role in any proposed deal, and would have the primary responsibility of monitoring Iran's compliance and cooperation.

In the second week of March 2015, in the wake of the controversial Netanyahu address to Congress, 47 Republican senators published an open letter to Iran. The signatories to that document sought to instruct the Iranian government about United States constitutional law, which they suggested the Iranians might not "fully understand." The letter, which was spearheaded by freshman Republican Senator Tom Cotton of Arkansas, made the claim that any nuclear deal that might emerge from the negotiations in Switzerland would be "nothing more than an executive agreement between President Obama and Ayatollah Khamenei," and thus require congressional approval while being subject to revocation by a future president. To this end, the letter included the following sentence: "The next president could revoke such an executive agreement with the stroke of a pen, and future Congresses could modify the terms of the agreement at any time."

It was difficult to interpret the missive as anything other than a transparent attempt to undermine President Barack Obama's leadership in the realm of foreign policy. Indeed, editorials from more than 22 cities across the country excoriated the 47 Republican senators for their action, which they characterized as a reckless and partisan stunt. Some newspaper boards even argued that by dispatching that missive, the 47 Republican senators were marching the country down the road of war. Almost all the editorials vociferously criticized the 47 Republican senators for betraying the national interests of the United States, whose constitution, accords broad authority to the president to conduct foreign policy.

From the Senate, Minority Leader Harry Reid -- the top Democrat in the upper chamber -- minced no words as he declared: "Let's be clear: Republicans are undermining our commander in chief while empowering the ayatollahs." Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who was expected to seek the Democratic nomination for president in 2016, entered the fray, saying that the letter's signatories could only be motivated by one of the following two

rationales. She said, "There appear to be two logical answers. Either these senators were trying to be helpful to the Iranians or harmful to the commander-in-chief in the midst of high-stakes international diplomacy. Either answer does discredit to the letter's signatories." White House spokesperson, Josh Earnest, said the letter was intended to undermine diplomacy and could spur a "rush to war, or at least the rush to the military option."

For his part, President Barack Obama responded to the infamous letter by accusing the 47 Republican senators of "interfering" in nuclear negotiations -- an arena typically reserved for the executive branch of government. He also sardonically noted that the 47 signatories constituted an "unusual coalition" with Iran's hard-line religious leaders, who have also opposed the nuclear negotiations. As noted by President Obama: "I think it's somewhat ironic to see some members of Congress wanting to make common cause with the hardliners in Iran. It's an unusual coalition." Vice President Joe Biden -- a former Senator himself and the official president of the upper chamber -- was more vituperative in his condemnation. Vice President Biden said that the letter from the 47 Republicans was "beneath the dignity of an institution I revere." He added, "In 36 years in the United States Senate, I cannot recall another instance in which Senators wrote directly to advise another country -- much less a longtime foreign adversary -- that the president does not have the constitutional authority to reach a meaningful understanding with them,"

Of significance was the reaction by the Iranian Foreign Minister, Dr. Javad Zarif, who dismissed the letter as a "propaganda ploy." Zarif said, "In our view, this letter has no legal value and is mostly a propaganda ploy. It is very interesting that while negotiations are still in progress and while no agreement has been reached, some political pressure groups are so afraid even of the prospect of an agreement that they resort to unconventional methods, unprecedented in diplomatic history. This indicates that like Netanyahu, who considers peace as an existential threat, some are opposed to any agreement, regardless of its content."

Educated in the United States himself, the Iranian foreign minister did not shy away from showing his own constitutional chops, intimating that the Republican Senators who signed onto the letter may not been fully conversant with the United States Constitution. To this end, Zarif said, "A change of administration does not in any way relieve the next administration from international obligations undertaken by its predecessor in a possible agreement about Iran's peaceful nuclear program." Zarif also noted that a move by a future president to dismantle a yet-to-be-achieved nuclear agreement would be in contravention to international jurisprudence, saying, "I wish to enlighten the authors that if the next administration revokes any agreement with the stroke of a pen, as they boast, it will have simply committed a blatant violation of international law."

To be sure, the letter from the 47 Republican senators emphasized the view that any deal would have to be ratified by the upper house of the Congress. However, both Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif and United States Secretary of State John Kerry pointed out that the vast majority of international agreements forged in recent decades have been executive measures and not treaties requiring ratification by the Senate.

Moreover, any deal emerging from the nuclear talk would be neither a bilateral agreement nor a conventional treaty between nation state. Instead, it would be a multilateral accord, forged by the P5+1 countries, including all permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. The accord would likely activated as a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, then sealed under the aegis of the United Nations Security Council, and thus would in fact not be subject to modification by Congress. In this regard, it would be follow on the heels of United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1696, 1737, 1747, 1803, 1835, and 1929 that have also dealt with Iran's nuclear program. Neither a Republican-controlled Senate nor a future president would be positioned to unilaterally reverse the terms of a potential accord of this sort.

Congress, with its power of the purse, could certainly place certain limits on President Obama or any future president as regards sanctions to be levied upon Iran (or any other country). However, Congress cannot summarily override international obligations forged in a multilateral frame, and which would be structured as an international measure, without being in flagrant breach of international law.

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Beyond the legal perils at stake, there were political perils to consider. The fact of the matter was that any post-Obama president would be placed in a precarious position within the world community for violating an agreement reached and understood as a matter of international consensus.

Meanwhile, there were rumblings in regards to violations of domestic law when some observers noted that the letter to Iran could be regarded as a violation of the 18th century Logan Act. To be precise, the Logan Act prohibits any "Private correspondence with foreign governments" and reads; "Any citizen of the United States, wherever he may be, who, without authority of the United States, directly or indirectly commences or carries on any correspondence or intercourse with any foreign government or any officer or agent thereof, with intent to influence the measures or conduct of any foreign government or of any officer or agent thereof, in relation to any disputes or controversies with the United States, or to defeat the measures of the United States, shall be fined under this title or imprisoned not more than three years, or both." In truth, it was unlikely that a law dating back to 1799 would be used to prosecute the 47 senators; however, its discussion has only added to the level of scandal and drama surrounding a potential landmark multilateral agreement on Iran's nuclear program.

Returning to the issue of the prevailing nuclear negotiations -- the fact of the matter was that nuclear talks continued in Switzerland in the third week of March 2015. The principal parties acknowledged that progress was being made, particularly with regard to technical provisions. Ali Akbar Salehi, the head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization, expressed delight over his productive meetings with United States Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz, saying, "We have made progress on technical issues. One or two issues remain and need to be discussed." For his part, Secretary of State Kerry said, "We're pushing some tough issues but we made progress."

However, other Western representatives had a different view. A State Department official told Reuters News, "We are pretty far away. There are a lot of issues that still need to be resolved. The Iranians must make substantial concessions." Moreover, as reported by Reuters News, an anonymous European negotiator said: "Contrary to what the Iranians are saying with regard to 90 percent of an accord being done, that's not correct. We are not close to an agreement."

Clearly, another round of talks was anticipated to resolve a slate of remaining issues. Of note was the West's insistence that Iran's nuclear activities be curtailed and its nuclear breakout time be circumscribed to one year. Stated differently, an arrangement had to be made whereby Iran would need a full year to garner enough fissile material (either high enriched uranium or plutonium before it could produce a nuclear weapon. On the agenda for discussion was a plan to limit the number of enrichment centrifuges Iran would be allowed to keep; other considerations included limits of the size of uranium stockpiles.

Note that on March 21, 2015, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani indicated that progress was being made in nuclear talks, setting the stage for a final deal. He was quoted by Iranian state media as saying. "There is nothing that cannot be resolved." Iran's Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, however, emitted a very different tone from that of Iran's more moderate president, Rouhani. In reference to President Obama's Persian Nowruz message to the Iranian people, in which the United State leader said a deal on Iran's nuclear program presented "an historic opportunity to resolve this issue peacefully," Ayatollah Khamenei said that his country should not submit to the demands of the global powers. Khamenei noted, "Basically, what he [Obama] says in his message is that you must accept the terms we dictate in the nuclear talks so that jobs, investment, and economic activities will blossom in your country... this view will never lead to any conclusions for us." In many senses, Obama and Rouhani were in similar positions -- both were pragmatic presidents, both were eager to improve bilateral relations between their countries, while meeting global security goals, yet both men were also politically at odds with the conservative and hardline elements in their own countries.

Days later, the landscape for negotiations could only be understood as uncertain. The various sides appeared to be deadlocked over certain sticking points. France was looking for more stringent restrictions on the Iranians -- a position by France that was at odds with the other P5+1 countries. Also at issue was the fact that France was not keen on the notion of a quick suspension to United Nations sanctions against Iran -- a demand being made by the

Iranians. Meanwhile, the United States was advocating that restrictions on Iranian nuclear work should be in place for at least 10 years, while France was looking for a 15 year timeline, along with 10 years of rigorous IAEA monitoring. Other contentions centered on Iran's demand that it be allowed unfettered research and development of advanced centrifuges, which are used to enrich uranium for use in nuclear reactors, and ultimately are linked with weapons production.

The fact of the matter was that significant issues remained unresolved with Iran and the P5+1 countries far apart in some regards. Still, the consequences of not reaching a deal would likely destabilize the world; as such, the impetus for forging an agreement was strong and all expectations were that the March 2015 deadline would be extended again.

The nuclear negotiations aside, relations between the United States and Israel continued to be poor in the aftermath of the Israeli election, which were decisively won by Netanyahu's Likud party. Netanyahu's victory was at least partially attributed to his controversial remarks warning Jewish voters that Arab Israelis would be "turning out in droves" at the polls, and asserting that there would be no Palestinian state under his watch. In the wake of that latter statement, the Obama administration in the United States warned Israel that it would be "reassessing" its relationship and its stance on Middle East diplomacy.

For his part, Netanyahu attempted to reverse the clear political damage made by these two statements. First, he apologized publicly to Arab Israelis for the divisive rhetoric. Then, he insisted to the United States that he still supported a "two-state solution" (i.e. an independent Palestinian state living side by side the Jewish state of Israel in peace and security), but claimed that he intended to simply point out that the conditions for the peace process were not optimal. As stated by Netanyahu in an interview with MSNBC News: "I haven't changed my policy. I never retracted my speech in Bar-Ilan University six years ago calling for a demilitarized Palestinian state that recognizes the Jewish state. What has changed is the reality."

For its part, the Obama administration in the United States made clear it was not prepared to accept Netanyahu's prevarication. Josh Earnest, the White House spokesperson, warned of "consequences" for Israel. In his conference with the White House press corps, Earnest said, "He [Netanyahu] walked back from commitments that Israel had previously made to a two-state solution. It is ... cause for the United States to evaluate what our path is forward."

On the radar could be the United States' stance at the United Nations. To date, it has only been the United States' veto at the Security Council that has prevented Palestinians from successfully garnering official recognition as a nation state. The United States has insisted that Palestinian statehood should be arrived at diplomatically, and via the established peace process, predicated on a two state solution. But with Netanyahu making the bold claim that there would be no Palestinian state so long as he remained prime minister, the entire foundation of the two state solution was now damaged. Thus, the door was now open for the United States to change its calculus -- and accordingly, its behavior at the Security Council. White House spokesperson Earnest addressed this very issue, saying, "Steps that the United States has taken at the United Nations had been predicated on this idea that the two-state solution is the best outcome. Now our ally in these talks has said that they are no longer committed to that solution."

Note: On April 2, 2015, after marathon talks in Switzerland, the P5+1 countries and Iran issued a joint statement announcing that the hard work of negotiations and diplomacy had yielded results, and that a historic framework agreement on Iran's nuclear program had been reached. As stated by the European Union foreign policy chief, Federica Mogherini, "We have reached solutions on key parameters of a joint comprehensive plan of action." A rigorous program of verification would remain in place to corroborate Iran's adherence to the terms of the agreement and to ensure that Iran meets its obligations. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu concluded

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that the deal needed additional measures included, such as a "clear and unambiguous Iranian recognition of Israel's right to exist." However, United States President Obama himself entered the equation, insisted that the framework agreement would be good for global security, as it would "cut off every pathway that Iran could take to develop a nuclear weapon."

Note: It was yet to be determined if the nuclear negotiations would actually end in a viable and enduring deal.

Special Entry

Saudi King's decision to skip meeting in U.S. sparks speculation of rift with Washington D.C.

Relations between Saudi Arabia and the United States have been strained in 2015 due to ongoing nuclear negotiations between the global powers and Iran. Already, Saudi Arabia was alarmed by Iran's increasing ascendancy in the region in Iraq and Yemen, and dismayed at the United States' eagerness to forge an Iranian nuclear deal. The United States' reticence about getting involved in Yemen where Iranian-backed Houthis have usurped the authority of the Saudi-allied and democratically-elected President Hadi has been regarded as another pressure point on the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the United States.

Given this background, the decision in mid-May 2015 by the new Saudi monarch, King Salman, to skip a security summit Gulf leaders at Camp David in the United States sparked speculation of a growing rift with Washington D.C. That speculation was particularly high since King Salman had initially accepted the invitation by United States President Barack Obama to the leaders of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries to attend the Camp David summit; however, King Salman announced his decision to skip the meeting only a few days ahead of time.

For its part, the Obama administration in the United States was certainly banking on a successful meeting with GCC leaders from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman. The United States president certainly hoped he would be able to argue in the future that the nuclear deal with Iran had the support of Arab countries in the region. This summit was intended to focus on regional security and reassure GCC countries that only a robust nuclear agreement with Iran would be accepted.

With rumors percolating on the eve of the summit of a snub by the Saudi monarch, the White House in the United States was eager to set the record straight. White House spokesperson, Josh Earnest, dismissed notions of a rift with Saudi Arabia and made clear that officials from that country had not conveyed any concerns over the agenda for the summit. Earnest also emphasized the White House's confidence that any leaders or officials attending the summit would be fully capable of representing their countries' interests and moving forward with any decisions made at the meeting. Saudi Arabia also entered the fray to shut down speculation of an imbroglio with the United States. Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir emphatically declared, "This idea that this is a snub because the King did not attend is really off-base."

In fact, Saudi Arabia's decision to send the newly-named Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef to Washington D.C. in King Salman's stead could be interpreted as a positive development. Of significance was the fact that Mohammed bin Nayef was named as the new Crown Prince only a week prior. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef held extraordinary security credentials as Saudi Arabia's Minister of the Interior and also enjoyed a close relationship with the United States. In fact, Washington warmly applauded King Salman's decision to name Mohammed bin Nayef as his heir apparent.

Also attending the summit would be Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the son of King Salman and the country's defense minister. Of note was the fact that Mohammed bin Salman was leading Saudi Arabia's effort against the Houthi rebellion in Yemen. His attendance at the summit was not only relevant, it would also likely help seal a close working relationship between the United States and the younger generation of the Saudi royal family.

Note: At the time of writing, reports were emerging of Iranian Revolutionary Guard gunboats firing on a Singaporean-flagged cargo shipping vessel in the Persian Gulf. That vessel transited from international waters into waters under jurisdiction of the United Arab Emirates when the Iranian boats retreated. This act of aggression by Iran in the strategic Persian Gulf area was likely to exacerbate regional tensions and bolster Arab countries' complaints about Iranian behavior on the global scene.

Special Entry

Special Report: P5+1 multilateral negotiations result in historic framework deal on Iran's nuclear program; agreement marks a significant achievement in diplomacy for the benefit of global security

Summary:

The international community has been focused on aggressive multilateral negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 countries of the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Russia, and China, aimed at arriving at a landmark nuclear deal. At issue was the goal of forging an accord that would regulate Iran's nuclear program, its stockpile of enriched uranium, and curtail Iran's ability to develop a nuclear bomb. For Iran, the objectives were twofold. First, Iran hoped to prove that its nuclear development was for peaceful purposes and not aimed at weaponization, as charged by the West. Second, Iran was keen to end a painful international sanctions regime that has badly damaged Iran's economy.

Going back to January 2014, an interim Iranian nuclear deal went into force. Under the terms of that interim agreement, Iran began the process of diluting its stockpile of uranium enriched to 20 percent, with all such uranium expected to be eliminated within a six-month period. There were also provisions for inspections at the Arak heavy water reactor and the Fordo uranium enrichment site close to Qom. While the interim deal constituted only a first step in the diplomatic track, it was certainly a significant development in that process aimed at establishing an enduring accord. Indeed, it represented a sea change in Iran's relationship with the United States, which was actively evolving from one singularly marked by hostility to one of (albeit limited) engagement. Now, with a final nuclear deal at stake, it was to be seen if that engagement would be ultimately deemed productive.

At the end of March 2015, the P5+1 multilateral talks with Iran were set to end, with all eyes on a framework for a long-term agreement. But the negotiations were mired by various sticking points, prompting the parties to extend the negotiating process. Finally, in April 2015, after marathon talks, the P5+1 countries and Iran announced that the hard work of negotiations and diplomacy had yielded results, and that a framework agreement on Iran's nuclear program had been reached. The agreement presaged a long-term deal, which would have to be made by the final "hard" deadline on June 30, 2015. The prevailing question continued to dominate: Could a final accord on Iran's nuclear program be forged? Nevertheless, the framework agreement marked a massive breakthrough in the realm of international diplomacy for the purpose of global security.

Political resistance from rival Republicans and skeptical Democrats in the United States Congress and from Iran itself could upend the deal. Nevertheless, new rounds of nuclear negotiations commenced later in the spring of 2015 with an eye on forging a sustainable final accord. That final agreement finally emerged on July 14, 2015, and, as expected, evoked passionate resistance from hardliners at home in Tehran, and in other capitals across the world, including Washington D.C.

Over the course of the rest of July 2015 and then through August 2015, the Obama administration in the United States was busy lobbying members of Congress to support the deal. The goal was to gain enough support to sustain the expected presidential veto on a so-called "disapproval resolution" being advanced by Republicans in the legislative chambers, with support from skeptical Democrats. Of course, the detractors of the deal were also doing their part to garner enough support to override the expected presidential veto. But by the start of September 2015, all signs posted to a political victory for President Obama and his administration's diplomatic efforts. Indeed, the Obama administration garnered enough Congressional support for the deal. Debate and voting on the "disapproval

resolution" commenced in the second week of September 2015, with Democrats successfully blocking a vote in the Senate.

Note: Regardless of the political dimensions, the Iranian nuclear accord was being celebrated as a historic development in the realm of international diplomacy and global security.

See below for the major developments leading up to the deadline for a proposed landmark accord.

Economic Imperatives for Iran:

There were serious economic imperatives that could nudge Iran in the direction of productive negotiations. Due to the harsh international sanctions regime, Iran has had to overcome steep obstacles in selling its oil and receiving payments for its oil exports. In places where Iran was still able to sell oil, it has been stymied from receipt of funds due to prevailing sanctions, especially those levied by the United States. But if Iran was not able to sell its typical 2.6 million barrels of oil a day, or, if it was forced to sell those barrels at deep discounts, the decreased revenue inevitably had a debilitating effect on the Iranian economy, adding to the possibility of social unrest.

In 2013, United States data sources indicated that the crippling sanctions imposed by the Western countries on Iran were exacting a heavy toll. Indeed, these United States statistics showed Iranian oil exports tumbling to a 26-year low. The United States Department of Energy estimated that Iran's oil exports earned less than \$70 billion in 2012 -- a 27 percent decrease as compared with \$95 billion in 2011. As well, the International Energy Agency -- a watchdog entity -- estimated Iran lost more than \$40 billion in export revenues in 2012.

While Iran was mitigating the effects of devolving oil exports via higher oil prices (at the time), and despite trying to circumvent the sanctions on Iran's central bank by trading oil for goods, there were reports that Iran was storing an unusually large volume of oil in supertankers in the Persian Gulf. This was due to dwindling purchasers from Asian markets. As noted by the Financial Times, all expectations were that Iran would eventually have to cut its already low production, which would exacerbate its burgeoning economic crisis. With Iranians feeling the pain of the sanctions in the form of inflation, the sliding value of its currency (the rial), and high unemployment, economic anxieties and public discontent characterized the socio-economic climate in Iran.

It was, thus, not surprising that the newly-inaugurated President Rouhani's first speech at the helm included a call for an end to the crippling sanctions against Iran. Of course, Rouhani had to be aware that those sanctions were not about to dissipate without diplomatic progress and measurable policy changes as regards Iran's nuclear program. It was to be seen how far Rouhani would be willing to go -- in terms of serious diplomatic engagement over its nuclear program -- in order to lift Iran out of its dismal state of international alienation.

Demands of the West:

It should be noted that the P5+1 countries have called on Iran to stop its production and stockpiling of 20 percent enriched uranium (a capacity en route to the degree of enrichment needed to develop a nuclear weapon). They have also asked that Iran close its underground uranium enrichment facility at Fordo, close to the city of Qom, where most of the higher-grade enrichment is produced. Another demand entailed Iran ending its construction of a nuclear reactor in Arak. The United States was looking for verifiable evidence that Iran was taking action on such measures. Should these actions be taken, the P5+1 countries said they would entertain the possibility of easing the crippling sanctions regime that has terribly damaged Iran's economy. That being said, it is worth noting that without the pressure of this very crippling sanctions regime, it was hard to imagine that President Rouhani would have been elected to power in Iran in the first place, or that he would be engaging in diplomacy at all. As such, the success of the Obama administration's soft power approach of "smart sanctions" have to be acknowledged as the mean by which Iran was compelled to return to the diplomatic table.

Main Developments from 2013 through 2014 --

An interim breakthrough deal was forged on Iranian nuclear program in November 2013. The central provisions of the interim deal were as follows:

- Iran would curtail its nuclear activities for an initial six-month period
- Iran's uranium enrichment activities would be limited to levels below five percent purity -- the level needed to make a nuclear bomb
- Iran would neutralize its stockpile of near-20 percent enriched uranium (via dilution to less than five percent or conversion to a form that cannot be further enriched)
- Iran would refrain from installing further centrifuges used to enrich uranium
- Iran would ensure that at least half of the centrifuges at the Natanz and Fordo enrichment facilities were inoperable
- Iran would halt work on the construction of its heavy-water reactor at Arak and refrain from plutonium production there
- Iran would provide access to its nuclear facilities to international inspectors in order to verify that it was keeping its commitments
- In return for these moves, Iran would garner limited relief from sanctions and would not be subject to further sanctions for a period of six months

The accord represented a sea change in Iran's relationship with the United States in particular, which was actively evolving from one marked by hostility to one of engagement. On the issue of engagement, it should be noted that the United States and Iran had been carrying out clandestine face-to-face meetings over the course of the year -- beginning prior to the election of President Rouhani. According to a report by the Associated Press, William Burns -- the United States Deputy Secretary of State -- and Jake Sullivan -- the senior foreign policy adviser to Vice President Joe Biden -- convened meetings with Iranian officials several times earlier in 2013, with some of their talks taking place in the country of Oman. These meetings, which were authorized by United States President Barack Obama, were kept hidden from United States allies, including Israel, until September 2013.

Of key importance was the realization that this agreement with Iran was not simply a sudden development resulting from marathon negotiating sessions only in the month of November 2013. Instead, the accord was the fruit of President Obama's vision of outreach to Iran, matched by time-consuming diplomacy, and marked by several key confidence-building steps aimed at dispelling the doubt, dissonance, suspicion, and even enmity that had, until this time, characterized United States-Iranian relations. Indeed, the revelations about secret meetings with the Iranians gave weight to the view that Barack Obama had been serious when he advocated for direct negotiations with Iran back in 2008 during his campaign for the presidency of the United States. Barack Obama's outreach towards Iran was pilloried by hardline factions in the United States in 2008, although it was this policy of vigorous diplomacy that gained him support during the primary election process from a United States citizenry weary from wars already taking place at the time in Iraq and Afghanistan. Since becoming president, Barack Obama's "smart sanctions" approach to pressuring Iran was also subject to complaint and criticism from conservatives in the United States political sphere, who were calling for a military solution instead.

Ideological differences aside, there was no debating the fact that it was the Obama administration's imposition of "smart sanctions" that compelled Iran to come to the negotiating table in 2013. In fact, "smart sanctions" may have even driven the Iranian populace -- now tired of economic pressures such as inflation wrought by these punishing sanctions -- to select the most moderate of the presidential candidates in that country's 2013 election. Certainly, the election of Rouhani in Iran appeared to have acted as an imprimatur for diplomacy and engagement by the Iranian political establishment.

In January 2014, a date was set for the Iranian nuclear deal to go into force. On Jan. 20, 2014, the landmark nuclear deal went into effect with Iran starting the process of curbing uranium enrichment. On that day, Iran would begin the process of diluting its stockpile of uranium enriched to 20 percent, with all such uranium expected to be eliminated within a six-month period. As well, there would be provisions for monthly inspections at the Arak heavy

water reactor, and daily access made available to nuclear inspectors to the Fordo uranium enrichment site near the holy city of Qom.

A day later on Jan. 21, 2014, the IAEA said that the first round of inspections went well and, as such, there was a need to double the size of the inspection team used to monitor nuclear activity. It should be noted that the IAEA confirmed that Iran had ceased enriching uranium above five percent purity mark at both the Nantaz and Fordo facilities. Meanwhile, the Iranian media was reporting that the centrifuges used for enrichment at the Natanz plant were disconnected.

Moving forward to February 2014, the attention was on the negotiations aimed at finding a permanent resolution to Iran's controversial nuclear program. For the West, that hypothetical agreement would delineate the parameters of an acceptable nuclear program for Iran and alleviate their suspicions about Iran's ambitions to build a nuclear bomb. For its part, Iran has consistently insisted that its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes only; however, Iran has had a poor record of cooperating with the IAEA, and its secretive activities at clandestine nuclear facilities have only added to the West's anxieties.

The IAEA noted at the start of March 2014 that although much work remained, Iran was nonetheless meeting its obligations to reduce its nuclear stockpile as required by the prevailing nuclear deal. Of particular note was the dilution of its stock of higher-enriched uranium to a lower fissile concentration that would be unsuitable for making an atomic bomb. Yukiya Amano, the head of the IAEA, said that Iran had made enough progress to warrant receipt of a March 1, 2014, installment of funds previously blocked by sanctions (the total in this case would be about \$450 million).

At the same time, the West continued to pressure Iran to address its suspicions over the design and manufacture of an atomic bomb -- activity Iran has insisted was not occurring. The United States warned that Iran would have to satisfy the West's doubts on this matter if they were to forge a final settlement over Tehran's nuclear program.

Multilateral talks in March 2014 were marked by a willingness to negotiate, juxtaposed against tensions due to disagreements on the future of the Arak heavy water reactor that could potentially produce plutonium for the manufacture of atomic bombs. Another source of contention centered on the level of uranium enrichment to be conducted in Iran. There were no resolutions forged on these matters and the two sides simply agreed to meet again in April 2014.

Meanwhile, as the March 2014 talks were taking place, revelations emerged about Iran's continued purchase of prohibited components links with the country's nuclear program. According to Vann Van Diepen, the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for International Security and Non-Proliferation, said Iran was still forming front companies that were being used to conceal their nuclear procurement activities.

In April 2014, the world's nuclear watchdog group -- the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) -- announced that Iran had "reduced its stockpile of higher enriched uranium by half, in keeping with a prevailing nuclear agreement aimed at easing the harsh sanctions regime against Iran. To be specific, Iran diluted half of its higher enriched uranium reserves to a fissile levels unsuitable for nuclear proliferation. As well, Iran has continued to convert the other half of its stockpile of 20 percent enriched uranium into oxide for making reactor fuel.

At the start of July 2014, United States Deputy Secretary of State Bill Burns was expected to participate in multilateral negotiations in the Austrian capital of Vienna aimed at finalizing a long-term nuclear deal by July 20, 2014. Burns' participation indicated the possibility of bilateral negotiations between the United States and Iran on matters beyond the nuclear politics, quite possibly touching upon the security crisis rocking Iraq at the hands of Sunni extremist terrorists.

With an eye on facilitating a productive path, it was soon announced that United States Secretary of State John Kerry, along with the foreign ministers from the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Russia and China, would be

joining the negotiating table. The presence of the six foreign ministers from the P5+1 nation states was not necessarily a sign that a long-term deal to resolve concerns over Iran's nuclear could be reached by the July 20, 2014, deadline. Instead, the conventional wisdom remained that an extension of the existing deal was likely necessary, but to even reach that point, the distance between negotiating positions had to be narrowed. The participation of the top diplomats from the P5+1 nation states was more than likely aimed at narrowing that gap.

By July 14, 2014, following the conclusion of this round of nuclear talks in Vienna, United States Secretary of State John Kerry made clear that if Iran wanted to secure a long-term agreement with the world powers and bring an end to damaging sanctions, it would have to reduce its capacity to make nuclear fuel. In an address to the media, Secretary of State Kerry said, "We have made it crystal clear that the 19,000 (nuclear centrifuges) that are currently part of their program is too many."

For its part, Iran was attempting to advance an alternative path with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif suggesting that Iran might keep its enrichment program at existing levels for a few years (essentially an extended "pause"), while also holding onto the 19,000 centrifuges it had installed for an industrial-scale uranium enrichment program. However, the P5+1 countries were not as interested in that type of concession as they were seeking to ensure that Iran simply did not pursue nuclear fuel needed for the manufacturing of a nuclear bomb. In fact, as noted by United States Secretary of State John Kerry, the very notion that Iran would be able to keep all of its existing centrifuges was simply "out of the question."

As expected, on July 18, 2014, it was announced that the deadline for reaching a deal on Iran's nuclear program would be extended for four months until November 2014. The extension would provide all parties with more time to engage in nuclear negotiations, with the goal of achieving a final deal by Nov. 24, 2014. A joint statement issued by the European Union foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, and Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, read as follows: "There are still significant gaps on some core issues which will require more time and effort."

During the four-month extension period, most sanctions against Iran would remain in place; however, Iran would be permitted to access an additional \$2.8 billion of its frozen assets. United States Secretary of State John Kerry said that in exchange for the access to these funds, Iran would continue to use its most problematic stores of uranium (those enriched to a level of 20 percent) for a research reactor that is used to make medical isotopes. Kerry also addressed the contentious issues requiring more negotiations as he said, "There are very real gaps on issues such as enrichment capacity at the Natanz enrichment facility. This issue is an absolutely critical component of any potential comprehensive agreement. We have much more work to do in this area, and in others as well."

NOTE: As of 2015, a negotiations extension remained in place with an eye on finally forging a deal or at least at ending the negotiations process aimed at a final agreement.

2015 Update on Nuclear Negotiations:

As of March 2015, despite a diplomatic contretemps between the United States and Israel over multilateral nuclear negotiations with Iran, the diplomatic process was ongoing.

That contretemps reached new heights on March 3, 2015, when Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu went to Capitol Hill in the United States to give an address to Congress. In that speech, he warned that the nuclear deal being negotiated by global powers and Iran in Geneva, Switzerland, would actually herald a nuclearized Iran. To this end, he said, "This deal doesn't block Iran's path to the bomb, it paves Iran's path to the bomb." Disparaging the efforts being carried out by United States Secretary of State John Kerry and his counterparts from the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Russia and China, Netanyahu said: "We've been told that no deal is better than a bad deal. Well this is a bad deal, a very bad deal."

Not surprisingly, the Israeli leader had harsh words regarding Iran, reminding the chamber -- and the worlds -- that "Iran's regime is as radical as ever, the ideology is deeply rooted in militant Islam... it will always be an enemy of U.S." He also noted that the Iranian imprint was growing in the Middle East, as it meddled in the affairs of countries such as Iraq and Yemen, while backing Lebanon-based Hezbollah. To this end, Netanyahu said that Iran was on a "march of conquest, subjugation and terror."

Netanyahu's speech, despite the boycott by as many as 60 Democrats, was well-received by the Republican-dominated Congress. Indeed, Republicans in Congress made a point to giving the Israeli leader a far warmer reception, with more boisterous applause than had been conveyed to President Barack Obama at the State of the Union less than two months earlier.

For its part, the White House blasted the Israeli prime minister's address as being filled by rhetoric and short of good ideas. As noted by President Obama himself after the Netanyahu visit to Capitol Hill, "On the core issue, which is how to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon which would make it far more dangerous, the prime minister [Netanyahu] did not offer any viable alternatives."

Nevertheless, the fact of the matter was that Netanyahu's address was a political success that would likely help him with hardline voters at home, while currying favor with hardliners across party lines in the United States. Of course, it was more difficult to ascertain whether the Netanyahu speech was necessarily in the best interests of the United States.

The reality was that without an agreement of some sort, Iran would likely move forward with the pursuit of its nuclear program, which could potentially involve bomb production. Indeed, it was only the interim nuclear deal (set to expire in mid-2015), which created the space for nuclear negotiations to take place, that had brought any halt to Iranian nuclear activities. Before the interim agreement was forged, despite the imposition of harsh sanctions, Iran was producing centrifuges and fissile material. Without a nuclear accord going forward, Iran would be free to resume unfettered nuclear activities.

Of note was the fact that President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu have viewed the Iranian nuclear problem differently. For President Obama, the imperative has always been the same: To prevent Iran from producing a nuclear bomb. But for Prime Minister Netanyahu, the objective has been to prevent Iran from having nuclear capability. While the two respective goals overlap, they must be understood distinctly.

A good deal for President Obama would be one in which Iran's nuclear program is curtailed, regulated, and monitored to the extent that its breakout time for creating a bomb would be lengthy and difficult. No deal would likely be acceptable to Prime Minister Netanyahu, who was determined to see Iran's nuclear capability ended in totality, and all of its nuclear facilities dismantled. Short of military action, it was difficult to see how Netanyahu's goals would be accomplished. But even military strikes would be risky since multiple sites -- from the uranium enrichment plants at Natanz and Fordo, to the heavy-water plutonium reactor at Arak, not to mention an array of laboratories and mines at stake.

Of significance was the fact that the very case by Israel (at least, as conveyed by Netanyahu) was being tarred by questions of credibility. At issue was the release of a cache of confidential intelligence documents that appeared to contradict Netanyahu's claims about Iran being imminently positioned to manufacture a nuclear bomb. Leaked cables -- reportedly from South African intelligence. but which were shared with certain news outlets -- indicated that in an address before the United Nations in 2012, the Israeli leader misrepresented Iran's progress on nuclear development, and even contradicted Israel's own Mossad secret service to make that claim.

Going back to 2012, Netanyahu famously stood before the United Nations General Assembly with a cartoon depiction of a bomb with a red line and declared that Iran would be positioned to build a nuclear weapons the following year. As such, he demanded global action to prevent Iran from achieving that end. Now, however, in 2015, the leaked documents, which were shared with Al-Jazeera and published by The Guardian newspaper,

included conclusions from Israel's own Mossad intelligence agency that Iran was "not performing the activity necessary to produce weapons." The Mossad briefing did note that Iran appeared to be moving in a direction "which will reduce the time required to produce weapons." However, the Mossad briefing also asserted that Iran "does not appear to be ready" to enrich uranium to the higher levels necessary for nuclear weapons. (The manufacture of a nuclear bomb would require enrichment of 90 percent.)

It should be noted that in response to the revelations ensconced in these leaked documents, the Israeli government said there was little difference in Netanyahu's claims as compared with Mossad's findings. Both agreed that Iran was indeed seeking to manufacture a nuclear bomb.

Regardless of Iran's actual intent or the actual timeline at stake, the difficult diplomatic work of trying to forge an agreement that would prevent Iran from producing a nuclear weapon was ongoing.

It should be noted that in the aftermath of the Netanyahu speech, United States Secretary of State John Kerry warned that simply demanding Iran's capitulation was unlikely to compel that country to voluntarily halt its nuclear development program. Kerry's remarks intimated criticism for the muscular language emitted by the Israeli leader, which were heavy on rhetoric but unlikely to achieve actual results. Instead, Secretary of State Kerry noted that the diplomatic path presented a serious path forward. He said, "No one has presented a more viable, lasting alternative for how you actually prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon. So folks, simply demanding that Iran capitulate is not a plan. And nor would any of our P5+1 partners support us in that position." At the same time, Secretary of State Kerry made clear that while the hard work of diplomacy was yielding results, there remained "significant gaps and important choices that need to be made" by Iran.

In Iran, President Hassan Rouhani emphasized his country's position. Rouhani indicated that Iran was prepared to subject itself to greater scrutiny, in order to satisfy the international community's concerns about nuclear weapons production. But at the same time, he reiterated Iran's long-standing stance that it was entitled to nuclear development. Rouhani said, "If the basis of these negotiations is for increased transparency, we will accept greater transparency. But if the negotiations are trying to prevent the people of Iran from their inalienable right, in other words advancement in science and technology, it is very natural that Iran will not accept such an understanding or agreement."

Of course, concerns about Iranian nuclear development, and a potential nuclear deal, extended not only to Israel but also to the Sunni Arab world. Of note was the ever-increasing sectarian divide between Shi'ites and Sunnis in the Middle East since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the Arab Spring in 2011. With this schism only deepening, Sunni countries, such as Saudi Arabia, were increasingly concerned about an ascendant Shi'ite Iran. Indeed, Iran already had its imprint in the Syria-Lebanon area due to tacit support of Hezbollah, and had tightened its alliance with Iraq in the post-Saddam Hussein era, and was now believed to be clandestinely backing the Shi'ite Zaidi rebellion (known as the Houthi rebellion) in Yemen. The notion of a nuclearized Iran, already with its tentacles stretching across the region, was not regarded positively by several Arab countries. Accordingly, Secretary of State Kerry traveled to Saudi Arabia to calm the anxieties of several Sunni Arab countries, including Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia itself, regarding a potential Iranian nuclear deal.

Speaking to this issue, Secretary of State Kerry said, "For all the objections that any country has to Iranian activities in the region, and believe me, we have objections and others in the world have objections, the first step is to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon." At stake was the goal of reaching the "right deal," which Kerry said would "close off any paths that Iran could have towards fissile material for a weapon."

To that end, the diplomatic track was continuing and the latest round of multilateral talks -- involving the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Russia, and China -- appeared to be making progress, with all eyes on late March 2015 as a possible timeline for a deal, with the details ironed out and solidified by a mid-2015 deadline.

United States Secretary of State John Kerry indicated that the negotiations were productive, saying to the media: "We made progress." His Iranian counterpart, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, said they were forging "a better understanding" at the negotiating table.

The comprehensive pact appeared to be geared towards constraining Iran's nuclear breakout capability, and restricting Iran's nuclear activities for a 10-year period, with an easing of restrictions on nuclear development after that time. Under consideration was a plan to deal with most of Iran's enriched uranium externally, or to convert it to a form that would not be easily used in weapons development. Overall, there would be strict curbs on Iranian nuclear development for a decade, particularly with regard to the handling of enriched uranium and the number of centrifuges at stake. But there would also be "rewards" of sorts for Iranian compliance and cooperation in the form of gradually eased restrictions and the lifting of sanctions. The United Nations' nuclear watchdog agency, the International Atomic Energy Agency, would play a central role in any proposed deal, and would have the primary responsibility of monitoring Iran's compliance and cooperation.

In the second week of March 2015, in the wake of the controversial Netanyahu address to Congress, 47 Republican senators published an open letter to Iran. The signatories to that document sought to instruct the Iranian government about United States constitutional law, which they suggested the Iranians might not "fully understand." The letter, which was spearheaded by freshman Republican Senator Tom Cotton of Arkansas, made the claim that any nuclear deal that might emerge from the negotiations in Switzerland would be "nothing more than an executive agreement between President Obama and Ayatollah Khamenei," and thus require congressional approval while being subject to revocation by a future president. To this end, the letter included the following sentence: "The next president could revoke such an executive agreement with the stroke of a pen, and future Congresses could modify the terms of the agreement at any time."

It was difficult to interpret the missive as anything other than a transparent attempt to undermine President Barack Obama's leadership in the realm of foreign policy. Indeed, editorials from more than 22 cities across the country excoriated the 47 Republican senators for their action, which they characterized as a reckless and partisan stunt. Some newspaper boards even argued that by dispatching that missive, the 47 Republican senators were marching the country down the road of war. Almost all the editorials vociferously criticized the 47 Republican senators for betraying the national interests of the United States, whose constitution, accords broad authority to the president to conduct foreign policy.

From the Senate, Minority Leader Harry Reid -- the top Democrat in the upper chamber -- minced no words as he declared: "Let's be clear: Republicans are undermining our commander in chief while empowering the ayatollahs." Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who was expected to seek the Democratic nomination for president in 2016, entered the fray, saying that the letter's signatories could only be motivated by one of the following two rationales. She said, "There appear to be two logical answers. Either these senators were trying to be helpful to the Iranians or harmful to the commander-in-chief in the midst of high-stakes international diplomacy. Either answer does discredit to the letter's signatories." White House spokesperson, Josh Earnest, said the letter was intended to undermine diplomacy and could spur a "rush to war, or at least the rush to the military option."

For his part, President Barack Obama responded to the infamous letter by accusing the 47 Republican senators of "interfering" in nuclear negotiations -- an arena typically reserved for the executive branch of government. He also sardonically noted that the 47 signatories constituted an "unusual coalition" with Iran's hard-line religious leaders, who have also opposed the nuclear negotiations. As noted by President Obama: "I think it's somewhat ironic to see some members of Congress wanting to make common cause with the hardliners in Iran. It's an unusual coalition." Vice President Joe Biden -- a former Senator himself and the official president of the upper chamber -- was more vituperative in his condemnation. Vice President Biden said that the letter from the 47 Republicans was "beneath the dignity of an institution I revere." He added, "In 36 years in the United States Senate, I cannot recall another

instance in which Senators wrote directly to advise another country -- much less a longtime foreign adversary -- that the president does not have the constitutional authority to reach a meaningful understanding with them,"

Of significance was the reaction by the Iranian Foreign Minister, Dr. Javad Zarif, who dismissed the letter as a "propaganda ploy." Zarif said, "In our view, this letter has no legal value and is mostly a propaganda ploy. It is very interesting that while negotiations are still in progress and while no agreement has been reached, some political pressure groups are so afraid even of the prospect of an agreement that they resort to unconventional methods, unprecedented in diplomatic history. This indicates that like Netanyahu, who considers peace as an existential threat, some are opposed to any agreement, regardless of its content."

Educated in the United States himself, the Iranian foreign minister did not shy away from showing his own constitutional chops, intimating that the Republican Senators who signed onto the letter may not been fully conversant with the United States Constitution. To this end, Zarif said, "A change of administration does not in any way relieve the next administration from international obligations undertaken by its predecessor in a possible agreement about Iran's peaceful nuclear program." Zarif also noted that a move by a future president to dismantle a yet-to-be-achieved nuclear agreement would be in contravention to international jurisprudence, saying, "I wish to enlighten the authors that if the next administration revokes any agreement with the stroke of a pen, as they boast, it will have simply committed a blatant violation of international law."

To be sure, the letter from the 47 Republican senators emphasized the view that any deal would have to be ratified by the upper house of the Congress. However, both Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif and United States Secretary of State John Kerry pointed out that the vast majority of international agreements forged in recent decades have been executive measures and not treaties requiring ratification by the Senate.

Moreover, any deal emerging from the nuclear talk would be neither a bilateral agreement nor a conventional treaty between nation state. Instead, it would be a multilateral accord, forged by the P5+1 countries, including all permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. The accord would likely activated as a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, then sealed under the aegis of the United Nations Security Council, and thus would in fact not be subject to modification by Congress. In this regard, it would be follow on the heels of United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1696, 1737, 1747, 1803, 1835, and 1929 that have also dealt with Iran's nuclear program. Neither a Republican-controlled Senate nor a future president would be positioned to unilaterally reverse the terms of a potential accord of this sort.

Congress, with its power of the purse, could certainly place certain limits on President Obama or any future president as regards sanctions to be levied upon Iran (or any other country). However, Congress cannot summarily override international obligations forged in a multilateral frame, and which would be structured as an international measure, without being in flagrant breach of international law.

Beyond the legal perils at stake, there were political perils to consider. The fact of the matter was that any post-Obama president would be placed in a precarious position within the world community for violating an agreement reached and understood as a matter of international consensus.

Meanwhile, there were rumblings in regards to violations of domestic law when some observers noted that the letter to Iran could be regarded as a violation of the 18th century Logan Act. To be precise, the Logan Act prohibits any "Private correspondence with foreign governments" and reads; "Any citizen of the United States, wherever he may be, who, without authority of the United States, directly or indirectly commences or carries on any correspondence or intercourse with any foreign government or any officer or agent thereof, with intent to influence the measures or conduct of any foreign government or of any officer or agent thereof, in relation to any disputes or controversies with the United States, or to defeat the measures of the United States, shall be fined under this title or imprisoned not more than three years, or both." In truth, it was unlikely that a law dating back to 1799 would be used to prosecute the 47 senators; however, its discussion has only added to the level of scandal and drama surrounding a potential landmark multilateral agreement on Iran's nuclear program.

Returning to the issue of the prevailing nuclear negotiations -- the fact of the matter was that nuclear talks continued in Switzerland in the third week of March 2015. The principal parties acknowledged that progress was being made, particularly with regard to technical provisions. Ali Akbar Salehi, the head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization, expressed delight over his productive meetings with United States Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz, saying, "We have made progress on technical issues. One or two issues remain and need to be discussed." For his part, Secretary of State Kerry said, "We're pushing some tough issues but we made progress."

However, other Western representatives had a different view. A State Department official told Reuters News, "We are pretty far away. There are a lot of issues that still need to be resolved. The Iranians must make substantial concessions." Moreover, as reported by Reuters News, an anonymous European negotiator said: "Contrary to what the Iranians are saying with regard to 90 percent of an accord being done, that's not correct. We are not close to an agreement."

Clearly, another round of talks was anticipated to resolve a slate of remaining issues. Of note was the West's insistence that Iran's nuclear activities be curtailed and its nuclear breakout time be circumscribed to one year. Stated differently, an arrangement had to be made whereby Iran would need a full year to garner enough fissile material (either high enriched uranium or plutonium before it could produce a nuclear weapon. On the agenda for discussion was a plan to limit the number of enrichment centrifuges Iran would be allowed to keep; other considerations included limits of the size of uranium stockpiles.

Note that on March 21, 2015, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani indicated that progress was being made in nuclear talks, setting the stage for a final deal. He was quoted by Iranian state media as saying. "There is nothing that cannot be resolved." Iran's Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, however, emitted a very different tone from that of Iran's more moderate president, Rouhani. In reference to President Obama's Persian Nowruz message to the Iranian people, in which the United State leader said a deal on Iran's nuclear program presented "an historic opportunity to resolve this issue peacefully," Ayatollah Khamenei said that his country should not submit to the demands of the global powers. Khamenei noted, "Basically, what he [Obama] says in his message is that you must accept the terms we dictate in the nuclear talks so that jobs, investment, and economic activities will blossom in your country... this view will never lead to any conclusions for us." In many senses, Obama and Rouhani were in similar positions -- both were pragmatic presidents, both were eager to improve bilateral relations between their countries, while meeting global security goals, yet both men were also politically at odds with the conservative and hardline elements in their own countries.

Days later, the landscape for negotiations could only be understood as uncertain. The various sides appeared to be deadlocked over certain sticking points. France was looking for more stringent restrictions on the Iranians -- a position by France that was at odds with the other P5+1 countries. Also at issue was the fact that France was not keen on the notion of a quick suspension to United Nations sanctions against Iran -- a demand being made by the Iranians. Meanwhile, the United States was advocating that restrictions on Iranian nuclear work should be in place for at least 10 years, while France was looking for a 15 year timeline, along with 10 years of rigorous IAEA monitoring. Other contentions centered on Iran's demand that it be allowed unfettered research and development of advanced centrifuges, which are used to enrich uranium for use in nuclear reactors, and ultimately are linked with weapons production.

Negotiations in mid-March 2015 abruptly ended when the Iranian delegation announced they were returning to Tehran because President Hassan Rouhani's 90-year-old mother had died. The break in negotiations was not being regarded as problematic; instead, all sides seemed to agree that talks would resume at the end of March 2015.

The fact of the matter was that significant issues remained unresolved with Iran and the P5+1 countries far apart in some regards. Still, the consequences of not reaching a deal would likely destabilize the world; as such, the impetus for forging an agreement was strong and all expectations were that the March 2015 deadline would be

extended again to give the negotiations process further time and space. For all the players, the March 30, 2015, deadline to reach a political framework agreement was not one to be held in stone. Instead, they were looking at the June 30, 2015, deadline for a final deal as being more pertinent.

Broken negotiations or breakthrough deal?

At the end of March 2015, the P5+1 multilateral talks with Iran were set to end, with all eyes on a framework for a long term agreement. But the negotiations were mired by various sticking points, prompting the parties to extend the negotiating process.

At issue were freshly emerging objections by Iran to the notion that it would ship its enriched uranium out of the country, where it would be unavailable for potential weaponization purposes. Since a potential Iranian nuclear deal has -- for years -- rested on this provision, Iran's insistence that its enriched uranium reside in Iranian possession could be an unresolvable obstacle in the negotiations process. Meanwhile, the other unresolved issues (discussed above) -- from the pace of lifting sanctions to strict monitoring restrictions -- continued to pose challenges. One Iranian negotiator, Majid Takhteravanchi, signaled some intransigence as he said in an interview with the Iranian Fars news agency that the lifting of sanctions on Iranian terms was essential. He said, "There will be no agreement if the sanctions issue cannot be resolved. This issue is very important for us."

Still, the P5+1 parties agreed to continue the conversation. As noted by United States Secretary of State John Kerry, "There still remain some difficult issues. We are working very hard to work those through." Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov sounded an optimistic note, saying that the chance of resolving the issues was high. He said, "The chances are high. They are probably not 100 percent but you can never be 100 percent certain of anything. The odds are quite doable if none of the parties raise the stakes at the last minute." Of course, the Iranians' objections to the removal of its enriched uranium could well be regarded as "raising the stakes at the last minute."

Lengthy and difficult talks continued at the Beau-Rivage Ralace hotel in the Swiss city of Lausanne. The March 31, 2015, "soft" or self-imposed deadline actually passed, with all parties set on extending the negotiations. All eyes were now focused on the first week of April 2015 as a new target date to forge consensus on the structure of a final accord.

On April 2, 2015, after marathon talks in Switzerland, the P5+1 countries and Iran issued a joint statement announcing that the hard work of negotiations and diplomacy had yielded results, and that a historic framework agreement on Iran's nuclear program had been reached. As stated by the European Union foreign policy chief, Federica Mogherini, "We have reached solutions on key parameters of a joint comprehensive plan of action."

The terms of the agreement would ensure that a longer time horizon -- of one year -- needed by Iran to enrich enough uranium for one nuclear weapon. This breakout period of one year would be held in place for a decade. Of note was the fact that Iran's existing breakout time was estimated to be only two months.

The agreement would reduce the number of installed centrifuges from around the 19,000 Iran currently has in its possession to 6,000; all the centrifuges would be the less efficient first-generation IR-1 enrichment models while newer-model centrifuges would be out of commission. Of those 6,000 centrifuges, about 5,000 would be allowed to enrich uranium for 10 years. The remaining centrifuges would be moved to storage and controlled by the United Nations' nuclear watchdog group, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

The joint comprehensive plan of action would also ensure that Iran's actual stockpile of uranium would be reduced from 10,000 kilograms of low-enriched uranium to 300 kilograms along a 15-year time horizon. As well, Iran would cease construction on new uranium enrichment facilities for a 15-year period.

Also central to the joint comprehensive plan of action were provisions to curtail Iran's enrichment facilities to the Natanz nuclear site, and convert the nuclear facilities at Fordo and Arak for purely research purposes.

According to a fact sheet from the Government of the United States, Iran would gain sanctions relief only if it "verifiably abides by its commitments." That sanctions relief would apply to those nuclear-related measures introduced by the United States and the European Union and not include sanctions related to terrorism and human rights abuses. There would be a "snap back" measure so that the sanctions could be re-imposed if Iran was not compliant with the provisions of the deal.

Also at stake would be prevailing United Nations Security Council resolutions on Iran's nuclear activities. A new resolution would be introduced that would hold in place certain key provisions relevant to "sensitive" nuclear activities, while also addressing the new measures outlined above.

A rigorous program of verification would remain in place to corroborate Iran's adherence to the terms of the agreement and to ensure that Iran meets its obligations. For example, Iran would have to provide the IAEA with unfettered access to its nuclear facilities, uranium mines, and centrifuge storage facilities, ensuring the IAEA inspectors could investigate any suspicious sites or covert activities.

In an interview with Radio Free Europe, Kelsey Davenport, the director for Nonproliferation Policy at the Arms Control Association, explained that the non-proliferation parameters of the agreement were "very strong." Davenport said, "This deal effectively blocks Iran's pathways to a weapon using both uranium and plutonium, and it puts in place stringent monitoring and verification to ensure that any deviation from the agreement or any covert program will be immediately detected."

Mark Fitzpatrick, the director of the Nonproliferation and Disarmament Program at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, came to a similar conclusion. In his interview with Radio Free Europe that the agreement would result in a rigid nuclear verification regime. Fitzpatrick explained that under the verification infrastructure, violations of the agreement at any point along the "supply chain" would be easy to discern. He said, "It would be detected very quickly if Iran were to use any of its declared facilities. If Iran were to try to hide something, that would also very likely be detected because this deal -- the parameters -- include a lot of verification measures that go beyond the normal IAEA monitoring."

The successful framework agreement reached on April 2, 2015, marked a massive breakthrough in the realm of international diplomacy for the purpose of global security.

The agreement presaged a long-term deal, which would have to be made by the final "hard" deadline on June 30, 2015. The prevailing question continued to dominate: Can a final accord on Iran's nuclear program be forged? The answer to that question remained the same at the time of writing: It was yet to be determined if the nuclear negotiations would actually end in a viable and enduring deal.

Political Complications:

In the initial aftermath of the framework announcement, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani vowed that his country would abide by the terms of the agreement, saying in a national address, "The world must know that we do not intend to cheat." He warned of consequences if the partner states did not do their own part, saying, "If the other side acts on its promises, Iran will abide by its promises. If, however, they one day decide to follow a different path, our nation too will be always free to make [another] choice."

On the other side of the Atlantic, United States President Barack Obama was set to embark on a political campaign of sorts, as he hoped to persuade skeptical members of Congress that the Iranian nuclear deal was the best way of ensuring Iran did not develop a nuclear weapon. But he was immediately stymied by Israeli Prime Minister

Benjamin Netanyahu who concluded that the deal needed additional measures included, such as a "clear" and unambiguous Iranian recognition of Israel's right to exist."

The Obama administration, though, noted that the purpose of the agreement was carefully circumscribed to deal with preventing Iran from gaining a nuclear weapon. President Obama himself entered the equation, insisting that the framework agreement would be good for global security, as it would "cut off every pathway that Iran could take to develop a nuclear weapon." He added, "We will be able to resolve one of the greatest threats to our security and to do so peacefully." It was to be seen if Obama would gain concurrence in the United States Congress, or, if hardliners would be able to cull together a veto-proof majority to force the president of the United States to seek Congressional approval of the deal.

An additional complication was emanating from Iran itself, as that country demanded immediate sanctions relief as part of the agreement. To be precise, Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, said that not only would all sanctions have to be lifted on the day any deal is signed, but that military sites would be not be open to international nuclear inspectors. Clearly, immediate sanctions relief was not part of the blueprint unveiled on April 2, 2015, while a rigorous program of verification stood as the bulwark of the very deal. As such, the Ayatollah's statements raised questions as to whether or not a viable agreement was actually on the table.

Another challenge was presented in the form of Russia's decision to lift a ban on missile deliveries to Iran while commencing an oil-for-goods exchange. These moves were being met with concern from the Obama White House in the United States. For Russia, though, it was evident that the plan was to immediately reap economic benefits from the cessation of sanctions against Iran. United States Secretary of State John Kerry was expected to bring up the subject for discussion with his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov.

Secretary of State Kerry, meanwhile, had his hands full at home in the United States, as he lobbied members of Congress to hold off on any legislation that might curtail his abilities to forge a solid final nuclear deal by the June 30, 2015, deadline mentioned above. At issue was the fact that hardliners in Congress have been eager to enter the realm of foreign relations, and force any deal signed by the president to be subject to review by the legislative branch of government. While Congress' hand could not stop the president from signing onto the deal being negotiated, the president would still have to gain cooperation from Congress to modify the sanctions regime against Iran. President Obama has made clear that he would veto moves intended to blunt or undermine the ability of his administration to negotiate a final deal with the Iranians.

The reality, however, was that President Obama could well be could be faced with a veto-proof super majority of bipartisan senators, who could conceivably impact his administration's negotiations. As such, Secretary of State Kerry, along with treasury Secretary Jack Lew and Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz, were eager to assure Republicans and Democrats of the substance of the agreement, and gain their cooperation in allowig him more time to finalize an acceptable nuclear deal with Iran. Ahead of these key meetings with legislators, Kerry said, "We hope Congress will listen carefully ... but also give us some space so we will be able to complete a very difficult task."

Note that on April 14, 2015, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee crafted a compromise bill that include a modest review period of 30 days for a final Iran nuclear deal. The bill would also specify that sanctions relief would be dependent on an end to Iran's support for terrorism, but it would do so in more malleable language. It seemed that the committee was hoping to avoid a showdown with the executive branch of government. President Obama made it known that he would support the compromise legislation in this new form. According to White House spokesperson Josh Earnest, the president was "not thrilled" with the bill; however, he concluded that the new proposal was a more acceptable measure. It was conceivable that the White House could change its stance if objectionable amendments were attached to the compromise bill. The bill passed by the committee and would be taken up by the full Senate.

Meanwhile, the negotiations process was ongoing, with a new round of talks between Iran and the P5+1 powers resuming in the last week of April 2015. United States Secretary of State John Kerry acknowledged that serious differences remained between Iran and the global powers, but added that they were nonetheless closer than ever to forging a sustainable agreement with Iran. Secretary of State Kerry said, "We are, in fact, closer than ever to the good, comprehensive deal that we have been seeking, and if we can get there, the entire world will be safer." He added, "If finalized and implemented, (an agreement) will close off all of Iran's possible pathways to the nuclear material required for a nuclear weapon and give the international community the confidence that it needs to know that Iran's nuclear program is indeed exclusively peaceful."

At the start of May 2015, those negotiations concluded, with emphasis on key sticking points -- namely the re-imposition of United Nations sanctions, should Iran violate the agreement, and the potential purchase of nuclear technology' known as a "procurement channel." The sanctions issue was being regarded as a particularly challenging one, with concerns centering on crafting parameters that would allow for the automatic re-imposition of United Nations sanctions (referred to as "snapback" provision), thus by-passing the potential hazard of a veto by either China or Russia. Western negotiators have made it clear that without the implementation of a snapback mechanism, there would be no final Iranian nuclear deal. Meanwhile, the procurement channel issue was being taken seriously, given the United Kingdom's report to the United Nations on a spurious Iranian nuclear procurement network, which was linked with two blacklisted companies.

A fresh round of negotiations commenced in Austria in mid-May 2015.

Recent Nuclear Negotiations Developments

As May 2015 came to a close, the six P5-1 international powers were able to reach an agreement aimed at restoring United Nations sanctions if Iran was found to be in non-compliance a complex issue as intimated just above.

Under the agreement, suspected breaches by Iran would be addressed by a dispute-resolution panel. As well, with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) monitoring Iran's nuclear program, IAEA reports would be used to assess compliance. If Iran was found to be in violation of the terms of the deal, then United Nations sanctions would effectively be "snapped" back into place.

The "snapback" provision meant that a significant hurdle had been crossed in reaching a comprehensive nuclear deal with Iran. Still, Iran had to concur with this measure for the deal to go forward, and Iran was itself suggesting that it would immediately resume its nuclear activities if the six P5-1 international powers did not meet their own obligations under the terms of the deal.

Moving forward, there was more diplomatic work to be done regarding access to sensitive Iranian military sites in order to verify Iran's compliance with the new nuclear development parameters. Of particular concern was the matter of the inspection of non-nuclear sites and military installations in Iran, presumably to ensure no clandestine nuclear operations were taking place in violation of the terms of any future permanent agreement. Iran has been cold to the idea of inspections to such facilities while France has threatened to block any final nuclear settlement without a provision for that type of intrusive inspections regime.

The start of June 2015 was marked by the resumption of negotiations between the six P5-1 international powers and the Iranian delegation in Austria. Of note was the absence of United States Secretary of State John Kerry as he recovered from a broken leg; however, the talks went on with United States negotiator Wendy Sherman representing the interests of her country.

The June 30, 2015, deadline loomed ahead for a final and sustainable agreement to be reached on Iran's nuclear program. The challenge of the task was aptly described by Iran's deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi, who

was quoted as saying in an interview with Iranian media, "There has been progress but still we have a difficult way ahead of us."

By mid-June 2015, all reports from Vienna in Austria were that the nuclear talks between the delegations from Iran and the six P5-1 international powers had stalled and, as such, the deadline for the final agreement might have to be pushed past June 30, 2015. Indeed, with only days to go until that deadline, it was announced that nuclear negotiations between Iran and the six P5-1 international powers would extend beyond June 30, 2015. There were reports that Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif was heading home to Tehran -- quite likely for discussions with the government in Iran regarding the difficult final status issues, such as access to IAEA nuclear monitors and the timing of sanctions relief.

At the start of July 2015, Iran and the six P5-1 international powers remained deadlocked and a breakthrough had not been made in the negotiations process. However, representatives from the various delegations noted that progress was being made, and that the "bones" of a final agreement were slowly taking shape. As indicated above, particular sticking points included the matter of sanctions relief and the inspections and monitoring of Iranian compliance. That latter issue took on greater relevance when Iran's Ayatollah Ali Khamenei declared that there would be no sustained freeze of sensitive nuclear development, and that military sites would not be open to inspectors. This absolutist stance by Iran's Supreme Leader could potentially upend the deal that so many diplomats had worked diligently to forge.

Still, the diplomatic work continued with all parties suggesting that a final agreement might be advanced by a new deadline of July 7, 2015. In an interview with the media, United States Secretary of State John Kerry indicated that a deal was possible in that timeframe as he said, "If hard choices get made in the next couple of days and made quickly, we could get agreement this week." But Kerry also acknowledged that negotiations had not yet yielded breakthrough results on the key technical issues, as he added that Iran and the six P5-1 international powers were "not where we need to be on several of the most difficult issues." If no progress was made with Iran on those matters, then the United States was ready to walk away -- regardless of the herculean effort to date in the negotiating arena. That deadline of June 7, 2015 was extended yet again and negotiations were set to continue with negotiators looking for a final deal. The new goal was to reach a nuclear agreement by mid-July 2015.

In the days leading up to the middle of July 2015, Iran accused the West of complicating the negotiations process by introducing new demands, while countries of the West warned that progress was now slow and difficult. There were also reports of loud arguments between Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif and United States Secretary of State Kerry. For his part, Secretary of State Kerry was signaling that he would be prepared to walk away from the negotiating table as he said, "We can't wait forever. If the tough decisions don't get made, we are absolutely prepared to call an end to this." On the other side of the equation, Iran responded bitterly with Iranian Envoy Ali Akbar Velayati referring to Kerry's statement as "part of America's psychological warfare against Iran."

But by July 12, 2015, tensions were calming and there were reports that the foundations of an agreement were emerging. To this end, Secretary of State Kerry suggested progress was being made as he said, "I think we're getting to some real decisions." French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius offered a similar message as he said: "I hope we are finally entering the final phase of these marathon negotiations. I believe it."

In the early hours of July 14, 2015, reports were emerging that a final deal was in the works. Some elements of the final deal were being leaked in the public sphere. Those elements of the nuclear draft included provisions for the United Nations inspectors to have access to all suspicious Iranian nuclear sites, including military compounds. The agreement would also have to be adopted by the United Nations Security Council in the form of a resolution, and then the work on limiting and regulating Iran's nuclear activities, as well as the measures related to sanctions relief, would be put into effect in 2016.

Final Iran Nuclear Deal Reached:

On July 14, 2015, Iran and the so-called P5+1 world powers officially reached a historic accord on Iran's controversial nuclear program. The accord was formally announced in the Austrian capital of Vienna where the final slate of difficult negotiations had taken place. As presaged in the previous sections of this report, the agreement would limit Iran's nuclear activity and development, essentially preventing the production of a nuclear bomb. The agreement was also aimed at extending Iran's nuclear weapons "breakout" time from its current timeline of a month to a year. The deal was not intended to address issues related to state-sponsorship of terrorism or human rights abuses. In exchange, the West would lift its international oil and financial sanctions imposed on Iran.

In a separate but related development, Iran and the the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) -- the world's nuclear watchdog entity -- said they had signed a roadmap to resolve outstanding issues. Already, under the aegis of the 2013 interim temporary accord, the IAEA verified that Iran had eliminated its known stockpiles of 20 percent enriched uranium. This 20 percent grade uranium can be used (1) to produce medical isotopes and (2) to fuel research reactors, but (3) it can also be purified to weapons-grade levels. The IAEA has already verified that Iran met this demand dating back to 2013.

Central elements of the final deal were as follows -

- Iran would reduce its enriched-uranium stockpile by 98 percent
- Iran would retain a reduced number of uranium centrifuges (5060 in total) for a ten-year period
- Iran would be limited to refining uranium at only a five percent enrichment level for a fifteen-year period (this level is consistent for usage at a nuclear power plant and is well short of weaponization levels)
- Iran will allow IAEA monitors to inspect facilities under review for suspicious activity for up to 25 years (Iran does not have to submit to inspections but if it refuses it will be subject to an arbitration panel and possible judgement that it is in violation)
- Iran would be granted gradual/phased in sanctions relief, essentially allowing Iran to finally export its oil
- Iran would be granted access to more than \$100 billion in frozen assets pending the implementation of nuclear curbs
- The prevailing United Nations arms embargo on Iran would remain in place for five years
- The prevailing ballistic missiles embargo on Iran would remain in place for eight years
- _ Iran would be prohibited from designing warheads or conducting experiments on nuclear weapons-related technology

The complete implementation of the provisions of the deal would be contingent on Iran's commitment to meeting its obligations to curtail its nuclear program and satisfy the world's concerns over the possible military dimensions of its nuclear development activity. To this end, a breach of the terms of the accord by Iran would generate a "snapback" provision, essentially snapping highly punitive sanctions back into place.

United States President Barack Obama touted the agreement as a good one, noting the following: "This deal meets every single one of the bottom lines that we established when we achieved a framework this spring. Every pathway to a nuclear weapon is cut off, and the inspection and transparency regime necessary to verify that objective will be put in place." President Obama also noted that the deal would make the world "safer and more secure." He additionally addressed his critics saying that the terms of the agreement provided for a rigorous verification regime. He added, "This deal is not built on trust -- it is built on verification." Furthermore, the president emphasized that there would be immediate consequences if Iran was found to be in violation of the terms of the agreement, as he said, "If Iran violates the deal, all these sanctions will snap back into place."

For his part, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani hailed the accord, saying that the prayers of Iranians had "come true." Rouhani -- who was being celebrated in the streets of Tehran as a hero -- said the deal opened a "new chapter" in Iran's relationship with the rest of the international community. But the Iranian leader was also realistic

in his assessment of the agreement, noting that it was "not perfect," but that it was the "best achievement possible that could be reached."

United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon championed the pact finalized in Vienna, casting it to be "historic," and paid tribute to the onerous and difficult work of diplomacy, which he said was a "testament to the value of dialogue." The United Nations chief conveyed his hopes that the deal would contribute to "a greater mutual understanding and cooperation on the many serious security challenges in the Middle East."

A similar view came from Federica Mogherini, the European Union foreign policy chief, as she expressed satisfaction with the final accord. She said, "This is a sign of hope for the entire world. And we all know this is very much needed in these times."

Even with the formal announcement of this historic nuclear agreement, the process was not over. There would have to be a vote at the United Nations Security Council. As well, the deal would still have to find concurrence in the capital cities of Tehran, Washington D.C., London, Paris, Berlin, Moscow, and Beijing where it would face the challenges of hardline domestic politics.

Hinting towards the Republicans' opposition would have to any agreement forged by the Obama administration in the United States, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said in an interview with Fox News, "I think it's going to be a very hard sell, if it's completed, in Congress. We already know it's going to leave Iran as a threshold nuclear state." Upon hearing the announcement of the landmark deal, and before actually reading the details of the agreement, Republican Speaker of the House of Representatives, John Boehner, denounced the deal, declaring that it would only "embolden" Iran. He said, "Instead of stopping the spread of nuclear weapons in the Middle East, this deal is likely to fuel a nuclear arms race around the world." But perhaps the most vituperative feedback came from Senator Tom Cotton of Arkansas who pugnaciously suggested military consequences for Iran as follows: "Iran is an anti-American, terrorism-sponsoring outlaw regime. Iran should have faced a simple choice: they dismantle their nuclear program entirely, or they face economic devastation and military destruction of their nuclear facilities."

Clearly, Republicans in the United States Congress, helped by certain factions of Democrats, would do their part to resist, curtail, and even halt the United States' participation in the agreement. To this end, under a special arrangement made with the president, they would have 60 days to consider the Iranian agreement in Congress and either sanction or reject it.

Note: Because the Iranian nuclear deal was not a formal treaty between the United States and Iran, there was actually no need for a ratification vote by two-thirds of the Senate. However, in the interests of some degree of national consensus on so sensitive a subject as Iran's nuclear ambitions, the United States Congress and President Obama agreed to an arrangement by which legislators would be allowed to either approve or reject the agreement by a simple majority. Since Republicans controlled both Houses of Congress, it was highly likely they would be successful in their efforts to defeat the accord. However, President Obama would himself have the opportunity to veto any legislation passed in Congress that aimed to kill the deal. Warning Republicans and their Democratic allies of this course of action, President Obama said, "So I will veto any legislation that prevents the successful implementation of this deal. We do not have to accept an inevitable spiral into conflict. And we certainly shouldn't seek it. And precisely because the stakes are so high this is not the time for politics or posturing. Tough talk from Washington does not solve problems."

In Iran, despite the positive reception by pro-Rouhani and other moderate elements, the agreement was guaranteed to spark the antagonism of hardliners and conservatives. As expected, Iranian hardliners and conservatives immediately launched their opposition campaign to the nuclear deal, with even Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei warning that some of the world powers that signed on to the agreement were "untrustworthy." In this way, there was no guarantee that Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei would "bless" the deal.

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In the United States, there was a parallel process of opposition and acrimony unfolding as hardliners and conservatives warned that Iran would find ways to cheat and violate the terms of the agreement. Of particular concern to United States lawmakers was the provision allowing Iran 24 days before allowing nuclear inspectors into suspect Iranian military sites, with many of them complaining that the length of time would allow Iran to cover its tracks were it to carry out clandestine nuclear activities at these sites. However, nuclear experts have noted that current technology would be able to detect traces of substances used for nuclear development activities, making it impossible for Iran to actually hide any "bad behavior." As noted by the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Yukiya Amano: "We are confident we can detect any diversion or misuse of nuclear material in a timely manner."

There were also objections to the lifting of sanctions and access to frozen assets, which could be used to fund rogue actors across the world. However, even if the United States held in place its own unilateral sanctions against Iran, the other world powers were eager to end the sanctions regime against Iran. Thus, the United States would be left isolated in its effort to keep the sanctions pressure on Iran.

In Israel, which has been adamantly against an agreement with Israel, the response was rapid and bitter. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu cast the deal as a "stunning historic mistake." He also noted that sanctions relief would provide Iran with "hundreds of billions of dollars with which it can fuel its terror machine and its expansion and aggression throughout the Middle East and across the globe." Netanyahu also made clear that Israel had no intention of abiding with the agreement -- regardless of its eventual enshrinement as a United Nations Security Council Resolution -- as he warned, ""We will always defend ourselves."

But the objective arbiters of the agreement expressed cautious optimism over the successful negotiations process. Yukiya Amano, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) -- the world's nuclear watchdog entity -- said that the landmark nuclear agreement constituted a "significant step forward," and noted that now the IAEA would be better positioned to "make an assessment of issues relating to possible military dimensions to Iran's nuclear program by the end of 2015."

As well, the conservative publication, The Economist, made the following conclusion: "The concern of critics of Barack Obama, both in Washington and beyond, was that the president's perceived desperation to burnish his legacy with an historic deal would result in dangerous compromises surrendered at the last minute to the wily Iranians. However, that was never likely (Iran's need for a deal has always been much greater than America's) and it is not borne out by the details of what has appeared to have been agreed... But judged by more pragmatic standards, the deal, while not perfect, appears much better than any of the plausible alternatives."

Ellie Geranmayeh, a policy fellow at the European Council of Foreign Relations, gave the agreement fulsome praise, declaring, "This is probably going to go down in history as one of the biggest diplomatic successes of the century."

It should be noted that nuclear nonproliferation experts have largely endorsed this agreement. As reported by Max Fisher at Vox.com regarding an interview with Aaron Stein, a nuclear nonproliferation expert at the Royal United Services Institute, the Iranian nuclear deal "exceeds in all areas." Under this agreement, according to Stein, if Iran were to attempt to build a bomb, "the likelihood of getting caught is near 100 percent." He added, "It makes the possibility of Iran developing a nuclear weapon in the next 25 years extremely remote." Stein explained his assessment further as follows: "I think the U.S. hand is actually strengthened in this, to be honest with you. A full accounting of where everything is [gleaned from invasive inspections and monitoring] is a wonderful targeting mechanism for the Pentagon. If we know where all of their stuff is, you can make far more accurate, detailed maps about where to put a cruise missile. Iran knows what it's doing going into this. They know the consequences if they screw up here, and the provisions are very tight, the inspection regime is very robust. The likelihood of getting caught is near 100 percent. The consequences are far more than just having your sites bombed. It's that they will have reneged on the agreement that basically the whole world supports, except for the Republicans and the Israelis and the Saudis."

United Nations Security Council lifts sanctions on Iran:

Going forward, the United Nations Security Council would have to adopt a resolution that would lift international sanctions related to Iran's nuclear program. Of course, as has been discussed here, the sanctions would be subject to the so-called "snapback" provision and could be re-imposed if Iran was deemed to be in violation of the new accord. A vote at the United Nations Security Council was expected to occur early as the third week in July 2015. To that end, United States Ambassador to the United Nations, Samantha Power, said she would submit the draft resolution on behalf of the P5+1 world powers and the European Union, which would then be taken up for a vote. That vote on a resolution endorsing the agreement was set to take place during the following week. Since the veto-wielding permanent members of the United Nations Security Council were all parties to the negotiations, there was no doubt that the resolution would be adopted.

Indeed, on July 20, 2015, the United Nations Security Council unanimously approved a resolution endorsing the Iranian nuclear deal, thus **clearing** the path for sanctions imposed since 2006 to be lifted. The United Nations Security Council also enshrined its nuclear watchdog agency, the International Atomic Energy Agency, with the authority to "undertake the necessary verification and monitoring of Iran's nuclear commitments."

Other measures would have to be undertaken by various governments. Primarily, Iran's parliament would have to review and ratify the agreement, which was reported to have been "blessed" by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. At the start of September 2015, Khamenei returned to the political purview in Iran to say that he favored a parliamentary vote on its nuclear deal. To this end, Khamenei said, "Parliament should not be sidelined on the nuclear deal issue ... I am not saying lawmakers should ratify or reject the deal. It is up to them to decide." While Khamenei has neither opposed nor endorsed the agreement, his praise of the diplomatic process has been interpreted by some observers as a tacit blessing of sorts. It was to be seen if an actual vote would ensue in the Iranian Majlis, however, President Rouhani's government had not yet even advanced legislation for members of parliament to consider.

A similar process would have to ensue in the United States where the Republican-led Congress would have 60 days to review and ratify the agreement, but where it was more likely to be rejected. The fight in the United States would be to secure enough votes to maintain a presidential veto.

Note on Political Landscape in the United States --

As discussed above, if the United States Congress was able to disapprove of the Iranian nuclear deal, President Obama would enact his veto authority. The main question would be whether or not there was enough support in Congress to override a presidential veto. (In the Senate and the House of Representatives, there would have to be a 2/3 super-majority in each of the two chambers to vitiate a presidential veto.) Of note was the fact that even a vote to "disapprove" of the nuclear deal by the United States Congress would do little to actually upend the agreement since a United Nations Security Council resolution had already approved it in the realm of international jurisprudence.

Assuming the United States president's veto would be enough to halt Republicans' objections to the deal, there would be few options left for hardline conservatives determined to kill any agreement with Iran. One of the remaining courses of action for Republicans would be for them to capture the White House in 2016. Then, with a new administration at the helm in 2017, the new president could conceivably begin the process of scapping the accord and re-imposing sanctions against Iran. But that would be a unilateral pathway unlikely to gain support from the other P5+1 countries, whose diplomats also worked hard to forge this pact, and who were not eager to see military engagement with Iran. Moreover, by 2017, most of the pressing sanctions would have been removed anyway, and the re-imposition of them promised to be a herculean task. As noted by the chairman of the Senate

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Foreign Relations Committee, Republican Senator Bob Corker, "The next president can start from scratch. What would have happened, though, is the international sanctions process would have been totally dismantled."

In the six weeks following the decision by the United Nations Security Council to lift its sanctions against Iran, groups hostile to the Iranian nuclear agreement launched an aggressive and expensive advertising campaign intent on securing enough support to kill the deal. As well, Israeli Prime Minister of Israel Benjamin Netanyahu repeated his dire warnings of geopolitical calamity sure to visit the Middle East were the deal to go forward. But even as these forces placed their own pressure on lawmakers in the United States, the Obama administration was busy at work trying to rally support for the deal in Congress. The main argument from the White House was that the agreement accomplished its objective of preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. As stated by President Obama himself, the agreement eliminates "every pathway to a nuclear weapon" for Iran.

With most of the Democratic representatives in the lower chamber in relatively safe seats, and since many of them already shared the president's internationalist foreign policy, there was a sense of confidence that House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi would be able to bring together enough Democratic votes to deny the House Republicans the 2/3 majority needed to uphold a disapproval measure. The real action was in the Senate where some Democrats, such as Senator Charles Schumer of New York, and Senator Robert Menendez of New Jersey, had already signalled their skepticism regarding the Iranian nuclear deal, and as expected, ultimately opted to vote to disapprove of the accord. Since a total of 34 votes would be needed to deny the Republican-led Senate their 2/3 majority, the job of gaining support for President Obama's Iran agenda would be difficult, and the final tally was expected to be tight.

But on Sept. 2, 2015, President Obama secured the support of 34 Democratic senators regarding the Iranian deal, effectively foreclosing any significant action from the Republicans to stymie the United States' full participation in the landmark Iranian nuclear curtailment deal. Most of the senators expressed similar sentiment, noting that no deal was perfect, that the Iranians were not to be trusted, but that the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (the legislative title for the Iranian nuclear deal as it is discussed and debated in the Congress) was the best available option to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear bomb. As noted by United States Secretary of State John Kerry, who did the strenuous work of vigorous diplomacy to make the deal a reality, "The benefits of this agreement far outweigh any potential drawbacks."

The disapproval resolution related to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action would be on the legislative agenda for debate when members of Congress returned to the Capitol in Washington D.C. after the August recess on Sept. 8, 2015. A vote was expected later in the month when the resolution would be presumably be passed, and then be subject to a presidential veto.

On the United States political landscape, there remained a small possibility in the Senate that the disapproval resolution would not even be voted on if Democrats in the upper chamber were able to hold together 41 votes to sustain a filibuster, thus preventing a vote of cloture cutting off debate. In such a case, the bill would not be able to be brought to the floor for a full vote and President Obama would not have to use his veto power. While all expectations were that there would, in fact, be a full vote where the bill would be approved, the landscape changed on Sept. 8, 2015, when the Democratic tally was complete. On that day, it was clear that 42 senators had opted to support the deal -- more than the 34 needed to sustain a veto but also more than the 41 needed to filibuster the bill from even going to a vote on the floor of the Senate. Still to be determined was the matter of whether or not at least 41 senators would be willing to go down the filibuster path.

That question was answered on Sept. 10, 2015, when Democrats in the Senate delivered a major victory to President Obama by successfully holding together 42 votes to filibuster the disapproval resolution, thus denying a vote on the legislation. All 42 Democratic senators who had expressed support for the nuclear agreement stood in solidarity on the procedural vote after several hours of debate, effectively preventing the bill from even going to a vote, and thus insulating the president from having to exercise his veto authority.

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Meanwhile, in the House of Representatives, the Republican leadership was trying to alter its political calculus related to the disapproval resolution by dividing it up into three separate bills, in the hopes that it would delay -- if not outright stop -- the nuclear deal from going into effect. Now, one measure centered on the claim that President Obama did not comply with the Iran nuclear review act; a second measure was a motion of approval of the nuclear deal; the third measure sought to prevent President Obama from waiving sanctions against Iran. All three pieces of legislation were cleared for debate, where they were expected to pass due to the fact that Republicans controlled the lower chamber. However, the fate of the Iranian nuclear deal was no longer in doubt given the outcome in the Senate.

The political victory for President Obama at home in the United States ensured that the nuclear deal would go into force -- irrespective of the objections from Republicans and a handful of Democrats in Congress, and certainly despite the disapprobation of Israel. Democratic Senator Schumer of New York, who was part of the four-vote Democratic contingent parting ways with the president conceded that the Obama administration had secured a political victory as he declared: "Regardless of how one feels about the agreement, fair-minded Americans should acknowledge the president's strong achievements in combating and containing Iran."

International Dimensions:

The Iranian nuclear deal certainly had support in Europe where the leaders of the United States' allied countries -- the United Kingdom, France, and Germany -- expressed support for it. In fact, United Kingdom Prime Minister David Cameron, French President François Hollande, and German Chancellor Angela Merkel wrote a joint opinion editorial titled "Why we support the Iran deal," which was published in the Washington Post on Sept. 10, 2015.

In that piece, the three Western world leaders acknowledged the difficulty of the negotiations process, noting, "The long history of fruitless nuclear talks with Iran did not give strong grounds for optimism." But they also noted that their efforts ended in success, as they declared, "Nevertheless, two years of tough, detailed negotiation have produced an agreement that closes off all possible routes to an Iranian nuclear weapon in return for phased relief from nuclear-related sanctions."

Cameron, Hollande, and Merkel repeated what United States Secretary of State John Kerry has long argued -- that the agreement was not based on blind trust. To this end, they wrote: "This is not an agreement based on trust or on any assumption about how Iran may look in 10 or 15 years. It is based on detailed, tightly written controls that are verifiable and long-lasting. Iran will have strong incentives not to cheat: The near certainty of getting caught and the consequences that would follow would make this a losing option."

As such, Cameron, Hollande, and Merkel reached the following conclusion: "We fully support this agreement because it achieves the goals we had set ourselves. It deals with the uranium enrichment route to a bomb by requiring Iran to reduce by 98 percent its stockpile of enriched uranium; to lower by two-thirds the number of its centrifuges; to limit uranium enrichment levels; and to stop using the deep Fordow site for enrichment. It closes the plutonium route through changes to the Arak reactor so that it does not produce weapons-grade plutonium. And it ensures the IAEA enhanced access not only to Iran's nuclear facilities and the entire nuclear fuel cycle but also, where needed, to any undeclared site."

Political legacies:

Meanwhile, regardless of the political machinations as well as the political posturing, this landmark accord was being celebrated as a historic development in the realm of international diplomacy and global security. For good or for ill, the re-integration of Iran into the global community would inevitably shift the geopolitical dynamics in the Middle East. Moreover, both President Rouhani in Iran and President Obama in the United States had made history with this landmark nuclear accord by moving their two countries from a state of decades-old enmity, charting the path of diplomacy, and traversing along the difficult road of re-engagement. These efforts would surely define their respective political legacies. Whether or not this nuclear agreement would stand the test of time and survive

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hardline domestic politics at home in Iran and the United States was to be determined, but Rouhani and Obama could take heart in the fact that they had respectively honored their election promises to pursue a peaceful resolution to the Iranian nuclear issue.

Special Entry United States and Cuba announce landmark shift in policy as they move to normalize relations
Summary:

The year 2015 was marked by the historic re-engagement of ties between the United States and Cuba, as the two countries moved to normalize their diplomatic relations and move along the path of rapprochement.

Going back to Dec. 17, 2014, United States President Barack Obama announced a landmark policy shift aimed at normalizing diplomatic relations with Cuba after more than 50 years of animosity. At the start of 2015, the governments of the United States and Cuba commenced negotiations aimed at achieving re-engagement. In April 2015, there was a historic thaw in bilateral relations between the United States and Cuba as United States President Barack Obama met with Cuban President Raul Castro at the Summit of the Americas in Panama. It was the first meeting of the leaders of the two countries in decades. Historians noted that the meeting was part of the legacy that would likely define the respective presidencies of Obama and Castro, essentially underlining the reality that the Cold War was officially over.

In the immediate aftermath of the historic meeting, the Obama administration in the United States announced it was removing Cuba from its list of state sponsors of terrorism. That move was formalized at the end of May 2015 and solidified Cuba's re-integration into the full international community. The action also augmented the process of rapprochement between the United States and Cuba. July 2015 was the date set for the official opening of the two countries' embassies in Washington D.C., and Havana. The Cuban flag thus flew for the first time in 50 years aloft the Cuban embassy in Washington D.C. in July 2015. United States Secretary of State John Kerry traveled to Cuba in August 2015 to attend a formal ceremony marking the raising of the United States flag at the American embassy in Havana.

Still to be determined was the matter of the economic sanctions, which would have to be removed via legislation in the United States Congress.

United States and Cuba announce landmark shift in policy as they move to normalize relations:

The year 2015 was marked by the historic re-engagement of ties between the United States and Cuba. Going back to Dec. 17, 2014, United States President Barack Obama announced a landmark policy shift aimed at normalizing diplomatic relations with Cuba after more than 50 years of disengagement. President Obama made the historic announcement following a shared telephone call with Cuban President Raul Castro. In his remarks, President Obama noted that the diplomatic breakthrough occurred partially due to action by Pope Francis as well as the government of Canada. Indeed, the effort to forge this historic agreement was ongoing for 18 months via clandestine talks facilitated by the government of Canada and thanks to endorsement and support from Pope Francis, the leader of the Holy See.

As noted by a senior Obama administration official in remarks to Reuters News ahead of the president's historic moves, "These steps will be the most significant changes to our Cuba policy in more than 50 years." The official continued, "We will be immediately initiating discussions with Cuba to re-establish diplomatic relations that have been severed since 1961. If there is any U.S. foreign policy that has passed its expiration date, it is the U.S. Cuba policy."

As stated by President Obama in a nationally broadcast landmark announcement: "We will end an outdated approach that for decades has failed to advance our interests and instead we will begin to normalize relations between our two countries." President Obama continued, "These 50 years have shown that isolation has not worked. It's time for a new approach." He added that the agreement would herald "a new chapter among the

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nations of the Americas" and move beyond a "rigid policy that's rooted in events that took place before most of us were born."

At the diplomatic level, the expected outcome of the new United States-Cuba policy would be the opening of embassies in the respective capitals of Washington D.C. and Havana.

Meanwhile, United States Secretary of State John Kerry would have to review his country's classification of Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism, and also negotiate the terms of this policy of re-engagement. These terms could not simply reverse the prevailing embargo against Cuba since that would take Congressional action. However, the president could -- and would -- impose exceptions to the embargo that would open up new pathways for cultural and commercial interactions between the United States and Cuba. Down the line, all expectations were that there would be improved circulation of commerce between the United States and Cuba.

Also on the agenda was the easing of travel restrictions between the United States and Cuba, including travel authorized for family visits, official visits, journalistic, professional, educational and religious visits, as well as trips intended for public performances. Tourism, however, was not yet on the agenda for easing of travel restrictions.

Another tangible outcome was the release of Alan Gross, a United States national held in a Cuban jail for five years, and an anonymous United States intelligence agent who was held in Cuba for 20 years. Gross, along with the intelligence agent, were freed as part of a prisoner exchange deal in which three Cubans held by the United States would also be released from American custody.

Gross was arrested, tried, convicted and imprisoned in Cuba in 2009 for delivering satellite telephone equipment capable of obfuscating Internet connections and deemed to be a spy. Despite high profile calls for his release, the Gross case seemed to be unresolvable until Dec. 17, 2014, when he was freed. Meanwhile, the release of the anonymous intelligence agent was described by United States authorities as follows: "In light of his sacrifice on behalf of the United States, securing his release from prison after 20 years -- in a swap for three of the Cuban spies he helped put behind bars -- is fitting closure to this Cold War chapter of U.S.-Cuban relations."

In the hours after the United States leader Barack Obama made his historic remarks on the policy shift with Cuba, Alan Gross was on a flight returning from captivity, accompanied by Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vermont), Senator Jeff Flake (R-Arizona), and Congressman Chris Van Hollen (D-Maryland).

Despite that diplomatic delegation being bipartisan in composition, some Republicans were outraged by the decision to engage with Cuba and to go forward with a prisoner exchange. Senator Marco Rubio (R-Florida) vociferously condemned the president's decision, saying, "This whole new policy is based on an illusion, on a lie, the lie and the illusion that more commerce and access to money and goods will translate to political freedom for the Cuban people. All this is going to do is give the Castro regime, which controls every aspect of Cuban life, the opportunity to manipulate these changes to stay in power."

Nevertheless, President Obama addressed those critics, declaring that while he shared their commitment to freedom, there were differing ways of achieving it. He said, "The question is how do we uphold that commitment. I do not believe we can keep doing the same thing for over five decades and expect a different result."

In Cuba, President Raul Castro made his own national address that was broadcast across the island. Castro's address came with no preamble and went directly into an announcement that he had spoken with President Obama. The call, which lasted 45 minutes, was the first direct conversation between a United States president and a Cuban president in more than 50 years. President Castro said they had agreed to a policy change and a prisoner swap. He said, "We have been able to make headway in the solution of some topics of mutual interest for both nations." President Castro also paid tribute to the American leader -- a historic moment after decades of mutual hostility -- as he said, "President Obama's decision deserves the respect and acknowledgment of our people."

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From the Holy See, the Vatican authorities released a statement hailing the historic agreement. That statement read as follows: "The Holy Father wishes to express his warm congratulations for the historic decision taken by the governments of the United States of America and Cuba to establish diplomatic relations, with the aim of overcoming, in the interest of the citizens of both countries, the difficulties which have marked their recent history."

Negotiations on Normalization of Relations

At the start of 2015, the Obama administration in the United States said it would dispatch a delegation to attend talks in the Cuban capital of Havana on Jan. 21 and 22, 2015, aimed at normalizing relations between the two countries. Meanwhile, Cuba was making good on its promise to release detainees as part of the process of rapprochement. As a result, there was a positive landscape in place within which the bilateral takes on normalizing relations could take place.

Ahead of the negotiations in Havana, some new measures were being put into place allowing United States citizens to use credit cards in Cuba and also to take into the United States up to \$100 worth of Cuban alcohol and tobacco. This would mean that it would be legal to bring Cuban cigars to the United States after a five-decade long ban. Other new measures included the relaxation of rules for United States businesses to export technologies, such as software, Internet, and telecommunications technologies to Cuba. There would also be opportunities for United States investment small businesses and agricultural operations in Cuba.

Heralding the changes, United States Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew said, "Today's announcement takes us one step closer to replacing out-of-date policies that were not working and puts in place a policy that helps promote political and economic freedom for the Cuban people."

Also of note was the fact that in mid-January 2015, the Obama administration also relaxed rules on travel to Cuba. While so-called "ordinary tourism" remained restricted, there was a relaxation of the travel ban to Cuba, providing potential travelers with a wide range of rationales for travel to Cuba without having to obtain a special license. The new rules would allow Americans to travel to Cuba for family visits, government business, journalism, research, and religious activity. With travel between the United States and Cuba opening up, United Airlines in mid-January 2015 announced it would offer regular commercial flights between the United States gateways of Houston and Newark to Cuba.

On Jan. 21, 2015, a United States diplomatic delegation, led by Assistant Secretary of State Roberta Jacobson, arrived in the Cuban capital of Havana to commence negotiations aimed at restoring diplomatic relations, and advancing the eventual opening of trade and travel ties between the two countries. For Cuba, whose delegation was being led by Josefina Vidal, director of United States affairs at the Cuban foreign ministry, a key demand during negotiations would be the removal of Cuba from the United States' list of state sponsors of terrorism. Cuba was also demanding that the United States end its practice of granting safe haven to Cuban under special status, noting that it encouraged Cubans to defect and contributed to the country's "brain drain." For the United States, the key demand would be improved respect for human rights by Cuba.

During his annual State of the Union address the day before (Jan. 20, 2015), President Barack Obama of the United States of America said, "We are ending a policy that was long past its expiration date. When what you're doing doesn't work for 50 years, it's time to try something new." He also called on members of Congress to end the embargo against Cuba although some members of Congress have opposed that move.

Note that in February 2015, the United States Department of State made clear that the return of the United States naval base at Guantanamo Bay was not on the agenda during bilateral discussions with Cuba. In testimony before the House of Representatives in Washington D. C., Roberta Jacobson, the assistant secretary of State for the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, said, "The issue of Guantanamo is not on the table in these conversations." Of note was the fact that Cuban President Raul Castro has called for the return of Guantanamo Bay. The issue,

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however, was not likely to stymie progress on broader negotiations aimed at normalizing relations between the United States and Cuba.

In the United States, some policy changes regarding Cuba were being advanced in mid-February 2015. A bipartisan group of Democratic and Republican senators were crafting legislation to repeal long-standing laws that have prevented Americans from doing business with Cuba. The bills would loosen legal restrictions on travel and trade with Cuba, while leaving in place provisions protecting long-standing property claims against the Cuban government. It was quite possible that hardline factions in Congress would prevent the new bills from being passed; however, the sponsors of the legislation said they would not be deterred and would simply include it as additions to appropriations bills in the future.

Meanwhile, the Obama administration in the United States eased some restrictions on the importation of goods and services from private Cuban entrepreneurs. Some arenas, such as live animals, tobacco, and textiles, were not included in relaxed rules. The intent by the United States government appeared to be geared to allowing private enterprise to flourish in Cuba. Of course, Cuban entrepreneurs would still have to secure permission from the Cuban government to export their goods; they would also have to come up with "documentary evidence" for the United States authorities to prove they fell into the category of approved enterprises.

Note that another round of bilateral talks between Washington and Havana commenced in the United States on Feb. 27, 2015. During this round of negotiations, Cuban envoys called for their country to be removed from the United States' list of state sponsors of terrorism. United States envoys said that the talks should concentrate on the opening of their respective embassies and the exchange of prisoners, rather than on this more contentious issue. United States Secretary of State John Kerry addressed the issue himself, saying that the designation of a country being a terrorism sponsor was a separate process and "not a negotiation" linked with the current push to normalize relations. He said, "It is an evaluation that is made under a very strict set of requirements, congressionally mandated, and that has to be pursued separately and it is being pursued separately."

Nevertheless, there were high hopes that an agreement would be reached by April 10, 2015, when regional heads of state were expected to meet in Panama, and where United States President Barack Obama and Cuban President Raul Castro could officially meet for the first time since the announcement of their plan to normalize bilateral relations.

Yet another round of bilateral talks ensued in mid-March 2015 -- this time in the Cuban capital of Havana. Success in these negotiations was somewhat undermined by a move by the United States to impose sanctions on Venezuela -- a leftist ally of Cuba. While the United States has argued that deteriorating relations (and associated sanctions) with Venezuela should have no impact on the effort to normalize ties with Cuba. However, Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez warned that hostile actions towards Venezuela would be interpreted as an attack on Cuba. To this end, Rodriguez said that the United States had "provoked serious damage to the environment in the hemisphere on the eve of the Summit of the Americas." He continued, "I hope that the U.S. government understands that it can't handle Cuba with a carrot and Venezuela with a garrote."

Historic Thaw in U.S.-Cuban Relations

April 2015 was marked by a historic thaw in bilateral relations between the United States and Cuba. At stake was the impending Summit of the Americas in Panama where United States Secretary of State John Kerry would meet with his Cuban counterpart, Bruno Rodriguez, in the highest level meeting between the foreign ministers of the two countries since the Eisenhower era in the United States. But all the attention quickly turned to the leaders of the two countries as United States President Barack Obama was expected to cross paths with Cuban President Raul Castro at the summit in Panama.

While the two men encountered one another at the 2013 memorial for the iconic South African leader, Nelson Mandela, the 2015 meeting of the Organization of American States would be the first official venue where the two

leaders would be present. Cuba had, for some time, been banned from attending the Summit of the Americas until this time, making President Castro's participation significant simply for that reason. But the significance of the meeting was accentuated because the political landscape was now markedly different, given the ongoing negotiations aimed at normalizing bilateral ties between the two countries after decades of animosity. Of note would be the meeting between the two leaders on the sidelines of the summit, although all eyes were on the initial encounter between Obama and Castro, ready to judge the meeting as either positively or negatively in terms of mood.

On April 10, 2015, at the opening ceremony of the Summit of the Americas, cameras captured the brief but historic moment when President Obama and President Castro shook hands and chatted informally. Global watchers cast the encounter as cordial and deemed it to be an optimistic start to the meeting of leaders of the countries of the Organization of American States (OAS). Historians noted the meeting would be part of the legacy that would likely define the respective presidencies of Obama and Castro, essentially underlining the reality that the Cold War was officially over. For President Obama, the legacy would be particularly pronounced, as the normalization of ties with Cuba would quite likely be regarded as one of the most significant foreign policy accomplishments of his presidency.

During his plenary session address to the 35 OAS countries, President Obama acknowledged that while differences remained between his country and Cuba, bilateral relations between the United States and Cuba were now at a "turning point." He said, "This shift in U.S. policy represents a turning point for our entire region. The fact that President Castro and I are both sitting here today marks a historic occasion." He continued by emphatically underlining the shift in United States policy towards Cuba, as he declared: "The United States will not be imprisoned by the past. We're looking to the future." He added, "I'm not interested in having battles that frankly started before I was born. The Cold War has been over for a long time."

President Castro had kind public words for President Obama in his address on the second day of the summit. After a lengthy speech that tracked the history of between the United States and Cuba, and particularly highlighted Cuba's grievances with the United States over the years, President Castro admitted he tended to get carried away with the subject matter, as he said, "When I talk about the revolution, the passion oozes out of me." He continued, by inoculating President Obama from the blame over decades of acrimonious relations as he said, "I have to ask President Obama for forgiveness. He is not responsible for the things which happened before his time." President Castro also appeared to exhibit genuine respect for his United States counterpart, as he declared: "In my opinion, President Obama is an honest man."

On the sidelines of the summit on April 11, 2015, President Obama and President Castro met for talks. It was the first face-to-face discussion between the leaders of the two countries in a half century. On the agenda for discussion were the myriad issues involved in the process of normalizing relations, from the re-opening of their respective embassies in Washington D.C. and Havana, to broadening economic and travel paths for the future, and also including human rights and freedom of the press. As noted by Cuban President Raul Castro: "Everything can be on the table."

During these talks, President Obama lauded the encounter with his Cuban counterpart, saying, "This is obviously a historic meeting." He acknowledged that difference remained between the two countries, but referred to President Castro as he said, "We have both concluded that we can disagree with a spirit of respect and civility." President Obama continued by explaining his rationale for pursuing re-engagement and rapprochement with Cuba. He said, "It was my belief it was time to try something new, that it was important for us to engage with Cuban government. And more importantly, with Cuban people."

For his part, President Castro also acknowledged there would be differences with the United States, but emphasized that the two countries have "agreed to disagree." President Castro emphasized that the imperative was to move forward in a productive manner with the Obama administration in the United States, as he said, "We are willing to make progress in the way the president [Obama] has described."

In a separate address at a civil society forum, President Obama heralded improved relations with Cuba saying, "As the United States begins a new chapter in our relationship with Cuba, we hope it will create an environment that improves the lives of the Cuban people... Not because it is imposed by us, the United States, but through the talent and ingenuity and aspirations, and the conversations among Cubans from all walks of life so they can decide what the best course is for their prosperity." President Obama added that the days of United States' influence, interference, neo-imperialism, and hegemony in the Americas was over, as he declared: "The days in which our agenda in this hemisphere so often presumed that the United States could meddle with impunity, those days are past."

Cuba removed from United States' list of state sponsors of terrorism

On April 14, 2015, in the immediate aftermath of the historic meeting between President Obama and President Castro in Panama, the Obama administration in the United States announced that it was removing Cuba from its list of state sponsors of terrorism. It should be noted that the United States has not, for some time, actually accused Cuba of terrorism. Nevertheless, the delisting procedure would be of practical benefit to Cuba, as it would no longer be officially cited in that notorious category of rogue nation states. It would also have the added benefit of moving Cuba in the direction of good standing with the wider global community.

Still to be determined was the matter of the economic sanctions regime. While President Obama had already used his executive action to loosen the trade embargo against Cuba, it would be up to the United States Congress to pass legislation to remove the bulk of the sanctions. While several leading Republican senators running for president have opposed the move, it was quite likely that a bipartisan group of senators would support the end to the sanctions regime against Cuba.

On May 29, 2015, the Obama administration in the United States officially removed Cuba from its list of state sponsors of terrorism. The move brought a formal end to the respective bans on economic aid, arms exports, "dual-use" military and civilian items; it also ended the United States practice of opposing loans by international financial institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The "de jure" end to these prohibitions would not translate into actual relaxations in practice since a wider economic embargo remained in place. As intimated above, a large swath of Republicans in Congress were not in a hurry to end that embargo, meaning that the real value in Cuba being removed from the United States' list of state sponsors of terrorism was symbolic. But even that symbolism had value as it solidified Cuba's re-integration into the full international community. Moreover, it augmented the process of rapprochement between the United States and Cuba.

For its part, the Castro regime in Cuba on May 31, 2015, applauded the move by the Obama administration in the United States.

Plans in the works to open embassies in Washington D.C. and Havana and fully restore diplomatic relations --

At the end of June 2015, it was announced that plans were afoot for the United States and Cuba to open embassies in Havana and Washington D.C. respectively. Of note was the fact that there has been no United States embassy in Havana since the 1960s. Meanwhile, July 20, 2015 was the date set for the official restoration of U.S.-Cuban relations since ties were severed in 1961.

United States Envoy Jeffrey DeLaurentis delivered a letter from the Obama White House to Cuba's interim Foreign Minister Marcelino Medina, which relayed plans from the United States to open its embassy in Havana. President Barack Obama delivered an address from the White House Rose Garden, where he addressed the development, saying, "This is a historic step forward in our efforts to normalize relations with the Cuban government and people and begin a new chapter with our neighbors in the Americas. A year ago it might have seemed impossible that the United States would be once again raising our flag, the Stars and Stripes, over an embassy in Havana." He continued, "With this change, we will be able to substantially increase our contacts with the Cuban people," he said.

"We will have more personnel at our embassy and our diplomats will have the ability to engage more broadly across the island."

Embassies open and flags raised in Washington D.C. and Havana

On July 20, 2015, Cuba formally re-opened its embassy and the Cuban flag was lifted aloft the embassy in the United States' capital. It was the first time in more than 50 years that a Cuban flag was flying at the diplomatic mission in Washington D.C. Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez, who attended the momentous occasion, declared: "The historic events we are living today will only make sense with the removal of the economic, commercial and financial blockade, which causes so much deprivation and damage to our people, the return of occupied territory in Guantanamo, and respect for the sovereignty of Cuba."

It was fair to state that the re-opening of the Cuban embassy in the United States was a significant development in the process of formally restoring bilateral relations between the two countries. Another significant development was set to follow as Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez met with United States Secretary of State John Kerry at the State Department. It was the first time a Cuban foreign minister had visited Washington D.C. since the Cuban Revolution.

While the United States' embassy was set to re-open in Havana, the United States flag would not be raised until August 2015 when Secretary of State John Kerry would travel to Cuba to witness the ceremony. To that end, a formal flag-raising ceremony was set for Aug. 14, 2015.

On that day, Secretary of State John Kerry arrived at Jose Marti International Airport in the Cuban capital of Havana. He would be distinguished as the first American head of the State Department to visit Cuba in 70 years. The United States' top diplomat presided over the historic re-opening of the United States embassy in Havana, the playing of the United States national anthem, and the raising of the United States flag aloft the diplomatic compound.

In his speech, Secretary of State Kerry noted that it was a "historic day," while also calling for democratization in Cuba as he declared, "The people of Cuba would be best served by a genuine democracy, where people are free to choose their leaders." He added, "Cuba's future is for Cubans to shape."

The ceremony was also witnessed by the three United States Marines -- now Veterans -- who lowered the United States flag in 1961 but who were now back in Havana to be part of the remarkable shift in bilateral relations.

Latest developments in U.S.-Cuban rapprochement

In mid-September 2015, the Obama administration in the United States announced a slate of regulations that would ease travel, trade and investment restrictions with Cuba. While the new rules would not reverse the embargo levied by the United States Congress, the executive action would nonetheless serve the purpose of chipping away at the embargo, while demonstrating the Obama administration's commitment to improving its ties with a former Cold War enemy. At the practical level, while United States citizens would still be barred from traveling to Cuba as tourists, these changes would open the door for some businesses to operate offices and expand financial activities in Cuba. As well, the changes would also do away with restrictions on the financial remittances to Cuba.

The government of the United States argued that the new regulations would spur business development in Cuba, while augmenting more economic and political freedoms there. As noted by United States Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew in a statement: "By further easing these sanctions, the United States is helping to support the Cuban people in their effort to achieve the political and economic freedom necessary to build a democratic, prosperous, and stable Cuba." He added, "A stronger, more open U.S.-Cuba relationship has the potential to create economic opportunities for both Americans and Cubans alike."

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Note that at the end of September 2015, on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly, United States President Barack Obama met with Cuban President Raul Castro. The meeting, depicted in videotaped footage, showed both Obama and Castro at ease with one another and sporting broad smiles. Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez described the rare one-on-one meeting of the two leaders as "respectful and constructive." Meanwhile, White House spokesperson Josh Earnest said, "We continue to believe that deeper engagement and deeper people-to-people ties, deeper economic engagement between the United States and Cuba will have the effect of moving the government and the nation in a positive direction."

Note:

The restoration of diplomatic ties with Cuba would stand as a marquis achievement of the Obama presidency since Barack Obama's foreign policy has centered on principles of vigorous diplomatic engagement, internationalism and multilateralism.

Special Entry

Pope Francis travels to Cuba and United States

While critics of President Barack Obama have criticized his re-engagement policy towards Cuba, the president of the United States had a strong ally for his actions in Pope Francis. Indeed, the Holy See has long frowned upon the United States' embargo on Cuba, and applauded President Obama's attempt to improve bilateral ties with its former Cold War foe. Moreover, Pope Francis himself was reported to have played a role in the diplomatic efforts that ultimately yielded the normalization of ties between the United States and Cuba from late 2014 and well into 2015.

Now, with the process of rapprochement underway between the two countries, Pope Francis was making landmark trip to Cuba and the United States. Indeed, Pope Francis called on Cuba and the United States to "persevere on the path" of detente. To this end, he praised the negotiations and ensuing reconciliation between Cuba and the United States as "an example of reconciliation for the whole world."

During his visit to Cuba, Pope Francis visited with the country's revolutionary leader, Fidel Castro, and also held a meeting with President Raul Castro. In public, the pontiff stayed away from overtly political remarks, and refrained from criticism of Cuba's poor democratic rights record, including its suppression of dissent. That being said, Pope Francis called for a "revolution of tenderness" and paid tribute to generations who kept Catholicism alive in Cuba despite an official policy of atheism. To this end, the pontiff said, "The soul of the Cuban people ... was forged amid suffering and privation which could not suppress the faith."

Pope Francis spent a good portion of his time in Cuba at the shrine to the Virgin of Charity in the eastern town of El Cobre, near Cuba's second city of Santiago. The Virgin of Charity statuette was said to have been rescued from the ocean in dry condition four centuries prior and is generally regarded as an important spiritual symbol in Cuba by Catholics as well as followers of Afro-Cuban religions, such as Santeria. Speaking from that site in El Cobre, Pope Francis said, "Like Mary, Mother of Charity, we want to be a Church which goes forth to build bridges, to break down walls, to sow seeds of reconciliation." Pope Francis made clear that the Roman Catholic Church would continue to "support and encourage the Cuban people in its hopes and concerns."

After his trip to Cuba, Pope Francis traveled on to the United States on Sept. 22, 2015, on a chartered Alitalia papal plane. On the flight from Cuba to the United States, he previewed his impending addresses at the White House and before Congress, noting that he was not likely to discuss the controversial matter of the embargo. He said instead, "My desire is that they end up with a good result, that they reach an accord that satisfies both sides, an accord, certainly." The Pontiff also indicated that his speeches would concentrate on "bilateral relations and multinational relations as a sign of progress and coexistence."

Pope Francis was personally met by President Barack Obama, First Lady Michelle Obama, Vice President Joe Biden, and Mrs. Jill Biden at a welcome ceremony on the tarmac of the Joint Base Andrews close to Washington DC. It was the type of extraordinarily distinguished greeting reserved for the most important foreign dignitaries. A short personal meeting with President Obama followed at a private suite, before Pope Francis departed in a small black Fiat destined for the residence of the Apostolic Nuncio -- the Vatican ambassador to the United States. In this way, Pope Francis was continuing his usual style of eschewing elaborate trappings, such as limousines and expensive hotels, in favor of a modest lifestyle.

A day later on Sept. 23, 2015, Pope Francis visited the White House where President Obama hosted a reception in his honor on the South Lawn. Despite not having coordinated their respective addresses from the White House, Pope Francis and President Obama offered harmonized messages about social justice and environmental consciousness. In fact, both men have espoused similar views on the threat posed by climate change, the excesses of capitalism, the plight of the poor and down trodden, and the moral imperative to provide aid to those in need. But on Sept. 23, 2015, the two world leaders respectively emphasized the crucial cause of environmental consciousness, given the perils of climate change, as well as the humanitarian need to welcome immigrants seeking a new life.

In fact, Pope Francis craftily began his address from the White House with the reminder that he was, himself, the son of immigrants in his native Argentina. He said: "As the son of an immigrant family, I am happy to be a guest in this country, which was largely built by such families." In this way, the leader of the Roman Catholic Church made it clear that he was an advocate for foreign born immigrants -- many from his own home region of Latin America -- who were seeking a better life in the United States.

On Sept. 24, 2015, Pope Francis addressed a joint session of Congress at the Capitol. He was the first pontiff in history to address a joint session of Congress and was welcomed warmly and with thunderous applause.

In his address, Pope Francis addressed the unprecedented migrant crisis sweeping across Europe as desperate Syrians fled that country's horrific war, seeking refuge elsewhere. Pope Francis had already called on Catholic churches across the world to provide refuge and assistance to them, but in his address to the Congress, he urged the lawmakers of the United States to view refugees not as "numbers" but as "people." He said: "We must not be taken aback by their numbers, but rather view them as persons, seeing their faces and listening to their stories, trying to respond as best we can to their situation."

Along a similar vein, the Pontiff urged lawmakers in Congress to treat immigrants "with the same passion and compassion with which we want to be treated." He added, "Let us remember the golden rule -- do unto others as you would have them do unto you." These statements, along with his introductory remarks the day before, made clear that Pope Francis was supportive of much needed immigration reform in the United States.

Of note was Pope Francis' choice to highlight four famous Americans in his speech -- Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, and Thomas Merton. The Pontiff cast President Lincoln as the "guardian of liberty, who labored tirelessly that this nation, under God, [so it might] have a new birth of freedom." He said of the civil rights icon: "I think of the march which Martin Luther King led from Selma to Montgomery 50 years ago as part of the campaign to fulfill his 'dream' of full civil and political rights for African Americans...That dream continues to inspire us all." His reference to the founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, Dorothy Day, likely confounded people unfamiliar with her legacy. The Pontiff said of Day: "Her social activism, her passion for justice and for the cause of the oppressed, were inspired by the Gospel, her faith, and the example of the saints." Finally, the Pontiff's explained that the Cistercian monk, Thomas Merton, "was above all a man of prayer, a thinker who challenged the certitudes of his time, and opened new horizons for souls and for the Church." All four individuals could be regarded as trailblazers of sorts who challenged the status quo on behalf of equality and social justice.

Conservatives applauded Pope Francis's remarks about the sanctity and protection of life, interpreting them as opposition to abortion; it was unclear if they were quite as receptive to his call for an end to the death penalty internationally. It was also unclear if they were aware that his warning that the world be attentive to "fundamentalism, whether religious or of any other kind," might apply across the board and not only to the expected pariah groups. On the other side of the equation, liberals were likely displeased by his criticism of same sex marriage, which was manifest in his comment that the "very basis of marriage and the family" was being challenged. They were also not likely to have embraced the Pontiff's anti-abortion reference.

Pope Francis' progressive approach to social justice and Christian values has not always been welcomed by hardline conservatives in the chambers of Congress, or from among social conservatives across the country. Some of his critics have gone so far as to cast his castigation of unbridled capitalism as a Marxist, while others have blasted his social justice platform and his urgent call for action on climate change -- a condition anti-science conservatives generally deny exists in the first place. However, Pope Francis has made clear that his stances are founded on Roman Catholic teachings. To this end, he said, "I am sure that I have not said anything more than what is in the social doctrine of the Church." He added, "It is I who follow the Church ... my doctrine on all this ... on economic imperialism, is that of the social doctrine of the Church."

Despite this insistence that he was simply delivering teachings and guidance consistent with Christianity, the fact of the matter was that Pope Francis made certain key choices, imbued with symbolism, that delivered patently clear political messages. First, he declined to dine with member of Congress following his landmark address to the joint legislative chambers. Instead, he opted to eat with the homeless at Catholic Charities. Second, all members of Congress were instructed prior to the Pontiff's address to refrain from attempting to shake his hand. However, Pope Francis initiated a handshake with President Obama's top diplomat -- Secretary of State John Kerry -- before his speech and upon departing from the Capitol. The general consensus was the Pope Francis was showing support for Secretary of State Kerry's efforts at vigorous diplomacy and on behalf of the pursuit of peace.

Special Note:

Afghan forces backed by US warplanes carry out offensive to retake control over Kunduz; air strikes kill MSF staff in horrific tragedy

At the end of September 2015, the Islamist terror group, the Taliban, carried out an audacious assault on the northern Afghan city of Kunduz, capturing the provincial capital in what could only be understood as their most significant strategic victory since their time in power. Cognizant of the stakes, President Ashraf Ghani ordered an immediate offensive operation aimed at retaking control of Kunduz, and soon, Afghan forces, backed by United States warplanes, were battling Taliban forces. Afghan officials said that the operation was seeing success and its forces had regained control over several government buildings while eliminating scores of Taliban fighters. Battles between the two sides went on at the airport although the city center was growing quiet. While many Taliban were killed or had fled Kunduz to escape the assault by U.S.-backed Afghan forces, there remained several Taliban fighters in the city and continuing to pose a threat. The process of retaking control over Kunduz would not be rapid, though, as the Taliban was reportedly using civilians as human shields, even hiding in people's homes and in hospitals.

The effort to retake control of Kunduz took a tragic turn at the start of October 2015 when air strikes hit an Afghan hospital in Kunduz, killing at least 22 people and injuring scores more. The esteemed French medical charity, Medecins sans Frontieres (MSF, or "Doctors without Borders" in English), which operated at that facility, reported that the air strikes killed 12 of its staff and seven of its patients, while its hospital was badly damaged.

It should be noted that the Afghan interior ministry reported that 10 to 15 Taliban militants were found hiding in the hospital, and were killed in the air strikes although this claim was not independently confirmed. Of course, along

with the deaths of those terrorists were the deaths of doctors trying to save lives in a war zone, along with patients already fighting for their lives.

NATO acknowledged that its forces were carrying out an offensive operation against the Taliban in Kunduz at the time, and air strikes by United States forces might be responsible for the unfolding tragedy. NATO noted that the aerial bombardment campaign may have yielded unfortunate collateral damage consequences and promised a full investigation into the matter.

MSF was unimpressed by this explanation, with MSF's President Meinie Nicolai casting the incident as "abhorrent" and issuing the following statement: "We demand total transparency from coalition forces. We cannot accept that this horrific loss of life will simply be dismissed as collateral damage." Indeed, officials from MSF also noted that the hospital's coordinates were well-known to coalition forces, and that once the air strikes began, its staff tried desperately to contact NATO to inform the security bloc that its hospital was being struck. Likewise, MSF President Joanne Liu declared: "Until proven otherwise, we are working on the presumption of a war crime...This attack cannot be brushed aside as a mere mistake or an inevitable consequence of war."

Meanwhile, the United Nations human rights chief, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, expressed his condemnation for the air strikes that hit the MSF hospital saying it was "tragic, inexcusable and possibly even criminal."

In response to the Kunduz tragedy, United States Defense Secretary Ashton Carter said: "While we are still trying to determine exactly what happened, I want to extend my thoughts and prayers to everyone affected. A full investigation into the tragic incident is under way in coordination with the Afghan government." In a later statement, Carter said that the United States military took responsibility for the tragic air strikes on the MSF hospital facility. The statement read as follows: "The U.S. military takes the greatest care in our operations to prevent the loss of innocent life, and when we make mistakes, we own up to them. That's exactly what we're doing right now. We will do everything we can to understand this tragic incident, learn from it, and hold people accountable as necessary."

United States President Barack Obama also entered the fray, as he personally apologized to the MSF chief, Joanne Liu, for the loss of life. As reported by White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest: "The President assured Dr. Liu that the Department of Defense investigation currently under way would provide a transparent, thorough and objective accounting of the facts and circumstances of the incident and, if necessary, the President would implement changes that would make tragedies like this one less likely to occur in the future." However, it was unclear that this overture from the leader of the free world had any significant impact. In fact, MSF was calling for an independent investigation into the matter, while noting that the institutional investigations underway by the United States Pentagon, NATO, and joint United States and Afghan entities were unacceptable.

The investigatory and accountability process was beginning in the political sphere. During testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee in the United States, the American commander of international forces in Afghanistan, Army General John Campbell, said that United States air support had been requested by Afghan officials, although he indicated that the deadly air strikes on the MSF facility were the result of a mistake within the United States' own military chain of command. Explaining that the United States military would never intentionally target a medical facility, Campbell said, "A hospital was mistakenly struck. We would never intentionally target a protected medical facility. With an eye on preventing further deadly mistakes of the type made in Kunduz, Campbell ordered military forces under his command to review the operational rules of engagement and to undergo retraining with respect to these rules.

Campbell also made it clear that the existing exit strategy to withdraw all remaining United State troops from Afghanistan at the end of 2016 should be extended due to continuing threats posed by al Qaida and Islamic State. Campbell's stance on a continuing military presence in Afghanistan was well-received by conservatives in the Senate who have never been on board with President Barack Obama's "date certain" schedule for withdrawal. As stated by Republican Senator John McCain, "The world walked away from Afghanistan once before and it

descended into chaos that contributed to the worst terrorist attack ever against our homeland. We cannot afford to repeat that mistake." Indeed, with the threat of terrorism increasing in the region, NATO was also warming to the idea of an extended military engagement in Afghanistan. To this end, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said, "I sense that many allies are willing to stay longer if needed."

The fact of the matter, though, was that as much as there were increasing calls for the United States and its allies to consider a more flexible schedule with regard to Afghanistan, the Kunduz tragedy was also spurring a debate on the Afghanistan policy in totality. After more than a decade of war in that country, critics were questioning the objectives of the engagement, and challenging the effectiveness of aerial bombardment campaigns in modern warfare. While air strikes and drone strikes favored by the United States in recent times have been deemed preferable to so-called "boots on the ground," it was unclear whether they were actually effective in accomplishing the goals of counter-terrorism. Instead, while such air strikes might target malignant actors, such as terrorists from al-Qaida, the Taliban, and Islamic State, they often result in the deaths of civilians as well, which tends only to fuel further terrorism. Meanwhile, even as the strikes may hit high value terror targets on occasion, the corpus of research done on the doctrine of air power indicates that aerial bombardment often serves only to disrupt the activities and strongholds of terrorists, who simply flee the targeted zone for more fertile ground. In their wake are civilians who bear the brunt of the assault from the skies, and ultimately are consigned to the category known infamously as "collateral damage."

Introduction

Since early 2011, anti-government protests have spread and escalated across the Arab world; Syria emerged as an addition to the list of countries experiencing unrest in March 2011. At first, protesters stopped short of demanding the resignation of President Bashar al-Assad, instead demanding greater political freedom and efforts to end corruption. For his part, President Assad announced he would advance a reform agenda, which would include lifting the emergency laws that had been in place for decades, and increased rights to the country's disenfranchised Kurdish population. These moves were aimed at quelling the rising climate of unrest gripping the country. But over time, as protests continued, and as the Assad regime carried out a hardline crackdown on dissent, tensions escalated between the government and the protesters.

In mid-2011, the United Nations Security Council and the Arab League respectively issued condemnations of the violence in Syria. As well, the United Nations Human Rights Council called for an independent inquiry into the violent crackdown on dissent. Meanwhile, global leaders were calling for President Assad to step down from power, given the brutality of the Syrian regime's crackdown on protesters. In 2012, the bloody crackdown by the Assad regime on anti-government protesters was ongoing. In fact, the crackdown appeared to become more relentless in places such as Homs and Aleppo. Despite widespread condemnation from the West, a United Nations Security Resolution on the situation in Syria was subject to veto by Russia and China. A subsequent vote in the United Nations General Assembly overwhelmingly condemned Syria for its brutal crackdown. A prevailing truce, brokered by the joint United Nations/Arab League envoy, Kofi Annan, was established in the interests of preventing further bloodshed; however, it was revealed to be an exercise in theory rather than practice and eventually the United Nations monitoring mission ended in failure.

Syria has meanwhile been subject to sanctions by various countries and was sliding into pariah status in the international community. Assassinations, alleged massacres, geopolitical tensions with Turkey and Israel, and suspicions about the use of chemical weapons, have since mired the Syrian landscape. Indeed, with it was increasingly clear that with President Bashar al-Assad using brutal tactics to quell the uprising served only to create an even more tumultuous landscape, and eventually set the path for a full-blown civil war. That civil war pitted the Assad forces, backed by Lebanon-based Hezbollah, against a disparate cabal of anti-government entities, ranging from the rebel Free Syrian Army to several Islamist terrorist enclaves.

At the same time, Syria was facing a devastating humanitarian crisis. That crisis reached new heights in August 2013 with claims that Syrian forces launched a chemical attack on the outskirts of Damascus. Although this was the clear sign that United States President Barack Obama's "red line" had definitively been crossed, the international community remained reticent about becoming more involved in the Syrian crisis. Ultimately, an ensuing chemical weapons deal with Syria between the United States and Russia quieted the war drums. In the meantime, though, a highly anticipated peace summit in Geneva ended without yielding any productive results and the civil war in Syria raged on and on.

By mid-2014, while Syria had shown progress in its disposal of chemical toxins, in keeping with an international agreement intended to avoid intervention by the West, the country was dealing with an ascendant "Islamic State." Previously known as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or ISIS as well as Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant or ISIL, this group self-declared a caliphate extending from Syria to Iraq. It was apparent that the power vacuum from the Syrian civil war provided a breeding ground for extremism that Islamic State could exploit and use to both challenge the Assad regime and function as a recruitment tool for Jihadists. Whereas the West and regional powers in the Middle East had earlier called for an end to the Assad regime, suddenly the geopolitical stakes were quite different as extremist terrorists were now posing the most dangerous threat to regional stability. The barbaric beheadings of two American journalists by Islamic State in their stronghold in Syria changed the calculus and the Obama administration in the United States -- initially reticent about re-engaging in the Middle East -- was now looking at a targeted anti-terrorism strategy in the Syrian-Iraqi landscape of Islamic State. As such, a Western coalition, led by the United States, was soon carrying out air strikes on Islamic State targets in Syria and Iraq. Of note was the fact that the United States-led coalition expanded to include Japan and Jordan when citizens of their countries that were being held by Islamic State were also brutally killed.

As of 2015, Syria was beset by two sets of intersecting challenges -- the ongoing civil war between the Assad regime and rebel forces on one end, and the horrific dangers posed by the notorious terror group, Islamic State, which had seized wide swaths of territory in Syria and left an appalling death toll. It was generally understood that the civil war conditions in Syria, to some extent, facilitated the emergence of Islamic State in that country. Syrian President Assad's priority to hold onto power, and thus the center of power in Damascus, had allowed a power chasm to flourish in other parts of the country, which Islamic State has been able to exploit. The result has been a mass exodus of Syrians fleeing the country and seeking refuge in Europe. The so-called migrant influx in Europe has raised questions as to how to legally and humanely deal with a burgeoning humanitarian refugee crisis.

At the political level, Russia signaled it would be entering the Syrian crisis militarily in September 2015 although it was unclear if Moscow's goal was to bolster and preserve Bashar al-Assad's hold on power, or, to go after Islamic State. The geopolitical landscape was complicated in October 2015 with the news that the United States would be deploying special operations teams to Syria. The scene in November 2015 was grave as Russia and France intensified their efforts to go after Islamic State targets in Syria following devastating terror attacks by the Islamist terror network that killed hundreds of Russian and French citizens. Russia, France, and the United States were now respectively changing their respective calculations, cognizant that the Islamist terror group was no longer simply seeking to build its Caliphate but, instead, transposing its goals to more of an Islamic Jihadist orientation. The result was a global security crisis.

Update on Syrian Civil War and threat posed by Islamic State--

In the autumn of 2015, the geopolitical dynamics of the region were complicated by the news that Russian military forces were operating in Syria to help shore up the Assad regime. Reports were emerging about no shortage of Russian fighter jets in Syria, as well as infantry forces, battle tanks and other military Russian military resources at an airfield near the Syrian city of Latakia. As well, Russia deployed military advisers to Syria and staged naval exercises off Syria.

Also of note was the fact that a global coalition, led by the United States, was already carrying out air strikes against Islamic State targets in Iraq and Syria. With both Russia and the United States-led Western coalition likely to be

carrying out air strikes on Islamic State targets in the same region, the two countries were discussing modes of cooperation and coordination that would prevent accidents in their respective air campaigns.

To this end, regardless of their frosty bilateral relations, Russian President Vladimir Putin and United States President Barack Obama met on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly meeting to discuss this matter. Russian President Putin characterized that meeting as follows: "Our talks were very constructive, business-like and surprisingly frank." A Russia aide to the president added to Putin's assessment of the meeting with Obama and their intent to work cooperatively as he said: "We have clarity on their objectives. Their objectives are to go after ISIL and to support the government."

Both leaders expressed the importance of avoiding air collisions between their respective air strike fleets; however, their visions for Syria's future remained quite different. While Putin has argued that Syria's stability and anti-terrorism efforts can only be maintained by keeping the Assad regime in power. Obama, by contrast, has cast Assad as a tyrant who was responsible for no shortage of gross abuses against his own people, and whose record should not be sanitized in the effort to go after Islamic State. For President Obama, there was a need for "a new [Syrian] leader and an inclusive government that united the Syrian people in the fight against terrorist groups."

Nevertheless, with Islamic State continuing to pose one of the most pressing threats to global security, President Obama expressed a pragmatic stance suggesting that there might be a "managed transition" from Assad's rule. This policy appeared to be backed by other Western leaders, namely United Kingdom Prime Minister David Cameron. Of concern was the reality that the loss of Assad at the helm might produce a power chasm that Islamic State and other unsavory actors could exploit. To this end, President Obama said, "There is no room for accommodating an apocalyptic cult like ISIL and the United States makes no apology for using our military as part of a broad coalition to go after it." He added, "Realism dictates that compromise will be required to end the fighting and ultimately stamp out ISIL. But realism also requires a managed transition away from Assad and to a new leader and an inclusive government that recognizes there must be an end to this chaos." President Obama also noted that his country was willing to work with other partner nation states in the effort to vanquish Islamic State and ultimately stabilize Syria. To this end, he said, "The United States is prepared to work with any nation, including Russia and Iran, to resolve the conflict. But we must recognize that there cannot be, after so much bloodshed, so much carnage, a return to the pre-war status quo."

United States Secretary of State John Kerry and his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, further elaborated their two countries' respective interests in Syria by noting that they had agreed on "some fundamental principles." In an interview with MSNBC News, Kerry explained, "There was agreement that Syria should be a unified country, united, that it needs to be secular, that ISIL needs to be taken on, and that there needs to be a managed transition." Kerry also added that with the Syrian crisis raging on, and with the human toll increasing alarmingly, there was a need for cooperation. He said, "Everybody understands that Syria is at stake, and the world is looking rapidly for some kind of resolution."

It should be noted that the Syrian National Coalition -- Syria's political opposition in exile -- has made it clear that it rejects any role for Assad in a transitional government. That unrelenting stance was sure to complicate any joint effort by Russia and the West to facilitate a "managed transitions of power" in Syria.

Meanwhile, there remained some questions about the actual goals and purpose of Russia's military intervention into Syria. Was it actually aimed at assisting the global effort against the world's most notorious and brutal terror group, Islamic State? Or was it actually more craven and aimed at ensuring that Russian President Vladimir Putin's ally, Bashar al-Assad, could hold onto power? To that latter end, in late September 2015, United States officials reported to the news outlet, CNN, that Russian fighter jets had turned off their transponders to evade detection as they flew into Syrian territory. United States officials also confirmed that Russian drones were flying in the area of the city of Latakia. Since this was not exactly Islamic State territory, the conclusion was that Russia was more focused on supporting Assad's regime than actually fighting terrorism. Separately, other Western countries were

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reaching the same conclusion. As noted by French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius, "You have to look at who is doing what. The international community is striking Daesh [IS]. France is striking Daesh. The Russians, for the time being, are not at all."

It should be noted that, the prospect of Russia intervening into Syria to shore up President Assad was not being well-received by Gulf Arab countries, who argued that such a move would only deepen the conflict. Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir characterized the Russian intervention as an "escalation" and emphasized his country's view that a stable Syria in the future would not involve Assad at the helm of power. For Russia, though, which was an ally of Assad-led Syria, and which had a naval base at Tartous in Syria, supporting the Assad regime would also preserve a level of Russian influence in the region.

On Sept. 30, 2015 -- shortly after agreeing to work with the United States to go after Islamic State -- Russian fighter jets were carrying out strikes on the anti-Assad rebel strongholds of Homs and Hama. The United States was informed of the Russian strikes only one hour before they commenced. For its part, Russia claimed that it was also carrying out missions against Islamic State military equipment, ammunition, communications, and fuel supply targets, however, United States officials noted this did not appear to be the case. The Russians' actual choices of air strike targets in Homs and Hama, along with United States assessments, made clear that the Russian intervention into Syria was clearly for the purpose of bolstering the Assad regime.

That being said, later air strikes reported by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights at the start of October 2015 indicated that Russia was also targeting command posts in the Islamic State de facto capital of Raqqa. That effort appeared to be forcing residents there to cancel prayers.

For its part, the United States reacted to this news by making clear that it would remain focused on the goal of vanquishing Islamic State. United States department of state spokesperson, John Kirby, said: "The U.S.-led coalition will continue to fly missions over Iraq and Syria as planned and in support of our international mission to degrade and destroy ISIL."

Right-wing and neoconservative critics of the Obama administration in the United States have argued that President Obama's reticent approach to getting involved in Syria and the rest of the Middle East created an opening for Russia to intensify its footprint in the region. But the Obama administration has defended its policy of avoiding military entanglements in the Middle East by pointing to the mistakes committed by the previous Bush administration in Iraq, which resulted in a decade of war and socio-political destabilization that actually created the conditions for Islamic State to take root. Moreover, both President Obama himself and his top diplomat, Secretary of State John Kerry, have warned that Russia was becoming ensconced in a regional sectarian quagmire by aligning itself with Iran-backed Hezbollah to prop up the Alawite Assad regime in Syria against a much larger bloc of Sunni Arab countries in the Middle East who want to see regime change in Syria. As noted by President Obama himself, by picking the Shi'ite side of this evolving sectarian battle, Russia was very likely strengthening Islamic State by undermining the moderate opposition and inspiring more Sunni Jihadists to the cause. The United States leader explained, "The Russian policy is driving the moderate opposition underground and strengthening ISIL." Left unstated -- but pertinent nonetheless -- was the fact that Russia was already bogged down due to its involvement in the Ukrainian crisis. Together with its economic woes, Russia's recent adventurism in the Middle East was not likely to be helpful to its long-term prospects either. However, for those seeking a more muscular foreign policy and a more deeply hegemonic imprint from the United States, such arguments were likely to fall on deaf ears.

By the start of October 2015 -- shortly after the start of Russia's foray into Syria -- a geopolitical imbroglio was sparked when Russian fighter jets twice violated Turkish air space. Russia explained one such violation as a mistake due to weather conditions; however, Turkey was not receptive to that explanation, with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan issuing the following warning: "If Russia loses a friend like Turkey, with whom it has been cooperating on many issues, it will lose a lot, and it should know that" He added that "an attack on Turkey means an attack on NATO." For its part, NATO -- of which Turkey was a member state -- also refused to accept that

explanation, noting that the Russian incursions "did not look like an accident" and with NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg noting that the Russian violations of Turkish air space "lasted for a long time." Stoltenberg further cast the Russian incursions as "unacceptable," and warned that the North Atlantic security bloc was viewing the situation "very seriously."

It should be noted that bilateral ties between Turkey and Syria have been a downward spiral largely due to Turkey's criticism of the Assad regime's brutal crackdown on anti-government factions. The ties between the two countries reached a new low in mid-2012 when Syrian air defenses shot down a Turkish fighter jet, but deteriorated further in October 2012 when Syrian mortar fire killed five Turkish civilians in a border town. The Turkish parliament at the time authorized military action against Syria in the aftermath of that incident. The geopolitical scene grew more complicated later in 2012 when Turkish jets forced a Syrian plane, which was suspected of "non-civilian cargo," to land in Turkey. Authorities in that country said that the move was aimed at preventing the passage of weapons through its airspace into Syria. The geopolitical complexity was exacerbated when Russia and Syria decried the move by Turkey. In late 2012, it was announced that the United States would send 400 troops and two Patriot air defense missile batteries to Turkey to help defend its NATO ally against possible threats from Syria. Tensions between Turkey and Syria emerged again in March 2014 when Turkey downed a Syria aircraft, which (according to Turkey) had violated its air space. In 2015, as discussed here, with the entry of Russian forces into the Syrian crisis, so too came violations of Turkish air space by Russian jets operating in Syria. In many senses, Turkey was becoming a key inflection point in the ongoing Syrian crisis.

Meanwhile, Russia reported that it carried out repeated air strikes on Islamic State targets in the first week of October 2015. But as before, the lion's share of Russia's activity in Syria appeared aimed at helping the Assad regime hold its territory and go after opposition rebel groups, with an eye on regaining territory. Of note were Russian continued strikes in anti-Assad rebel strongholds. Around the same period in October 2015, Syrian forces were reported to be preparing for a ground offensive, which would presumably be backed Russian air strikes and cruise missile strikes from their fleet in the Caspian Sea.

The success of the Russian effort was very much a subject of debate, despite claims of Russia being an emerging actor in the region. For all its air strikes in Syrian territory, reports from the ground indicated that Russian strikes were more successful at hitting moderate rebel and civilian targets than Islamic State targets.

In the background of these developments were continued overtures between Russia and the United States aimed at establishing rules of engagement and protocols of conduct related to their respective campaigns in Syria. However, the United States Defense Secretary Ash Carter ruled out further cooperation with Russia regarding the Syrian crisis as he declared the Russian strategy to be clearly aimed at bolstering the Assad regime. He said, "We believe Russia has the wrong strategy. They continue to hit targets that are not ISIL. This is a fundamental mistake."

Nevertheless, as October 2015 came to a close, United States and Russian military officials signed a memorandum of understanding covering "de-conflicting" procedures and protocols to be undertaken by their pilots in order to avoid an accidental incidences over Syria as they respectively carry out air strikes in the same territory. A Pentagon spokesperson, Peter Cook, said that the two countries would "form a working group to discuss any implementation issues that follow" but that the actual agreement covered all coalition members, such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. The State Department was *clear* in noting that the agreement was geared towards keeping pilots safe and did not extend into the realm of strategic cooperation. As noted by State Department spokesperson, John Kirby, "It's not a treaty of cooperation or anything like that ... It doesn't connote cooperation or coordination or joint targeting."

Meanwhile, in the same period of late October 2015, United States President Barack Obama indicated a policy shift regarding Syria, as it was reported that dozens of special operations troops would be deployed to northern Syria to advise opposition groups as they battle Islamic State. The deployment indicated a departure from President

Obama's "no combat boots on the ground" in Syria stance, although the White House insisted that the mission would have a circumscribed and highly limited "train, advise, and assist" role. White House spokesperson, Josh Earnest, explained the president's position as follows: "This is a dangerous place on the globe and they are at risk, and there's no denying that. But I think if we were envisioning a combat operation, we probably would be contemplating more than 50 troops on the ground."

It should be noted that President Obama was also supplementing this limited deployment with A-10s and F-15 war planes, which would be deployed to the Incirlik air base in Turkey, presumably to carry out air strikes against Islamic State targets. The deployments of both military advisers and aircraft in northern Syria was part of a mission by Syrian rebels to target the Islamic State stronghold of Raqqa. Meanwhile, the diplomatic effort was afoot to try to find a political solution for Syria that would include an Assad-free future while not allowing the country to sink into the morass of lawlessness.

Amidst these developments on the geopolitical landscape was the reality that Islamic State continued to pose a threat in the region, and even advance deeper into Syrian territory. Of particular note was the fact that at the start of November 2015, the terror group was able to capture the Syrian town of Maheen, located in the central Homs Province. Maheen had been held by government forces but was now under Islamic State control. Battles were taking place in nearby towns as Islamic State sought to extend its grip in the region. In the crosshairs was the Assyrian Christian town of Sadad where inhabitants spoke the ancient Aramaic language.

In the first week of November 2015, despite the addition of the Russian campaign in Syria to support Assad, anti-government rebels were able to capture control over the town of Morek to the north of the flashpoint city of Hama. Fares al-Bayoush, a commander for the rebel group Fursan al-Haq, which has been operating under the auspices of the Free Syrian Army, said the strategically located town of Morek had been "liberated." He explained the strategic value of controlling Morek as follows: "It was a center for the gathering of regime forces and a point of departure for its operations." In the same period, rebels in Idlib province recaptured Tal Skik, which had gone under Hezbollah-backed Syrian control a month earlier. These gains for anti-Assad factions indicated that despite Russia's intervention into the Syrian civil war, rebel factions continued to make their presence known.

A two year siege by Islamic State at the Kweires air base in Aleppo in northern Syria came to an end in the second week of November 2015 when Syrian soldiers stormed the facility and rescued soldiers trapped there. The operation could well be regarded as one of the most significant victories for Assad's forces in Syria in recent times.

Meanwhile, ahead of scheduled multilateral talks on Syria, Russia released a blueprint for the country's future. That initiative called for the Assad regime and the opposition to find consensus in a constitutional reform process that would last 18 months and be followed by a presidential election. Significantly, the proposal would not prevent Bashar al-Assad from contesting the presidential contest. This latter element promised to be a deal-breaker of sorts for the opposition. As noted by Monzer Akbik of the Western-backed Syrian National Coalition, "The Syrian people have never accepted the dictatorship of Assad and they will not accept that it is reintroduced or reformulated in another way." Meanwhile, Western powers, several Sunni Arab countries in the region, and Turkey were not expected to accept a plan that included a pathway for Assad to hold onto power in Syria. Indeed, those various players made clear that they would not sign onto a plan that did not include an exit strategy for Assad, whom they viewed as one of the main sources of Syria's crisis. That being said, there were other viable aspects of the proposal, such as a process for distinguishing rebel groups with terror ties and legitimate opposition entities -- the latter of which could become key players in a future peace and reconciliation plan. As well, there were provisions for a soft partitioning of power and security into Assad-led zones and non-Assad led zones across Syria.

In the same period, the effort against Islamic State was ongoing. Indeed, on Nov. 12, 2015, the United States Pentagon reported that it had targeted a notorious Islamic State terrorist known as "Jihadi John" in an apparent drone strike in Syria. The Kuwaiti-born British national had already been identified as Mohammed Emwazi; he gained notoriety as the ominous masked figure in Islamic State propaganda videos who carried out beheadings of international journalists and humanitarian workers. According to United States authorities, Emwazi had been

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"tracked carefully over a period of time" and was finally targeted for elimination in a drone strike near the Islamic State stronghold of Raqqa. Defense Department personnel initially stopped short of confirming Emwazi's death with Press Secretary Peter Cook simply saying: "We are assessing the results of tonight's operation and will provide additional information as and where appropriate." By Nov. 13, 2015, United States authorities said they were "reasonably certain" that drone strike in Syria had killed Emwazi.

In this period, the United States' air strike effort was aggressively geared towards hitting Islamic State's oil producing resources, which essentially funds the terror group. The air strike campaign, called "Tidal Wave II," was thus concentrating on oil tanker trucks, oil rigs, pumps and storage tanks. The objective was the hit the targets so as to disrupt the oil related activities for a significant period of time, but without either destroying these oil facilities completely or just inflicting minor damage that could be repaired in short order.

In mid-November 2015, the situation was grave as Russia and France intensified their efforts to go after Islamic State targets in Syria following devastating terror attacks by the Islamist terror network that killed hundreds of Russian and French citizens. At issue was the fact that Islamic State was claiming responsibility for a bomb that exploded on a Russian jet flying from the Egyptian resort of Sharm-el-Sheikh, killing more than 200 Russians on board. Also at issue was the Islamic State claim of responsibility for a spate of appalling terror attacks in the French capital city of Paris, which killed approximately 130 people. Islamic State made clear that its brutal acts were being carried out because of the international community's engagement in Syria. Islamic State also promised that attacks were to come in the United States and other Western countries.

In response to what could only be understood as acts of war by Islamic State, Russian and French warplanes wasted no time before stepping up their respective air campaigns in Syria, targeting Islamic State targets in the terror group's stronghold of Raqqa in a sustained manner. France also deployed its air craft carrier, the Charles de Gaulle, to the Middle Eastern region for the purpose of supporting the effort against Islamic State. Of note was the fact that France was not limiting its air strike campaign from the Charles de Gaulle only to Islamic State targets in Syria, such as the terror group stronghold of Raqqa; indeed, France soon expanded its scope to hit Islamic State targets in Ramadi and Mosul in Iraq.

While the United Kingdom was not, at the time, engaged in the Syrian crisis, the British government gave France the use of its air base in Cyprus from which it could strike Islamist terror groups in the region. United Kingdom Prime Minister David Cameron said that his country would provide air-to-air refueling services and that he would recommend that the British parliament vote in favor of the his country joining the United States-led air campaign to strike Islamic State targets.

The United States was taking the terror threat posed by Islamic State and other radical Islamist terror groups seriously, with the United States Department of State issuing a global travel alert. The warning read as follows: "Current information suggests that Islamic State, al-Qaida, Boko Haram, and other terrorist groups continue to plan terrorist attacks in multiple regions. Authorities believe the likelihood of terror attacks will continue as members of (Islamic State) return from Syria and Iraq. Additionally, there is a continuing threat from unaffiliated persons planning attacks inspired by major terrorist organizations but conducted on an individual basis.

Meanwhile. as a result of their shared interest in defeating Islamic State, Russian and United States forces were said to be more closely coordinating their respective strikes on Islamic State targets in Syria despite strained relations between the two countries. Overall, Russia, France, and the United States were now respectively changing their calculations, cognizant that the Islamist terror group was no longer simply seeking to build its Caliphate but, instead, transposing its goals to more of an Islamic Jihadist orientation. The result was an international security crisis.

In addition to the killing of Russian and French nationals in the autumn of 2015, in the same period, Islamic State had also claimed responsibility for double bombings in a Shi'a district of the Lebanese city of Beirut, killing more than 40 people. The general consensus was that the Beirut bombings were inflicted due to activities of the

Lebanese Shi'a Islamic militant group, Hezbollah, in Syria. Specifically, Hezbollah has been militarily engaged in the Syrian civil war for the purpose of backing the Assad regime in that country. But the result has been a high price in blood as spill-over violence from the Syrian civil war was reaching Lebanese terrain.

The attacks on Lebanese, Russian, and French targets constituted a terrorist trifecta for Islamic State, and could only be understood as manifestations of the terror group's effort to demonstrate its relevance and resilience -- even as it was being subject to strikes from various international actors.

Indeed, the terror enclave was certainly under pressure from a United States-led international coalition, as well as a bombing campaign by Russia. Earlier in November 2015 Islamic State lost control of Sinjar in Iraq as a result of a fierce offensive by Kurdish peshmerga fighters backed by United States air power. In the same period, as discussed above, the United States Pentagon reported that it had targeted the "face" of Islamic State in a drone strike -- the notorious terrorist "Jihadi John" who was shown in barbaric videotaped footage with international hostages who were executed via decapitation. The Pentagon indicated that the drone strike was very likely successful, thus inflicting a symbolic blow against the terror group. Around the same period, Islamic State was reported to be losing control in Aleppo in Syria.

While these losses were recent, the downward trajectory for Islamic State had been occurring for several months. As such, the terror enclave's evolving imperative might be to show that it still had power and influence. No longer able to expand its territorial advances, Islamic State was very likely transforming its efforts. Rather than concentrating on building and expanding its so-called Caliphate, Islamic State could be refocusing its ambitions in the direction of international Jihadism. Should this working theory gain support, it would suggest an acute threat to global security.

Given this burgeoning global security threat, neoconservative critics of President Obama in the United States were clamoring for him to articulate a more muscular foreign policy in regard to Islamic State. At the G20 summit in Turkey, an unusually angry President Obama dismissed the notion of warfare for the purpose of warfare without careful consideration, saying, "It's best that we don't shoot first and aim later." In response to the call for him to extort American hegemony and leadership in a robust manner, President Obama said, "If folks want to pop off and have opinions about what they want to do, present a specific plan. 'What I am not interested in doing is posing, or pursuing some notion of American leadership or America winning or whatever other slogans they come up with ... I'm too busy for that.'" He added, "What I do not do is to take actions either because it is going to work politically or somehow make America look tough, or make me look tough. And maybe part of the reason is that every few months I go to Walter Reed [a military hospital] and I see a 25-year-old kid who is paralysed or has lost his limbs. And some of those are people who I have ordered into battle. So I can't afford to play some of the political games that others play."

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In the background of these developments was the growing sense of anxiety about refugees streaming across the Mediterranean to Europe, whose resources were being stretched by the influx of migrants from war torn areas of the Middle East, such as Syria. The United States had agreed to take some Syrian migrants; however, in the wake of the Paris attacks and the news that one terrorist had used a Syrian passport (regardless of whether it was

actually a forged document), there was a loud chorus of opposition. That opposition was coming from the public at large and from Republican politicians who together angrily complained that Syrian refugees posed a national security threat. President Obama lambasted both Republicans in the United States and their counterparts in Europe for attempting to keep these refugees out, making clear it was unAmerican to close the doors to people in need.

The geopolitical complexity of Syrian civil war grew more complicated in the last week of November 2015 when Turkey shot down a Russian fighter jet on the basis of accusations that the Russian aircraft violated Turkish air space. Russia disputed that claim, insisting that the jet was operating in Syrian air space as part of the fight against Islamic State. Russia also referred to the tragic incident as a betrayal and instituted sanctions against Turkey as a result.

With Turkey being a NATO member, Russia's wrath could potentially affect all Western countries participating in the United States-led coalition fighting Islamic State in the region. Hopes for greater cooperation between the West and Russia against the terror group were thus dimmed. In a small positive sign, however, both Moscow and Ankara made clear that they were not interested in escalating tensions and facilitating the path of war. As well, despite being NATO allies, France and the United States called on Turkey to do a better job of monitoring its borders which Islamic State terrorists were using to traverse in and out of Syria. Of particular note was a stretch of the Syrian-Turkish border north of the Syrian city of Aleppo where Turkey had not closed and was being used by the terror group to transport militants and supplies.

Of course, the truth of the matter was that neither Turkey nor Russia has been involved in the Syrian civil war for the principal purpose of fighting Islamic State in the first place. Turkey was one of the initial voices calling for Bashar Assad to go and has directly supported Sunni rebel groups fighting the Assad regime in Syria. At the same time, Turkey has exploited the excuse of fighting Islamic State to instead go after Kurdish extremists, which it deems to be a political threat. On the other side of the equation, Russia has been a long-time backed of the Assad regime, and has often treated Syria like a client state. Russia entered the Syrian quagmire on the basis of claims that it was fighting Islamic State but it, instead, hit rebel targets in Syrian territory that were opposed to the Assad regime. In many senses, Turkey and Russia were already in opposed political "camps" with regard to the Syrian crisis before the latest contretemps over Turkey shooting down a Russian jet.

As November 2015 drew to a close, French President Francois Hollande traveled to the United States to meet with President Barack Obama to discuss the threat posed by Islamic State in the aftermath of the horrific Paris terror attacks and with the Islamist terror group threatening to go after American targets. At the conclusion of their meeting, President Obama and President Hollande agreed to intensify and expand their military operations against Islamic State and also to coordinate intelligence on domestic threats. During a joint news conference at the White House, President Obama noted the long-standing and historic friendship between his country and France, dating back to the 18th century and distinguishing France as the United States' oldest ally. For his part, the French president said that he and President Obama were united in their "relentless determination to fight terrorism anywhere and everywhere." President Hollande said, "We will not let the world be destroyed. To face Daesh (Islamic State), we must have a common, collective and implacable response. We must destroy Daesh wherever it is, cut its financial resources, hunt down its leaders, dismantle its networks and reconquer the territory it controls."

Special Entry:

Islamic State-inspired attacks in United States; President Obama outlines anti-terrorism strategy

The period of late 2015 into the start of 2016 was marked in the United States by two terror attacks at the hands of persons claiming to be inspired by the blood thirsty Islamist Jihadist group, Islamic State. The arrival of such terror attacks on the United States home front provoked criticism of President Barack Obama's response to the threat posed by Islamic State.

Starting in Dec. 2, 2015, a terror attack involving a mass shooting and an unsuccessful bombing took place at the Inland Regional Center in San Bernardino, California in the United States, killing 14 people and injuring 21 others. The assailants escaped in a vehicle, which was tracked by police and ultimately intercepted. An exchange of fire ensued and the two terrorists were killed as a result of the shoot-out with police.

The terrorists were identified as a married couple -- Syed Rizwan Farook, a United States-born citizen of Pakistani background, and Tashfeen Malik, a Pakistani national whom Farook met in Saudi Arabia, and who entered the United States on a fiancé visa prior to her marriage to Farook. It should be noted that Malik was educated in the Pakistani town of Multan, which was known to be a hotbed of militant Islamist ideology.

President Barack Obama said the attack appeared to be inspired by the Islamist extremist terror group, Islamic State, although it was unclear if it was the act of a terror cell and planned with overseas involvement, or, instead the plot orchestrated and carried out by the highly radicalized Muslim Jihadist couple. United States authorities indicated the couple appeared to have planned the killings and certainly had some sort of terrorist inclinations, having uncovered a cache of weapons, pipe bombs, and a mini bomb making factory at the couple's home. As well, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), which was investigating the killings as a counter-terrorism probe, indicated that the couple had contact with individuals suspected of having terrorist connections. The FBI also said that the couple was engaged in target practice using their weapons ahead of the attack, and appeared to be well trained. Furthermore, in interviews with international media, Farook's father reportedly indicated that his son was an Islamic State sympathizer. Farook's wife and co-conspirator, Malik, conveyed support for Islamic State via the social media outlet, Facebook, on the very day of the attack in San Bernadino.

The attack in San Bernadino, coming on the heels of the attacks in Paris, made clear that Islamist extremists working either directly on behalf of Islamic State, or, indirectly in an inspired fashion, were now posing a clear and present danger to Western countries. No longer could the threat posed by Islamic State be regarded as one being manifest in the Middle East. Instead, the countries of the West were being directly targeted with young people aligned with the terror group being determined to carry out vicious acts of brutality on behalf of Islamic State.

Given this reality, United States President Barack Obama was being forced to defend his "light footprint" approach to fighting Islamic State, as his Republican rivals blasted him for being soft on terrorism. In truth, in recent times, Islamic State was certainly under pressure from a United States-led international coalition. For example, in November 2015, Islamic State lost control of Sinjar in Iraq as a result of a fierce offensive by Kurdish peshmerga fighters backed by United States air power. In the same period, the United States Pentagon reported that it had targeted the "face" of Islamic State in a drone strike -- the notorious terrorist "Jihadi John" who was shown in barbaric videotaped footage with international hostages who were executed via decapitation. The Pentagon indicated that the drone strike was very likely successful, thus inflicting a symbolic blow against the terror group. Around the same period, Islamic State was reported to be losing control in Aleppo in Syria.

As such, the Obama administration was emphasizing the fact that the downward trajectory for Islamic State had been occurring for several months. It was certainly true that Islamic State was no longer expanding its territory for its desired Caliphate. But at the same time, it was also exporting fighting back to the West to carry out attacks of the sort that occurred in Paris in November 2015, and it was certainly inspiring "lone wolf" attacks of the sort that occurred in San Bernadino in December 2015. As such, there was no getting away from the fact that there was a burgeoning threat to global security.

Neoconservative critics of President Obama in the United States were clamoring for him to articulate a more muscular foreign policy in regard to Islamic State. At the G20 summit in Turkey, an unusually angry President Obama had already dismissed the notion of warfare without careful consideration, saying, "It's best that we don't shoot first and aim later." In response to the call for him to extrovert American hegemony and leadership in a robust manner, President Obama said, "If folks want to pop off and have opinions about what they want to do, present a specific plan. What I am not interested in doing is posing, or pursuing some notion of American leadership

or America winning or whatever other slogans they come up with ... I'm too busy for that." He added, "What I do not do is to take actions either because it is going to work politically or somehow make America look tough, or make me look tough. And maybe part of the reason is that every few months I go to Walter Reed [a military hospital] and I see a 25-year-old kid who is paralysed or has lost his limbs. And some of those are people who I have ordered into battle. So I can't afford to play some of the political games that others play."

One flashpoint issue in the discussion of United States policy regarding Islamic State was President Obama's claim in the autumn of 2015 that the terror group had been "contained." Asked how he could make that claim given the ongoing terror activity by Islamic State, President Obama explained, "When I said that we are containing their spread in Iraq and Syria — in fact, they control less territory than they did last year. The more we shrink that territory, the less they can pretend they are somehow a functioning state and the more it becomes apparent that they are simply a network of brutal killers." He also insisted that it was vital that Islamic State not be treated as a conventional state enemy but rather as a terrorist network. President Obama said, "Our goals here have to be aggressive and leave no stone here, but also recognize this is not conventional warfare. We play into the ISIL narrative when we act as if they are a state and we use routine military tactics that are designed to fight a state that is attacking another state. That's not what's going on here."

In December 2015, in the aftermath of the San Bernadino massacre, with emotions running high in the United States, President Obama sought to calm the nerves of the United States public, while holding the line on his "light footprint" policy against Islamic State. In his national address on Dec. 6, 2015, President Obama cast the bloodshed in San Bernadino as "an act of terrorism designed to kill innocent people" and promised to "hunt down terrorist plotters" anywhere they are. At the same time, he insisted that there would be no renewed ground war using United States blood and treasure in the Middle East as he declared, "We should not be drawn once more into a long and costly ground war in Iraq or Syria." He noted that "the terrorist threat has evolved into a new phase" as Islamic State exploited the Internet to "poison the minds" of potential sympathizers, turning them into killers. He added, "The threat from terrorism is real but we will overcome it."

President Obama also connected the terrorism threat with the fact that the assailants in San Bernadino were able to easily access guns. He made clear that in the discussion of national security, there had to be a provision for appropriate gun control. Of particular relevance was the fact that persons on the United States' "no fly list" should never be able to purchase a gun.

President Obama's address spurred his Republican rivals to blast his anti-terrorism strategy. Notably, Republican presidential contender, Donald Trump, said via the social media outlet, Twitter, "Is that all there is? We need a new President – FAST!" Another Republican presidential contender, Marco Rubio, declared, "We are at war with a radical jihadist group" and concluded that nothing the president said "will assuage people's fears." Other presidential contenders from the Republican parties demanded that the United States fight Islamic State more aggressively and put fighting forces on the ground. Senator Lindsey Graham said that President Obama's existing strategy would not destroy Islamic State and demanded that United States send ground forces to the battleground in the Middle East. Former Governor Jeb Bush espoused a standpoint neoconservative approach as he demanded "an aggressive strategy to defeat ISIS." Senator Ted Cruz said that were he to become president, he would "direct the Department of Defense to destroy ISIS." It was unclear how he believed that direction was substantially different from President Obama's directives, unless he envisioned a massive ground campaign in the Middle East.

It should be noted that the president had already augmented the air strike campaign against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria with the deployment of military advisors, and at the start of December 2015, he supplemented these forces with a special operations expeditionary force to fight Islamic State. While this deployment collectively could actually be defined as ground forces, it was clearly being interpreted by hardline conservatives as insufficient. Defense Secretary Ashton Carter outlined the goals the special operations expeditionary force as follows: "These special operators will over time be able to conduct raids, free hostages, gather intelligence and capture ISIL leaders." For the Obama administration, the imperative was to exploit the special operations expertise in a targeted

strategy against Islamic State, rather than the conventional warfare approach favored by Republicans. This stance was actually consistent with President Obama's philosophy that Islamic State was simply not engaged in traditional warfare in the first place and thus could not be quelled in a conventional manner.

By January 2016, the threat posed by "lone wolf" actors inspired by Islamic State was manifest in an attack on a Philadelphia police officer. In that incident, a man pledging allegiance to Islamic State ambushed Officer Jessie Hartnett, opening fire on him and releasing approximately a dozen shots. Despite being struck by gunfire, Hartnett was able to return fire and notify dispatchers of his predicament. Responding police were able to capture the assailant, who was later identified as Edward Archer and who declared that he was acting "in the name of Islam." Meanwhile, while Hartnett was described as having suffered grave injuries, he was expected to recover.

January 2016 was also marked by arrests in Sacramento, Calif., and Houston, Texas, of two Iraqi refugees of Palestinian ancestry whom the United States Justice Department accused of lying to federal officials and supporting terrorism. Aws Mohammed Younis Al Jayab was arrested in Sacramento and charged with making a false statement linked to international terrorism. The criminal complaint against him also indicated that Jayab intended to travel to Syria to fight on behalf of Islamic State. Omar Faraj Saeed Al Hardan was arrested in Houston and charged with trying to provide material support to Islamic State. The two cases of likely terrorists presenting themselves as refugees would likely harden the view of Americans with regard to accepting refugees from war torn countries in the Middle East. The two cases would also likely place additional pressure on the Obama administration regarding its refugee policy, as well as its response to the threat posed by Islamic State, even though it was the United States authorities who successfully intercepted and arrested both Jayab and Hardan.

U.S. augments anti-terror strategy for Iraq and Syria --

Recent terror attacks on Lebanese, Russian, and French targets constituted a terrorist trifecta for Islamic State, and could only be understood as manifestations of the terror group's effort to demonstrate its relevance and resilience -- even as it was being subject to strikes from various international actors.

Indeed, the terror enclave was certainly under pressure from a United States-led international coalition, as well as a bombing campaign by Russia. Earlier in November 2015 Islamic State lost control of Sinjar in Iraq as a result of a fierce offensive by Kurdish peshmerga fighters backed by United States air power. In the same period, as discussed above, the United States Pentagon reported that it had targeted the "face" of Islamic State in a drone strike -- the notorious terrorist "Jihadi John" who was shown in barbaric videotaped footage with international hostages who were executed via decapitation. The Pentagon indicated that the drone strike was very likely successful, thus inflicting a symbolic blow against the terror group. Around the same period, Islamic State was reported to be losing control in Aleppo in Syria.

While these losses were recent, the downward trajectory for Islamic State had been occurring for several months. As such, the terror enclave's evolving imperative might be to show that it still had power and influence. No longer able to expand its territorial advances, Islamic State was very likely transforming its efforts. Rather than concentrating on building and expanding its so-called Caliphate, Islamic State could be refocusing its ambitions in the direction of international Jihadism. Should this working theory gain support, it would suggest an acute threat to global security.

Given this burgeoning global security threat, neoconservative critics of President Obama in the United States were clamoring for him to articulate a more muscular foreign policy in regard to Islamic State. At the G20 summit in Turkey, an unusually angry President Obama dismissed the notion of warfare without careful consideration, saying, "It's best that we don't shoot first and aim later." In response to the call for him to extrovert American hegemony and leadership in a robust manner, President Obama said, "If folks want to pop off and have opinions about what they want to do, present a specific plan. What I am not interested in doing is posing, or pursuing some notion of American leadership or America winning or whatever other slogans they come up with ... I'm too busy for that." He added, "What I do not do is to take actions either because it is going to work politically or somehow make America

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In December 2015 when the United States was struck by a massacre in the California city of San Bernardino. President Barack Obama said that the assailants were inspired by Islamic State. In his national address on Dec. 6, 2015, President Obama cast the bloodshed in San Bernardino as "an act of terrorism designed to kill innocent people" and promised to "hunt down terrorist plotters" anywhere they are. At the same time, he insisted that there would be no renewed ground war using United States blood and treasure in the Middle East as he declared, "We should not be drawn once more into a long and costly ground war in Iraq or Syria."

President Obama's address spurred his hardline conservative rivals to blast his anti-terrorism strategy and argue for a more aggressive approach, marked by a massive ground force engagement in the region. However, President Obama had already augmented the air strike campaign against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria with the deployment of military advisors, and at the start of December 2015, he supplemented these forces with a special operations expeditionary force to fight Islamic State. United States Defense Secretary Ashton Carter outlined the goals the special operations expeditionary force as follows: "These special operators will over time be able to conduct raids, free hostages, gather intelligence and capture ISIL leaders." For the Obama administration, the imperative was to exploit the special operations expertise in a targeted strategy against Islamic State, rather than the conventional warfare.

In the period of late December 2015, the United States led an air offensive against Islamic State, killing 10 Islamic State leaders. Included in the list of targets were Abdul Qader Hakim and Charaffe al Mouadan, who linked with the terror attacks that took place in Paris a month earlier and left as many as 130 people dead at the hands of ISIL-linked terrorists. United States Army Colonel Steve Warren, a spokesperson for the United States-led campaign against the Islamist terror group, outlined the development, saying, "Over the past month, we've killed ten ISIL leadership figures with targeted air strikes, including several external attack planners, some of whom are linked to the Paris attacks. Others had designs on further attacking the West." Army Colonel Warren was clear in noting that the increased successes against Islamic State was due to the fact that the coalition was making progress in decapitating the terror group's leadership. He said, "Part of those successes is attributable to the fact that the organization is losing its leadership." Still, he acknowledged there remained much work to do as he added, "It's still got fangs."

Also during this period, the United States' air strike effort was aggressively geared towards hitting Islamic State's oil producing resources, which essentially funds the terror group. The air strike campaign, called "Tidal Wave II," was thus concentrating on oil tanker trucks, oil rigs, pumps and storage tanks. The objective was to hit the targets so as to disrupt the oil related activities for a significant period of time, but without either destroying these oil facilities completely or just inflicting minor damage that could be repaired in short order.

In mid-January 2016, United States air power and military might successfully targeted a banking facility in Mosul used by ISIL. Two 2,000 pound bombs were reportedly used in the operation, which resulted in the banking

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compound being decimated in via aerial bombardment. The bank was believed to house millions in funds accrued through oil sales, looting, and extortion. The operation thus deprived Islamic State of the funds used to finance the terror enclave. United States commanders acknowledged that because the bank was located in a civilian area, there was a chance of civilian casualties; however, they opted to move forward with the strike "due to the importance of the target." As noted by Lieutenant Commander Ben Tisdale, a spokesperson for the United States Central Command, said, "The bulk cash distribution site was used by ISIL to distribute money to fund terrorist activities."

Special Report on Iran:

- Diplomacy credited for quick return by Iran of U.S. sailors; treatment of sailors in propaganda video raises eyebrows
- Diplomacy credited for release of five U.S. citizens from Iran; seven Iranians in U.S. released as part of prisoner swap
- Iran sanctions lifted thanks to P5+1 landmark nuclear deal; U.S. imposes new sanctions on Iran

Diplomacy credited for quick return by Iran of U.S. sailors; treatment of sailors in propaganda video raises eyebrows

On Jan. 12, 2016, 10 United States sailors were detained by Iranian Revolutionary Guards after an incursion into Iranian marine territory. According to reports, one of the two patrol vessels on a training mission between Bahrain and Kuwait developed mechanical troubles and, as a result, they strayed into Iran's waters. The crew was then held at an Iranian naval base on Farsi Island. The development spurred some degree of panic in the United States about the fate of the sailors, given the fact that in 2007, 15 sailors from the United Kingdom were detained in a disputed area between Iranian and Iraqi territory and held for weeks.

Soon, however, there were reports that thanks to a recent opening of the diplomatic channels, United States Secretary of State John Kerry was in contact with his Iranian counterpart, Foreign Minister Javad Zarif and that discussions were afoot to arrange the release of the sailors.

Of significance was the fact that Iranian General Ali Fadavi cast the United States' sailors as having committed "unprofessional" acts. He made clear that the United States vessel had violated Iranian sovereignty by entering Iranian waters; however, he indicated that the sailors would soon be released. As noted by Fadavi, "Mr. Zarif [Iran's foreign minister] had a firm stance, saying that they were in our territorial waters and should not have been, and saying that they [the US] should apologize. This has been done and it will not take long, and the naval force, according to its hierarchy, will act immediately upon the orders it receives." As promised, the sailors were released in the early hours of Jan. 13, 2016 although the United States made clear that Secretary of State John Kerry did not issue an apology.

For its part, Iran released videotaped footage showing the United States sailors being held at gunpoint by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. The video also included footage of one sailor offering an apology for straying into Iranian waters. While there were strong criticisms of Iran for indulging in what could only be understood as propaganda formation, the general consensus was that such action was to be expected from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, which was known to be one of the most hardline elements of the Iranian governing structure.

It should be noted that the naval incident occurred at a time when a controversial Iranian nuclear deal was set to be implemented. At issue was the lifting of punitive sanctions against Iran for its nuclear program. With that goal in mind, along with an open channel of communication between United States Secretary of State Kerry and Iran's Foreign Minister Zarif, it was perhaps not surprising that the matter was quickly resolved and the sailors were released. Indeed, according to State Department spokesperson, John Kirby, the foundation of diplomacy set during the nuclear negotiations is precisely why the United States sailors were freed from Iranian custody in less than 24 hours.

Diplomacy credited for release of five U.S. citizens from Iran; seven Iranians in U.S. released as part of prisoner swap

On Jan. 17, 2016, five United States citizens were released from the notorious Evin prison in Iran. Among the released individuals were Jason Rezaian, a reporter for the Washington Post; Amir Hekmati, a United States marine; Saeed Abedini, a Christian pastor; Matthew Trevithick, a student, and a fifth individual identified as Nosratollah Khosravi-Roodsari. Rezaian and Hekmati were imprisoned for charges related to espionage; Abedini was jailed for church activities in people's homes while he was in Iran to set up an orphanage. The charges related to the arrests of Trevithick and Khosravi-Roodsari were unknown, although Trevithick was in Iran to attend university and learn the Farsi language. The freedom for four of the five Americans was achieved after secret negotiations between the United States and Iran, and was part of a prisoner swap deal that also involved amnesty for seven Iranians jailed in the United States. The release of the fifth American -- Trevithick -- was not part of the prisoner swap.

On the other side of the equation, the seven Iranians were identified by Iranian media as Nader Modanlo, Bahram Mechanic, Khosrow Afghani, Arash Ghahreman, Tooraj Faridi, Nima Golestaneh and Ali Saboun. All seven were detained and either charged or convicted in the United States due to their violations of prevailing sanctions.

As with the rapid resolution to the naval incident discussed above, the opening of the channels of communication and the diplomatic process were credited for the prisoner swap. That being said, the diplomatic negotiations aimed at returning the United States citizens home had been going on for some time and without public discussion of the matter. In fact, detractors of the Obama administration on the Republican side of the political aisle have long decried the controversial Iranian nuclear deal by drawing attention to the fact that Rezaian, the Washington Post correspondent, remained in jail in Iran. They argued that the United States should never have signed onto the nuclear deal with the likes of Rezaian in Iranian custody. Unknown to them, however, was the fact that the Obama administration was steadfastly pursuing the release of the Americans during private negotiations.

Indeed, the determination of the Obama administration was supported by reports from some of the released prisoners up until the moments prior to their departure from Iran. Of note was the fact that Iranian authorities tried to prevent Rezaian's wife, Yeganeh Salehi, and his mother, Mary Rezaian, from boarding the flight intended to evacuate the Americans; however, representatives from the United States Department of State issued a hardline stance saying that the prisoner swap would be called off if Rezaian's wife and mother were not allowed to join him on the Swiss aircraft.

Ultimately, four of the former prisoners -- Rezaian, Abedini, and Hekmati, Trevithick, as well as Rezaian's wife and mother, boarded the Swiss aircraft and departed Iran and landed in Geneva, Switzerland. Nosratollah Khosravi-Roodsari, for unknown reasons, opted to remain in Iran. From Switzerland, three of the four prisoners -- Rezaian, Abedini, and Hekmati -- were transported to the Landstuhl army base in Germany for medical review. Trevithick returned home to Massachusetts in the United States and was immediately reunited with his family.

For his part, Rezaian -- the most well known of the prisoners in Iran -- confirmed that he was in good health. In a report by his employer, the Washington Post, he was reported to have said, "I want people to know that physically I'm feeling good. I know people are eager to hear from me but I want to process this for some time." In a moment of levity, Rezaian added that he was doing "a hell of a lot better than I was 48 hours ago." Abedini issued a statement thanking President Obama, his administration, and the State Department for their efforts in securing his release, which read as follows: "I am thankful for our president and all of the hard work by the White House and State Department in making this happen." Hekmati, who was met in Germany by his United States Congressional Representative, Dan Kildee -- a Democrat from Michigan -- used Kildee's Twitter feed to issue the following statement: "Dear Mr. President: Thank you for making my freedom and reunion with my family possible. I am humbled that you were personally involved in my case and proud to have you as my president."

Editor's Note: Even as amidst the celebration of the release of five Americans from Iranian custody, it is essential to keep in mind that there remains no shortage of people unjustly imprisoned across the world. Of note, is the disturbing number of journalists in prison who have done nothing other than report the news. The Committee to Protect Journalists reports that close to 200 journalists are in jail across the globe. See this report for more information: <https://www.cpj.org /imprisoned/2015.php>

Iran sanctions lifted thanks to P+1 landmark nuclear deal; U.S. imposes new sanctions on Iran

On Jan. 17, 2016, following talk in Vienna, Austria, in keeping with a landmark nuclear deal negotiated between Iran and the so-called P5+1 countries, international sanctions on Iran were lifted. The official lifting of the sanctions was announced in a joint news conference by the European Union foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif. Mogherini's statement included the declaration that Iran had "fulfilled its commitment. "

It should be noted that the announcement was made after the international nuclear watchdog entity, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reported that Iran had complied with the dictated terms of the nuclear agreement, which were intended to ensure that Iran would not develop a nuclear weapon.

A recapitulation of the central elements set forth in the nuclear deal, which was formalized in July 2015 via a resolution in the United Nations Security Council, is as follows:

- Iran would reduce its enriched-uranium stockpile by 98 percent
- Iran would retain a reduced number of uranium centrifuges (5060 in total) for a ten-year period
- Iran would be limited to refining uranium at only a five percent enrichment level for a fifteen-year period (this level is consistent for usage at a nuclear power plant and is well short of weaponization levels)
- Iran will allow IAEA monitors to inspect facilities under review for suspicious activity for up to 25 years (Iran does not have to submit to inspections but if it refuses it will be subject to an arbitration panel and possible judgement that it is in violation)
- Iran would be granted gradual/phased in sanctions relief, essentially allowing Iran to finally export its oil
- Iran would be granted access to more than \$100 billion in frozen assets pending the implementation of nuclear curbs
- The prevailing United Nations arms embargo on Iran would remain in place for five years
- The prevailing ballistic missiles embargo on Iran would remain in place for eight years
- _ Iran would be prohibited from designing warheads or conducting experiments on nuclear weapons-related technology

Via the social media outlet, Twitter, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani praised the development with the following Tweet: "I thank God for this blessing and bow to the greatness of the patient nation of Iran." For his part, President Barack Obama hailed the move, saying, "This is a good day because once again we are seeing what's possible through strong American diplomacy. These things are a reminder of what we can achieve when we lead with strength and with wisdom." Detractors in Iran and United States respectively had a very different view of the situation. In Iran, hardliners have long argued that the Iranian government should not be in negotiations with the United States, and sign on to a deal whose terms would be dictated externally.

In the United States, conservatives have argued that the nuclear deal would result in Iran -- a state sponsor of terrorism -- to have access to frozen funds and re-entry to the international markets. However, the counterpoint argument in both Iran and the United States has been that while the agreement would hardly result in the normalization of relations between the two countries, there was now a diplomatic channel open that was not available for decades prior. Moreover, as noted by advocates of global security, the deal was the only viable way to reduce the threat of a nuclear-armed Iran. This sentiment was clear articulated by United States Secretary of State

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John Kerry, who said, "Today, as a result of the actions taken since last July, the United States, our friends and allies in the Middle East, in the entire world are safer because the threat of a nuclear weapon has been reduced."

United Nations sanctions against Iran were automatically ended, but with the formal announcement by Mogherini and Zarif, along with the certification of Iranian compliance by the IAEA, the European Union ceased its economic and financial sanctions regime against Iran, while the United States lifted its litany of commercial and financial sanctions that had been levied against Iran.

With the sanctions thus lifted, Iran was effectively "open for business" with billions dollars of assets now unfrozen, and with its oil now available to be sold on the international market. Indeed, Iran immediately acted to increase its oil output, while international companies commenced the process of returning to Iran to pursue business deals. However, not all the new was positive for Iran. By Jan. 18, 2016, the United States had imposed fresh sanctions on approximately a dozen companies and individuals for their involvement in Iran's ballistic missile program. At issue was the fact that in October 2015, Iran had conducted a precision-guided ballistic missile test, in violation of a prevailing United Nations prohibition. As noted by Adam Szubin, the United States acting under-secretary for terrorism and financial intelligence, "Iran's ballistic missile programme poses a significant threat to regional and global security, and it will continue to be subject to international sanctions."

Editor's Note: Regardless of the political machinations as well as the political posturing in both Iran and United States respectively, this landmark accord was being celebrated as a historic development in the realm of international diplomacy and global security. For good or for ill, the re-integration of Iran into the global community would inevitably shift the geopolitical dynamics in the Middle East. Moreover, both President Hassan Rouhani in Iran and President Barack Obama in the United States had made history with this landmark nuclear accord by moving their two countries from a state of decades-old enmity, charting the path of diplomacy, and traversing along the difficult road of re-engagement. These efforts would surely define their respective political legacies. Whether or not this nuclear agreement would stand the test of time and survive hardline domestic politics at home in Iran and the United States was to be determined, but Rouhani and Obama could take heart in the fact that they had respectively honored their election promises to pursue a peaceful resolution to the Iranian nuclear issue.

Special Note on relations with North Korea

United States and China reach agreement on draft resolution expanding sanctions against North Korea over nuclear activities --

In late February 2016, in response to North Korea's provocative nuclear activities in contravention of international law, the United States and China arrived at an agreement intended to expand United Nations Security Council sanctions against that country. In the aftermath of North Korea's hydrogen bomb test in January 2016, Washington D. C. and Beijing have been ensconced in rigorous negotiations aimed at drafting a draft resolution.

The two sides were not in complete agreement about what types of initiatives should be undertaken, with Beijing favoring dialogue and advocating non-proliferation, and with Washington D.C. pushing for more stringent punitive measures, including curbs on Pyongyang's ability to access the global financial system. Other provisions being explored included mandatory inspections on cargo passing from or to North Korea, a ban on all supplies of aviation and rocket fuel to North Korea, and a ban on the transfer to North Korea of any item that could be used for military purposes.

Despite the distance on some of these items, Washington D. C. and Beijing were finally able to find concurrence and craft the draft resolution, which they hoped would be introduced and voted on in the full 15-member United Nations Security Council at the start of March 2016. Of significance was the fact that the resolution was passed into international law.

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Significantly, North Korea reacted to the Security Council resolution by casting it as a "criminal act" orchestrated by the United States and vowed to continue its nuclear proliferation activities. A government spokesperson said in an interview with the state-controlled KCNA media said, "Our response will involve the full use of various means and tools including a strong and ruthless physical response."

North Korean leader instructs military to be ready to use nuclear weapons and makes miniaturization claims; U.S. discusses missile defense shield protection with South Korea --

In the first week of March 2016, North Korea's leader, Kim Jong-un, declared that his country's nuclear weapons should be made ready for use "at any time" and in a "pre-emptive attack" mode. According to state media in North Korea, King Jong-un called on the military to adjust its posture so that it could launch pre-emptive strikes upon demand. As stated by Kim Jong-un, North Korea "Now is the time for us to convert our mode of military counteraction toward the enemies into a pre-emptive attack one in every aspect." He added that North Korea "must always be ready to fire our nuclear warheads at any time" due to the threat posed by the country's enemies.

Kim Jong-un identified those enemies, as follows: "At an extreme time when the Americans... are urging war and disaster on other countries and people, the only way to defend our sovereignty and right to live is to bolster our nuclear capability." There were some suggestions that this move by North Korea, which was accompanied by a volley of short-range missile launched into the sea, constituted a belligerent response to the tough sanctions imposed by the United Nations on North Korea for its recent provocative nuclear activities. As is usually the case with North Korea, the move could only mean an escalation of tensions on the Korean peninsula.

The United States Pentagon reacted with the spokesperson issuing the following statement: "We urge North Korea to refrain from provocative actions that aggravate tensions and instead focus on fulfilling its international obligations and commitments." As well, the United States convened talks with South Korea aimed at possibly deploying an American missile defense shield to the South Korea. To that end, the discussion would focus on the feasibility financially and environmentally of installing the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in South Korea, along with its effectiveness in potentially shooting down short and medium-range ballistic missiles, thus destroying incoming warheads. Of note was the fact that the THAAD was already installed in Hawaii and Guam to protect the United States from potential attacks from North Korea.

Those defense systems would be of paramount importance given North Korea's claims on March 9, 2016, that its scientists had made technological strides and developed miniaturized nuclear warheads that could be fitted on ballistic missiles. Of significance was the fact that North Korea state media has published photographs of Kim Jong-un at the testing event of a multiple launch rocket system, and also posing with what was claimed to be miniaturized weapon. It should be noted that there was no verification of North Korea's claims in these regards although the release of the images was clearly geared to proving its claims.

Special Note

United States carries out air strikes on al-Shabab terror training camp in Somalia

In the first part of March 2016, the United States carried out an air strikes on an al-Shabab terror training camp in Somalia, killing more than 150 fighters. The strikes were undertaken in response to intelligence indicating that al-Shabab was preparing to carry out an attack. As noted by Pentagon spokesperson Captain Jeff Davis, "We know they were going to be departing the camp and that they posed an imminent threat to U.S. and to Amisom, African Union mission in Somalia forces, that are in Somalia." As such, the strikes, The strikes, using both manned and unmanned drone aircrafts, targeted the terror group's "Raso" training camp located approximately 120 miles to the north of the Somali capital of Mogadishu. Speaking about the elimination of as many as 150 terrorists in the air strikes, Davis said, "Their removal will degrade al Shabaab's ability to meet the group's objectives in Somalia, which include recruiting new members, establishing bases and planning attacks on U.S. and Amisom forces there."

Special Note

United States formally declares that terror group Islamic State has committed genocide

United States Secretary of State John Kerry in late February 2016 indicated that considerations were being made as to whether or not to formally accuse Islamic State of genocide. Secretary of State John Kerry made this suggestion during testimony before a House Committee hearing on Capitol Hill in which he said that the Obama administration "will make a decision on this" after evaluations were made regarding the process of making a declaration of genocide against the Islamic State. To this end, Kerry indicated that there had to be a rigorous review of the "legal standards and precedents." Clearly, if the United States wanted to move forward with such a serious accusation against the terror group, it wanted to do so on solid juridical ground. Of significance was the fact that "crimes against humanity" has been regarded as an easier legal bridge to cross as compared with genocide. As such, there were some administration voices suggesting that the "crimes against humanity" designation might be a preferable path to traverse.

On March 14, 2016, the United States House of Representatives voted overwhelmingly to declare the actions of Islamic States to be genocide. The United States Department of State would thus be compelled to respond with a decision as to whether or not they concur with this designation, or, if another characterization was in order.

Days later on March 17, 2016, United States Secretary of State John Kerry declared that Islamic State -- referred to as "Daesh" -- WhippsJr., against several ethnic and religious minority groups, including Christians, Yazidis, and Shi'ite Muslims. Secretary of State Kerry said, "The fact is that Daesh kills Christians because they are Christians. Yazidis because they are Yazidis. Shi'ites because they are Shi'ites."

While the declaration could add weight to the argument in favor of more hardline action against Islamic State, the designation was not expected to significantly change United States policy toward the terror group. As noted by State Department spokesperson, Mark Toner: "Acknowledging that genocide or crimes against humanity have taken place in another country would not necessarily result in any particular legal obligation for the United States." Along the same vein, Jon Alterman, the director of the Middle East program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, in an interview with Reuters News conveyed a similar sentiment. He said, "It may strengthen our hand getting other countries to help. It may free us against some (legal) constraints, but the reality is that when you are fighting somebody, you don't need another reason to fight them."

Special Report: United States President Barack Obama makes landmark trip to Cuba after restoration of bilateral ties between United States and Cuba

Introduction:

After decades of antipathy rooted in the Cold War, a process of re-engagement of ties between the United States and Cuba was undertaken. History was made as the two countries moved to normalize their diplomatic relations and move along the path of rapprochement.

Going back to Dec. 17, 2014, United States President Barack Obama announced a landmark policy shift aimed at normalizing diplomatic relations with Cuba after more than 50 years of animosity. At the start of 2015, the governments of the United States and Cuba commenced negotiations aimed at achieving re-engagement. In April 2015, there was a historic thaw in bilateral relations between the United States and Cuba as United States President Barack Obama met with Cuban President Raul Castro at the Summit of the Americas in Panama. It was the first meeting of the leaders of the two countries in decades. Historians noted that the meeting was part of the legacy that would likely define the respective presidencies of Obama and Castro, essentially underlining the reality that the Cold War was officially over.

In the immediate aftermath of the historic meeting, the Obama administration in the United States announced that it was removing Cuba from its list of state sponsors of terrorism. That move was formalized at the end of May 2015 and solidified Cuba's re-integration into the full international community. The action also augmented the process of rapprochement between the United States and Cuba. July 2015 was the date set for the official opening of the two countries' embassies in Washington DC, and Havana. The Cuban flag thus flew for the first time in 50 years aloft the Cuban embassy in Washington DC in July 2015. United States Secretary of State John Kerry traveled to Cuba in August 2015 to attend a formal ceremony marking the raising of the United States flag at the American embassy in Havana.

Still to be determined was the matter of the economic sanctions, which would have to be removed via legislation in the United States Congress. But before that issue was resolved, President Obama made a landmark trip to Cuba making him the first sitting United States president to set foot on Cuban land in almost a century. President Obama's arrival on Cuban soil on March 20, 2016, marked a very real benchmark in the international sphere, serving as a reminder that the Cold War was over.

President Obama to make historic trip to Cuba:

In February 2016 it was announced that United States President Barack Obama would travel to Cuba in March 2016. The United States president made the announcement via the social media outlet, Twitter, as he said: "Next month, I'll travel to Cuba to advance our progress and efforts that can improve the lives of the Cuban people." A formal statement from the White House went out after and read as follows: "This historic visit — the first by a sitting US president in nearly 90 years — is another demonstration of the president's commitment to chart a new course for US-Cuban relations and connect US and Cuban citizens through expanded travel, commerce, and access to information." According to the White House, First Lady Michelle Obama would accompany the president on the historic visit to Cuba.

The Cuban visit would be part of a regional trip to Latin America that would also include a stop in Argentina. Nevertheless, the Cuban endeavor could only be understood in historic context, given the fact that President Obama was the leader to achieve rapprochement with Cuba, and he would be the first sitting United States president to set foot on Cuban territory in almost a century. Indeed, the last sitting president to travel to the Caribbean Island was Calvin Coolidge in 1928.

Not surprisingly, Republicans criticized the proposed trip to Cuba, insisting that such a visit should not take place while Cuba remained officially Communist under the rule of the Castro regime. However, other observers have noted that President Obama's success in achieving rapprochement with Cuba would likely be regarded as one of the foreign policy highlights of his tenure, if not the apex of his presidency.

Perhaps cognizant of this reality and eager to protect this landmark legacy achievement, President Obama was keen to ensure his Cuba policy would not be upended by the president who would succeed him. In truth, should Hillary Clinton win the 2016 president election, there was little chance of such a move as Obama's former Secretary of State has telegraphed her intent to preserve the Obama legacy. But should a Republican succeed President Obama, it was highly likely that individual would seek to reverse the Cuba policy, given the Republican Party's general stance in opposition to rapprochement between the United States and Cuba. To that end, the Obama administration was looking to open up travel between the United States and Cuba, while also easing trade restrictions and facilitating greater United States investment in Cuba. These moves would essentially plant the seeds for business links that would be difficult to reverse under a hypothetical Republican successor.

Also of note was the restoration of direct flight agreements between the United States and Cuba, as well as the resumption of direct mail delivery to Cuba. There were also several hotel chains that were interested in establishing footholds in Cuba. Significantly, Starwood Hotels applied to the United States government for a license and signed a deal to develop hotels in Cuba. The extent of these types of tourist development endeavors, outside of the Starwood Hotels deal, were yet to be determined.

Meanwhile Republicans continued to criticize the impending Cuba visit, railing against the president for giving, in their view, too many concessions to the Castro regime in Cuba. They were also opposed to the very notion of engagement with a tyrannical dictatorship. During an interview with CNN en Espanol, President Obama addressed this criticism, saying, "This is not a matter of providing concessions. This is a matter of us engaging directly with the Cuban people." As well, he continued to emphasize his position that engagement between Washington D.C. and Havana was more likely to facilitate transformation, rather than sticking with the same failed policy of isolation that has yielded no significant results until the restoration of bilateral ties between the two countries.

Alert:

On March 20, 2016, Air Force One touched down at Jose Marti Airport in Havana. President Obama's arrival on Cuban soil on that day was a historic moment as it was the first time 1928 that an American president was on Cuban territory. It marked a very real benchmark in the international sphere, serving as a reminder that the Cold War was over. Perhaps underlining the significance of the historic visit to Cuba, President Obama was accompanied by First Lady Michelle Obama, their daughters Sasha and Malia, as well as the first lady's mother.

Upon landing in Cuban, President Obama said via the social media outlet, Twitter, "Que bolá Cuba? Just touched down here, looking forward to meeting and hearing directly from the Cuban people."

That direct engagement with the Cuban people was to be understood through the complicated and contradictory lens of Cuban political and social life. Ahead of President Obama's arrival in Cuba, several dissidents were arrested while protesting. Clearly, political repression was not expunged because of normalized bilateral relations. On the other hand, the American president's arrival in Cuba was being nationally broadcast without objection from the Cuban Communist Party, and journalists on the ground in Cuba traveling with the president indicated robust and genuine interest by the Cuban people with regard to President Obama. There was a general feeling of disbelief that history was unfolding and they were participants in a landmark moment in global geopolitical life.

During President Obama's visit to Cuba, there were plans for a meeting with dissidents, as well as a meeting with Cardinal Jaime Ortega, who played a central role in the diplomatic talks in late 2014 that ultimately resulted in the re-engagement process. The schedule also included attendance at an exhibition baseball game between the Tampa Bay Rays and the Cuban National team, as well as a tour of notable cultural sites. Also on President Obama's agenda was what United States deputy national security adviser, Ben Rhodes, characterized as a "speech to the Cuban people" at Havana's legendary Gran Teatro, as well as a meeting with Cuban President Raul Castro, which would be followed by a media event and a state dinner.

Rhodes previewed President Obama's speech, saying that it "will be a very important moment in the president's trip, an opportunity for him to describe the course that we're on, to review the complicated history between our two countries ... but also to look forward to the future." He added, "We very much want to make the process of normalization irreversible."

In an unprecedented address at Havana's Gran Teatro on March 22, 2016, President Obama issued a passionate clarion call for democratization and economic transformation in Cuba. The United States leader noted, "Liberty is the right of every man to be honest, to think and to speak without hypocrisy." President Obama then said, "I believe citizens should be free to speak their minds without fear. Voters should be able to choose their governments in free and democratic elections." He added, "Not everybody agrees with me on this, not everybody agrees with the American people on this but I believe those human rights are universal. I believe they're the rights of the American people, the Cuban people and people around the world."

Although the United States leader's advocacy for free speech, the right to protest, and other political freedoms, as well as economic reforms likely did not comport perfectly with the notions of the Cuban government, it was nonetheless attended by Cuban President Raul Castro and nationally broadcast. President Obama's declaration

that he came to Cuba to "bury the last remnant" of the Cold War and extend a "hand of friendship" warmly received by the Cuban people. The positive reception was not limited to President Obama's call for the United States Congress to lift the embargo, which he characterized as "an outdated burden on the Cuban people." Indeed, the following reference to the difficult and hostile United States-Cuban relationship was met by thunderous applause: "I know the history. But I have no wish to be trapped by it."

In a departure from his conservative predecessors who have favored a deep imprint of United States influence in the Western Hemisphere, and the exercise of United States hegemony, President Obama made it clear his country under his leadership had no desire to deploy neo-imperial control over Cuba. He said, "I've made it clear that the United States has neither the capacity nor the intention to impose change on Cuba. What changes come will depend upon the Cuban people. We will not impose our political or economic system on you. We recognize that every country, every people must chart its own course and shape its own model."

But the United States president took the opportunity to laud American values and the record of change in the United States as he declared, "Now, there's still some tough fights. It isn't always pretty, the process of democracy. It's often frustrating. You can see that in the election going on back home. But just stop and consider this fact about the American campaign that's taking place right now. You had two Cuban Americans in the Republican party running against the legacy of a Black man who was president while arguing that they're the best person to beat the Democratic nominee, who will either be a woman or a democracy socialist. Who would have believed that back in 1959? That's a measure of our progress as a democracy."

Editor's Note:

The process restoration of diplomatic ties with Cuba would stand as a marquis achievement of the Obama presidency, reflective of Barack Obama's foreign policy philosophy, which has centered on principles of vigorous diplomatic engagement, internationalism, and multilateralism. Indeed, President Obama's policy of rapprochement with Cuba would likely be understood by his supporters as a landmark accomplishment during his tenure in office. Conservative critics of the president have held a very different view, as discussed above.

U.S. President Barack Obama visits Hiroshima during trip to Japan and Vietnam

In May 2016, the White House announced that United States President Barack Obama would visit to the Japanese city of Hiroshima later that month as part of his Asian trip to Japan and Vietnam. The visit would mark the first time a sitting American president would travel to the Japanese city that was decimated by a nuclear bomb that effectively ended World War II in 1945. The bombing of the city of Hiroshima in 1945 killed 140,000 people. A second nuclear bomb by the United States decimated the Japanese city of Nagasaki. A statement from the White House regarding the impending visit to Hiroshima read as follows: "The President will make an historic visit to Hiroshima with Prime Minister [Shinzo] Abe to highlight his continued commitment to pursuing peace and security in a world without nuclear weapons."

That being said, there was no indication that President Obama would actually apologize for the destruction to those two cities, which occurred as a result of the United States' action in World War II. As noted by President Obama's communications adviser, Ben Rhodes, via the social media outlet, Twitter, the United State would be "eternally proud of our civilian leaders and the men and women of our armed forces who served in World War II." Rhodes added that President Obama would "not revisit the decision to use the atomic bomb at the end of World War II. Instead, he will offer a forward-looking vision focused on our shared future." Rhodes said the president's visit was intended "to honor the memory of all innocents who were lost during the war."

In keeping with this preview, when President Obama finally arrived at Hiroshima's Peace Memorial Park, he expressed sympathy for the victims of the nuclear attack. He declared, "Why do we come to this place, to Hiroshima? We come to ponder the terrible forces unleashed in the not so distant past. We come to mourn the

dead ... their souls speak to us and ask us to look inward. To take stock of who we are and what we might become." President Obama called for a "world without nuclear weapons," while stopping short of expressing regret over the matter. He said, "71 years ago on a bright, cloudless morning, death fell from the sky and the world was changed." He continued, "A flash of light and a wall of fire destroyed a city, and demonstrated that mankind possessed the means to destroy itself." Flanked by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, President Obama laid a wreath and said that there was "shared responsibility" to look into the "eye of history" and prevent another nuclear weapon from being used. He said, "The scientific revolution that led to the splitting of an atom requires a moral revolution as well."

Earlier, President Obama visited Vietnam. In his first visit to the Vietnamese capital of Hanoi, the United States president was warmly received by the people of that country. In a gesture intended to herald a new chapter in the story of bilateral relations, given the history of warfare between the two countries, the United States lifted an arms ban on Vietnam. During a joint news conference with Vietnamese President Tran Dai Quang, President Obama said that disputes -- specifically with regard to an ongoing imbroglio with China in the South China Sea -- should be resolved peacefully. President Obama said, "The decision to lift the ban was not based on China or any other considerations. It was based on our desire to complete what has been a lengthy process of moving towards normalization with Vietnam."

NOTE

See "Political Conditions" Section 6 of the Country Review for the United States for coverage of foreign policy under the Trump administration.

Written by Dr. Denise Coleman, Editor in Chief, www.countrywatch.com .

See Bibliography for list of general research sources. Supplementary sources: Encyclopedia Britannica (www.britannica.com), Foreign Policy: In Focus (www.foreignpolicy-infocus.org/briefs), DefenseLINK (www.defenselink.mil), Congressional Research Service Brief IB91121: China-U.S. Trade Issues (www.cnire.org/nle/econ-35.html), Time Magazine, Der Spiegel, Die Welt, CBS News, NBC News, MSNBC News, ABC News, BBC News, CNN, The New York Times, Washington Post, The Telegraph, the Independent, the Financial Times, Reuters, Newsweek, United States Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the Nobel Peace Prize Organization, Human Rights Watch.

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